

CHAPTER VII

CONCLUSION: Nature of Ethnic Politics in Sikkim.

Ethnic cultural politics as a social phenomenon involves the issues of a particular variant of collective consciousness and collective identity in which members of a group irrespective of their social positions are viewed as a cohesive formation without any class barriers. Ethnic cultural consciousness and political mobilization on the basis of such consciousness, as indicated in Chapter I, has been explained by social scientists generally from two broad perspectives. The first one like that of Glazer and Moynihan, C. Greetz and others emphasizes that ethnicity a natural social phenomenon. In any given society social exchanges and communication are based on and within a cultural framework. This social phenomenon is simply reflected in politics. Political articulation, communication as well decision-making occur under the shadow of ethnic consideration. The other perspective is generally known as instrumentalist view point which perceives ethnicity as a political resource employed by groups, classes, elites and others. From this viewpoint ethnic politics involves manipulation of cultural sentiments and affective ties to achieve certain tangible goals. Instrumentalist perspective argues that competition for resources between two distinct cultural groups actually give birth to ethnic political mobilization. The deprived group often resort to cultural sentiments and mobilize people to gain a share of resources; contrarily, the privileged also may fall back upon culture for the protection of their status and resources. It is also argued that often the elites of a community or the middle classes belonging to a particular ethnicity manipulate ethnic sentiment to realize their own objectives. The political-economic analysis of ethnicity addresses the question from a class perspective in which the whole concept of wounded attachments and unity of a cultural group is the construction of a particular dominant class which reinforces its privileged positions with reference to ethnic solidarity.

In such analyses, however, political structures and institutions are presented as passive recipient of pressures emanating from socio-economic structures and formation. The role of the state, political parties and other political organizations in containing or aggravating ethnic consciousness is seldom recognized in the above mentioned analyses. In the history of Sikkim, however, it is apparent that ethnic division among various communities actually was a consequence of specific laws and state policies which discriminated against particular communities; and therefore ultimately produced separateness and mistrust in the minds of members of different communities. The attempt of the state to exclude certain groups from the process of governance and from resources on the basis of ethnic criteria can create a political system founded upon ethnic considerations. Sometimes State may glorify or promote a particular culture or language, generally that of a dominant group, as national culture or national language. Thus, the ethnic relationship in a multicultural society expresses in terms of apprehension over such cultural or linguistic imposition or show inability to cope with the idea of cultural or linguistic uniformity or homogeneity. It intensifies demands for official status and activities for protection and promotion become resonant. This exactly happened in Sikkim under the Bhutia monarchy and the process continued partly even under parliamentary form of government after merger of Sikkim with India. Similarly, political parties and other political organizations also like the state have determinate relations with increase or decrease of ethnic consciousness. The political parties may try to promote a secular consciousness. On the other hand, parties may pick up ethnic cultural differences as a natural choice for political mobilizations by falling back upon social bonds, traditional social structures and community sentiments. Through ethnic identity political parties may discover civic kinship and try to appeal to electorate in ethnic terms. In case of Sikkim also it is evident that the activities of political parties and other organizations often have aggravated ethnic tensions as a result of articulation of exclusive community demands and slogans.

An examination of the government policies and decisions during pre-merger era in Sikkim reflect ample indications that they were designed to favour politically dominant ethnic community in all conceivable fields. For instance, the notification of 1897 (renamed later as Revenue Order No. 1 in 1917) prohibited Nepalis from buying Bhutia-Lepcha land while the same rule favours the Bhutias to have an access over the Lepcha land. Further, Nepali settlement and carrying on any business by a Nepali subjects beyond the river Dikchu in north Sikkim was prohibited. This rule was extended for an indefinite period in 1956. Two separate rate of revenue for the Bhutia-Lepchas and Nepalis for the same amount and quality of land, the Parity formula equating the minority Bhutia-Lepcha with the majority Nepalis, communal pattern of voting system denying adequate representation to the Nepalis in the legislative and executive organs of the government are instances of differential treatment meted out to the Nepalis during the pre-merger Sikkim. Such governmental policies discriminating against the Nepalis based on race/cultural identity naturally created a sense of alienation among the Nepalis. The government justified differential treatment on the ground that the Nepalis were migrants and it was legitimate to protect and promote the cause and interest of the Bhutias-Lepchas who were considered indigenous populations of Sikkim, though many tribes which pass by the name Nepali today were present in Sikkim long before the establishment of the Bhutia rule in Sikkim. Thus, what occurred in Sikkim was a state sponsored rewriting of history which transformed some indigenous inhabitants into migrants. Apart from this, by adopting terminologies like 'blood brotherhood' or 'Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum' either by including or excluding communities arbitrarily in the official discourses further strengthened the feeling of alienation or separateness among various groups who have been excluded or included in the official notion of indigenous people, and thereby cannot be regarded as legitimate members of Sikkimese nation.

More importantly, the monarchy in Sikkim and Bhutia elites of royal court defined the Sikkimese nation in terms of Bhutia-Lepcha culture and Buddhism; which effectively excluded the Hindu Nepalis. In this context it may be stated that the ethnic segregation may also take place in response to the way State involves in

the process of constructing a particular culture as a national culture or national identity. The establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642 has facilitated construction of a distinct Sikkimese identity based on the cultural aspirations of the ruling community. The religion of the ruling community, i.e. Tibetanised Buddhism, became the State religion and monasteries and other ritualistic activities as symbols of Sikkimese identity. This happened despite the fact that Sikkim was a multi-cultural and multi-religious society. Interestingly, entry into some of these monasteries was forbidden to other Sikkimese, including the Lepchas. During the pre-merger era the Lepchas and Nepalis found difficulties in adapting to the Tibetanised version of national culture. In the post-merger period attempts to unify cultural aspirations of three ethnic communities of Sikkim have been made, though symbols of Bhutia culture, however, remained dominant as in the earlier days, including representation in the political institution.

The merger of Sikkim with India in 1975 and introduction of parliamentary democracy generated expectation that ethnic/communal discrimination and politics based on ethno-cultural identity would gradually make way for equitable society and secular political mobilization. But, unlike the expectation the government of India decided to continue with the provisions which existed in Sikkim before the merger. In other words, the State rules which discriminated the Nepalis on racial/cultural/religious grounds such as Revenue Order No. 1, settlement laws, communal voting and representation system etc. were provided constitutional sanctions (Article 371F) under the parliamentary-democratic and secular constitution of India. Thus, when political mobilization took place, ethno-cultural demands continue to dominate political scenes in Sikkim and the governing rules and policies of the succeeding government (India) continue to reflect ethnic-cultural identity as a basis for political-administrative arrangement and distribution of resources. For example, introduction of Sikkim (citizenship) Order, 1975 with controversial Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 as the basis for grant of Indian citizenship to the Sikkimese despite the representation of the Nepalis for consideration of 1970 as the cut off year and amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951 (as amended in 1976) which

legitimizes 100 per cent seat reservation in the Assembly on communal and religious grounds. The constitutional arrangement of 1975, which was expected to assuage ethnic differences, was also directly or indirectly responsible for sustaining ethnic differences and, in some cases, aggravating it further.

How various government policies contribute to the continuation of ethnic division can be understood from yet another example. The central government had asked the state government to recommend names of communities for the preparation of Scheduled Tribes list for Sikkim as early as 1976. But, contrary to the desire of the Central government to include various tribal groups of Sikkim namely Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo, Tamang, Gurung, Mangar, Rai etc. in the scheduled tribes list, the State government recommended for inclusion of only the Lepchas and Bhutias, the latter being the ruling and economically dominant community, in the list. The policy of the State government denying scheduled tribe status to some deserving communities in favour of certain other communities naturally created a feeling of alienation and discrimination among the communities who were denied Scheduled Tribe status. The issue of scheduled tribe is just not an issue of affirmative action in favour of socially backward community but it also involves larger economic and political benefits. Thus, as the demand for scheduled tribe status grew along community line the level of apprehension among various communities also increased. In 1978, the Bhutias resented to the idea of inclusion of eight other communities in the Bhutia fold while in 2003 Limboo and Tamang scheduled tribe communities resented to the government policy which denied them any claim to seats reserved for tribals in the State Legislative Assembly. Such seats remain the exclusive privilege of Bhutia and Lepchas. Why do most modern states either select certain categories of the population for favoured or protected treatment or establish rules that distribute inequalities in life impartially, or randomly? According to Brass, they do so for variety of reasons such as; (a) the state may be controlled by a class or ethnic group or some combination of classes and/or ethnic groups, whose members the state chooses to favour; or (b) the dominant group may seek support among certain categories in the population and may adopt an 'equalitarian' policy for that

purpose; or (c) the state may choose a particular equalitarian strategy for its own administrative convenience. It is assumed that the State, through such 'equalizing' policies as 'affirmative action' and 'protective discrimination', actually creates or precipitates the formation of new identities among various categories of persons, but, such policies, however, do not necessarily precipitate organization among all relevant categories. The ethnic mobilization actually takes place when the Government/State tends to work or shape policies on the advice of the leaders and elites within an ethnic group with which it enters into collaboration or understanding for the transmission of government patronage. Sometimes a particular leadership within a group may even gain control over an entire area of government policy and the institutions associated with it and use them as a means of consolidating their leadership of their own community. Though it cannot be claimed that the State always and inevitably takes a stand on the side of one group or another in conflict situations but, on the contrary, it happens very often. Sometimes, the State may also choose to remain neutral but neutral policy often means, in effect, support for the status-quo, i.e. a refusal to rectify an existing imbalance between groups. The domination of regional parties in State politics and ethnic issues which almost all political parties raise and promise to fulfill during elections also exacerbate ethnic politics in Sikkim.

The role of the state policies in containing or accentuating ethnic politics is also clear in the sphere of language, i.e. in the area of recognition of a particular language as official language by the state. It is generally recognized that language is another symbol of contradiction and ethnic division. The group demanding 'a rightful place' to its language very often means recognition as 'official language'. In other words, it means recognition or glorification of people speaking that language and a legitimate claim to greater respect or worth in the society than others. On the contrary, for others it may mean demeaning to work or communicate in the language which is not their own. In the context of Sikkim, a three-language formula was adopted in 1977 as a reconciliatory effort to pacify community resentments. In 1984, Limboo language too was included in the official list of State languages. However, since the Nepalis are in majority in the

State, Nepali language automatically became the lingua-franca of the State. As the social recognition affects group's self-esteem, it also encourages opposition. In 1994, a Bhutia organization, 'Survival Sikkimese' asked its members to speak in Bhutia language while various sub-cultural groups of Nepalis like Gurungs, Tamangs, Rais, Sunuwars, Sherpas, Mangars also demanded for official recognition of their languages/dialects. The protagonist of the dominant language often draw attention towards inadequacy of these languages in terms of their simplicity, shallow literary tradition, under-developed grammar and vocabulary, paucity of textbooks in concerned languages, unsuitability of the languages for use in technical field, and their general inferiority as compared to the dominant language. (For instance, the Limboo representatives who went to meet Mr. N.B.Bhandari, the then Chief Minister of Sikkim, in relation to recognition of the Limboo language were asked to supply information regarding the number of Limboo language graduates.) Sometimes, the inadequacy of the language or need for improvement are generally measured by comparing it with European languages, particularly the English language. The most common statement or argument among the Nepalis during 1995-96 (when six other languages spoken by various sub-cultural groups of Nepalis were granted official status) was that whether these languages could adequately cope with advanced teaching. Their competitiveness was measured in terms of inability of even the Nepali language to compete with increasing domination of the English language and globalization. The State, however, has the power to rectify the inadequacy or deficiency. As such politics can be used not only to confirm group status but to enhance it also. (In 1985, Mr. Bhandari demanded recognition of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian constitution. In 1994-95, Mr. Chamling demanded the same status for the Bhutia, Lepcha and Limboo languages.) Hence, it is not necessarily the presence of ethno-cultural symbols which ethnicised a polity but the way the government looks at the issue and formulates policies often evoke community resentments and precipitate ethnic consciousness.

Political parties and other organizations like the state are also important determinants of ethnic political mobilizations. In the context of Sikkim it is found that the parties and organizations can be classified into three categories. First, parties with a general name and secular goals but use ethnic terminology, attachments and demands for electoral and other political purposes. The Sikkim National Party and Sikkim State Congress under the monarchy fall into this category. Sikkim Sangram Parishad and Sikkim Democratic Front may also be included in this segment. Secondly, parties with distinct ethnic regional bias but maintain some degree of restraint like the Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary). In the third category falls aggressive parties and organizations which often indulge in hate campaigns. These are small calvinist groups but electorally are not very successful. Such parties and groups, therefore, function more or less like a pressure group. The Sikkim National Party during the pre-merger days openly advocated in favour of the monarchy and interests of the B-L category, particularly the Bhutias. The campaigns of the National Party definitely created a gulf between the Nepalis in the one hand and Bhutia-Lepchas on the other. The election campaigns of Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary) and the Sikkim Prajatantrik Morcha favouring the interests of a particular community also contributed to escalation of ethnic tensions in recent times. On the other hand Sikkim Sangram Parishad's Sikkimese identity which attempted at transcending Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha identity definitely reduced ethnic tension in Sikkim among various communities, though it was only a temporary phenomenon. But it proves that campaigns by political parties may generate a particular type of consciousness which may reduce or increase ethnic tensions.

All these state policies, activities of political organizations and ideas propagated by rulers and political leaders have contributed to the development of a particular type of community perception about itself and about other communities. It is necessary to throw light on perception of respective communities in this context. The Bhutias believed that the signing of blood brotherhood pact with the Lepchas and establishment of their rule in Sikkim was historically destined and prophesized according to their intricate Lamaist tradition.

By virtue of the 'pact' the Bhutias became the legitimate ruler of Sikkim and protection of the Lepchas was considered their solemn pledge. A relationship of Protector (Bhutia) and Protected (Lepchas) was believed as just relations between the two. The use of the hybrid term 'Bhutia-Lepcha' or simply 'BL' stand for this relationship. As some point of time, the Tsongs (Limboos), another tribe of Sikkim, too were considered as members of the same BL family, called Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum (Bhutia-Lepcha-Limboo family).

The Bhutias did not merit Nepalis suitable for inclusion in the definition of the Sikkimese. For the Buddhist theocratic and hereditary rulers, Nepalis were basically migrants from Nepal, Hindus by religion, troublesome as neighbours, Nepali by speakers and coolies by profession. This perception of the Bhutias was perhaps shaped by their long association with the Gorkhas which was marked by internecine wars, including circumstances leading to transfer of capital from Rabdentse in the West to Tumlung in the north by the Seventh Chogyal, Tsugphud Namgyal, in 1814.

The use of racial or religious rhetoric against the Nepalis was part of the political strategy which the Bhutia ruling elite perfected to counter the numerical strength of the Nepalis in view of their demand for democratization of political institution particularly during the later half of 1940s. J. N. Kazi in his "Inside Sikkim: Against the Tide" wrote, "If it was not for the large Nepali population in Sikkim, the former kingdom's merger with India may either have delayed or not have taken place at all".

Besides merger, the Bhutias also perceive Nepalis primarily responsible for the abolition of the symbols of Sikkimese identity, i.e. the institution of the Chogyal and denial of the post of the Chief Minister of the State. The Bhutias believe that the post of the Chief Minister of the State should have been reserved for the Bhutias and Lepchas.

The contemporary educated Lepchas do not consider Bhutias as one of them or believe in the theory of a combined 'B-L' community. But, in practice, the dependant-dominant relationship prevails between the two ever since the foundation of the Bhutia rule in Sikkim. Evidences show that the Lepchas did

very often deny that the present ruler (Bhutia ruler) was their ruler or king. At present, majority of educated Lepchas feel that the Bhutias have denied them respectable position in the society and cornered the benefits meant for them as scheduled Tribes. They want protection of their land from the Bhutias and equal representation with that of the Bhutias in all respects. The Lepchas are separate community and want to be identified as Lepchas and certainly not as B-L.

Nepalis had been subject to discrimination of various kinds during the theocratic monarchical regime of the Namgyal dynasty. When the political development began in the late 1940s it was natural for the majority Nepalis to demand for democratic government as a means for eliminating discrimination and making them accessible to decision making organs of the State and resources of other kinds.

The policy of reserving seats in the political institution and recognition of certain old laws of Sikkim actually identify political/legal identity of the people of Sikkim. The denial of this legal/political identity for the Nepalis (i.e. abolition of Nepali seats in 1979/80) and continuation of the old Sikkimese laws which discriminated the Nepalis in the past, in fact, constitute major cause of concern and apprehension for the Sikkimese Nepalis. This along with influx from other parts of India has further aroused the level of concern for the Nepalis in Sikkim.

The Nepalis are also apprehensive to the way government policies have been formulated, by and large, undermining the interest of the Sikkimese Nepalis. For instance, 41 per cent of seats are reserved for the 25 per cent Bhutia-Lepcha (actually dominated by the Bhutias) population whereas 75 per cent people are left with 59 per cent seats in the Assembly; abolition of the Nepali seats in 1979/80; denial of tribal status to various tribes/castes of the Nepali community in 1976/1978; denial of seats in the State Assembly for the tribes (Limboos and Tamangs) of the Nepali community; different benchmarks for the reservation of seats for the Scheduled castes (Nepali) and Scheduled tribes (BL) of Sikkim etc.

The perception of different communities about others also created divergent views about Sikkimese identity and the place of the community in Sikkimese society. Because of divergent perception, different ethnic groups

approached the issue of Sikkimese identity from different angles. Sikkim evolved into a monarchical form of government with Lamaist Buddhism as its national identity subduing other lesser cultural or religious identities. The official Sikkimese identity, based on the historical-cultural aspiration of the politically dominant Bhutia community began to confront serious challenges particularly after the formation of political parties and other socio-cultural organizations in the late 1940s. Consequently revision or reinvention of the 'Sikkimese identity' was felt necessary. The new definition attempted to rope together the mongoloid tribal communities of the Nepalis with the ruling community suggesting that they shared common place of origin, i.e. the Tibetan Plateau, and a common religion, i.e. Buddhism. Needless to say, this 'Tibeto-Burman' identity, which became so popular during the 1960s and excluded the Nepalis of Aryan stock and the Indians alike, was politically motivated. In 1961 the parameters of Sikkimese identity was expanded to include all those persons whose names were included in the Register of Sikkim Subjects.

Political parties and cultural organizations also have presented the concept of Sikkimese national identity in different ways. For Mr. N.B.Bhandari, former Chief Minister and now the President of the State unit of the Congress (I), the Sikkimese identity has been associated with the issue of 'De-merger' of Sikkim or with reference to the Chogyal's Sikkim. Similarly, for Mr. B.B.Gurung, former Chief Minister of the State and now the political advisor to the present Chief Minister, and many others viewed Sikkimese identity with reference to the continuation of the institution of the Chogyal should Sikkim was denied free access to run the affairs of the State. On the other hand, for the cultural organization like 'Survival Sikkimese' the Sikkimese identity was very much related with the concept of exclusion of the Nepalis and 'other Bhutias'. In the above instances Sikkimese identity has been referred in terms of specific community or cultural identity of a particular community. Such notion of identity along with its agenda for exclusion or inclusion has produced a chain reaction in the form of emergence of several other cultural organizations emphasizing community interests and identity. Thus the exclusionist view of the Sikkimese

identity and the feeling of being excluded may have given way for proliferation of ethnic identity and consciousness and emergence of ethnic organizations demanding community identity and a boundary of their own. For instance, the Renjyong Mutanchi Rong Ong Seyzum (Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association) demands for separate identity for the Lepcha community outside the common reference of 'BL' and protection of their interest from the Bhutias. The Limboo organization, called Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limboo Chumlung, also claims that Limboos are not Nepalis; the Bhutia organizations like Survival Sikkimese and SIBLAC demand for exclusion of 'other Bhutias' from the present definition of the Bhutias; the Sikkim Sherpa Association demands for exclusion of kin and kith of royal family and the Kazis from the status of the Scheduled Tribes of Sikkim etc. Similarly, various groups within the Nepali community demand for self identity different from the Aryan identity. Sometimes, the identity question involves 'Sikkimese' as against the 'Plainsmen'. Therefore 'politically defined' Sikkimese identity is not always clear and often re-demarcated. It is because of this flexibility, the Sikkimese identity often gets interwoven with the community identity. In brief, it gives an opportunity for manipulation of ethnic/identity issues at the political level. Therefore, the political parties operating in Sikkim are also seemed to have fallen upon such ethnic demands and generally rely on ethnic demands and alignment for electoral success. The political parties are also often referred to with the community or group name, though they deny for being so. For example, the Congress Party (I) is known as Tribal party (earlier the 'Dhoti party' considering the central leadership), the Sikkim Sangram Parishad party was known as Upper caste party and the Sikkim Democratic Front party is associated with the Other Backward Caste/community.

Social beings have multiple layers of identities. For instance, they may be Hindus or Muslims, male or female, labourer or merchants, teachers or lawyers and so on. Among this plethora of identities, a particular identity in a specific context becomes prominent. With reference to Sikkim, political issues are often very important and dominantly reign over rest of the issues or identities.

It seems attitude of members of government, state policies, activities of political parties etc. significantly contribute to development and consolidation of ethnic consciousness and politics. State and political parties create an atmosphere in which ethnic segregation and alienation occur. Such alienation tends to develop a particular perception about other communities and about identity itself. Such developments strengthen ethnic cultural politics. It appears that ethnic consciousness and mobilization in Sikkim has evolved in close relations with state policies and party politics. It definitely establishes a close relation between the two; in which politics shapes the process of definition and development of ethnic identity. In this sense ethnic consciousness is conditional and can be contained through political actions.