

A Glance on the Movement for Democracy in Sikkim (1947-1975)

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Abstract

The Indian struggle for independence from the British Raj had an indelible mark on the democratic movement in Sikkim. The institution of kazi and thekadar survived under the patronage of the Chogyals since 1642 became more and more corrupt. They exploited/subjugated masses through various means. Although people were fuming because of the exploitation of the kazis and the thikadars, they didn't voice it loud until stimulated by the Indian Independence in 1947. A document named 'A few facts about Sikkim State,' which was published in 1947 can be regarded as an spark for the movement that followed later, which led to the merger of Sikkim with India, which many claim, was against the will of the majority of people who for all intents and purposes desired for democracy. This paper is an attempt to look into the episodes of the movement of democracy in Sikkim post 1947. Attempt has also been made to highlight the role of the Lepcha leaders, Ruth Lepcha in particular.

Key words: Sikkim, democratic movement, exploitations, kazis, thikadars, Lepcha.

Introduction

When India got liberated from the clutches of the British *Raj*, crave for democracy could also be seen in the Sikkimese politics. There was a mass discontent due to the

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suppression of the *kazis* and *thikadars* and opinions were slowly building to get rid of such exploitations. Though the kingdom witnessed a few uprisings before yet the real and more open quest for freedom and democracy in Sikkim started after 1947. The country which became the de-facto protectorate of India in 1861 through the treaty of Tumlong, started to surge with slogans of democracy as more and more commoners came under the banner of political parties to oppose the oppressive rule of the *kazis* and *thikadars* under the patronage of the *Chogyals (Protector of faith)*.

The Nepalese, the Lepchas and even a section of Bhutia commoners revolted against the then existing system and ill practices of *Kalo-bhari*, *Jharlangi*, and *Kurua*.¹ These practices were laden upon the commoners and especially to the tenants by the *kazis*. Poor peasants had to work in the land of their lords, mostly *kazis* and *thikadars*, for weeks without any wages. A document written by Tashi Tshering in 1947 entitled 'A few facts about Sikkim State,' highlights this spiteful act and oppression of the *kazis* and the landlords. This document actually ignited many to oppose the polity of *kazihood* and towards the restoration of democracy. It was becoming more and more clear that the end of the British rule in India was the beginning of a new era in the political history of Sikkim. This was the era of democratic movements, of rights and freedoms, and of political agitations calling for amelioration from the bondage of exploitation. As time moved on the people got consolidated and mass opposition spilled over to various parts of the state, its capital being the hub. The Indian Independence and its affect on the Sikkimese society were immense.

The Lepchas who are regarded as the original inhabitant of Sikkim too participated in the movement. Sonam Tshering Lepcha, Dimik Singh Lepcha, Ruth Karthak Lepcha were some of the eminent Lepcha leaders. However, it must be noted that, although a good number of Lepchas supported the movement against the

kazis of Sikkim, a fraction of Lepchas were in favour of the *Chogyal* due to BL² slogan.

It may be noted that the BL did not have any political organization of their own before 1947 as their interest were adequately protected and represented through various proclamations issued by the *Chogyal* from time to time. Since the arrogation of the throne by the Namgyals a few pressure groups from the traditional Kazi families and Lamas of monasteries existed to safeguard their interests. Being parties to the ruling clique these groups played important roles both in creating channels for articulation of their demands and influencing political decision in favour of the group.³ They always looked for their own interest and despite knowing the people's outrage they remained arrogant,⁴ which led to much bigger rebellion.

The Movement

The Chogyal's indifferent attitude and helplessness to stop the long remained suppression of Kazis upon the commoners led to a mass agitation for democracy in Sikkim. The agitation opposing the tyranny of the Kazis, and demanding democracy was mainly headed by the Nepalese; nevertheless, some section of Lepcha and Bhutia commoners also took part in it. It was literally not possible to turn them down. It was due to this reason the rulers targeted the Lepcha leaders. Basnet (1974) remarks,

The policy of elimination of important Lepcha personalities continued even in the later half of the 20th century, when a new movement started in Sikkim, after Indian Independence. It is evident from the incident of Ruth Karthak, who in order to articulate socio-economic and political grievances and asserting a separate identity of the Lepcha community, was banished from Sikkim allegedly for questioning the legal basis of Bhutia rule in the land of the Lepchas.⁵

The Bhutia rulers and elites in Sikkim with an intent to create divide and dominate/douse off the revolt tried to create “systematic elimination of important Lepcha people of important families, lords and functionaries from the participation in the mass movement.”⁶ Some argue that “in spite of matrimonial linkages and blood brotherhood pact, a deep seated mistrust prevailed in their relationship.”⁷

Many events occurred post 1947. “The ‘peasants agitation’ broke out in 1949 which was followed by the short-lived ‘Popular Ministry’ of Tashi Tshering together with the support of the Government of India for ‘progressive association’ of the people of Sikkim in the Government accentuated the demand for representative governance in Sikkim.”⁸ Along with the question of ‘association of the people’, the problem of representation of different communities in the government acquired importance among the parties concerned. As such, in May 1951 Chogyal Tashi Namgyal called for a tripartite talk between royals, BLs and Nepalese, “to sort out the problem of representation in the proposed State Council.”⁹ The royal interest was represented by Palden Thondup Namgyal, the then Maharajkumar of Sikkim, Sonam Tshering represented the BL lobby and interestingly Nepalese’s voice was represented by Capt. Dimik Singh Lepcha and Kashi Raj Pradhan.

The Parity Formula

The tripartite meeting held in 1951, between the representatives of the Durbar, BL and Nepalese tried to find solution for the equal representation of the entire ethnic group in state council. Finally, “the ‘parity formula’ as the governing principle for equal seat sharing between the minority Bhutia-Lepcha and majority Nepalese was worked out”¹⁰ and agreed upon by all parties. As per the formula the state council was composed of 17 members legislative body where six seats were reserved for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha community, another six seats were allotted

to the majority Nepalese and remaining five seats were kept as the nomination of the Chogyal. However, this formulation was again opposed by the Sikkim State Congress's nominee Tashi Tshering on the ground of unequal representation. Sikkim State Congress demanded the restructuring of the council's representation but Chogyal paid no heed to it. Finally, "it was decided with the influence of Government of India that 25% Bhutia-Lepcha population was given equal representation with 75% Nepali population."¹¹ Besides, "since the Lepchas were not awarded any separate representation the Bhutias who constituted only 10 to 12 % of the population now exercised control over 50% of seats in the council."¹² The denial of the separate representation in the state council "effectively generated a feeling of deprivation among the minority Lepcha subjects."¹³ In the year 1953, 17 member State Council was formed and the elections were held for every term henceforth. The seat for state council was raised from 17 to 24 since 1967.

Lepcha Leader Banished and Voice for the Lepcha Identity Suppressed

In 1966, Ruth Mary Lepcha, a Sikkimese Lepcha woman married to A. Halim, an Indian muslim, formed a new party called 'Sikkim Independent Front' with an objectives to protect the socio-economic and political interests of the indigenous Lepchas. The party fielded six candidates comprising of 1 Nepali and 5 Lepchas for 1967 election but their nomination papers were rejected for no specific reasons. Ruth Lepcha, along with her husband was arrested on 23 March 1967 under the Sikkim security Act.¹⁴ Ruth was alleged of making adverse statement and criticism against *Chogyal*. She was alleged to have said "The Lepchas are being suppressed in Sikkim. The Sikkim Darbar is intending to rehabilitate 5000 Tibetan refugees in Sikkim. This move of the Sikkim Darbar is to harm the Lepchas."¹⁵ After her arrest she over reportedly escaped and reached the Indian house for safety. The Indian political officer, N.B.Menon however handed her over to the Sikkim

authorities and she was charged for additional offence i.e. running away from legal custody. On 15 August, 1968, she was sentenced to two years rigorous imprisonment by the chief magistrate of Sikkim, a retired Indian Magistrate serving the Sikkim Government.”¹⁶ Infact, some of the allegations made by Ruth Lepcha were logical where as some were constructed by the authorities to debar her from active politics in Sikkim. Her allegations were logical in a sense that after Dalai Lama reportedly fled Tibet with some 60,000 odd followers, the *Chogyals* expressed his desire to provide refuge to some 5,000 Tibetans in Sikkim.”¹⁷ Since the majority Nepalese were against the establishment of *Chogyal*, the authority of Sikkim was desperately trying to bring the BL in one platform. However, a number of Lepcha leaders were averse to the will of the *Chogyal*. The *Chogyal* must have thought of increasing his supporter by giving refuge to the Tibetan refugees. Further, his Tibetan lineage might also have obliged Chogyal to rise for the cause of the Tibetans. Ruth Lepcha was leading the party which was against the formula of BL and was advocating for a separate identity and provisions for the Lepchas. Hence, the royal government which was facing the whirlwind of agitation must have felt insecure with the rise of Ruth Lepcha. So much so that her charges were neither made public nor was she tried under the Sikkim Public Security Rules 1962. She was branded as non-Sikkimese on the ground of her marriage with an Indian man. The Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 did not have such provisions but to banish her from Sikkim. She was asked to leave Sikkim immediately and not to enter Sikkim again.¹⁸ She was compelled to leave Sikkim for Kalimpong leaving her landed property and a house hoping to come back which however never materialized. Gurung (2011) remarks, “This recorded event was suggestive of the fact that the Lepchas under the Bhutia rule were subjected to various forms of dominations and their attempts for freedom were generally meted out with punitive actions.”¹⁹ In 1950, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty was

signed and Sikkim became the protectorate of India.²⁰ Following the earlier policy of British India government appointed political officer to Sikkim. However, it is worth mentioning that the attitudes of the Indian political officers were not found to be cordial and protective towards the autochthones Lepchas. The “non-associational group of the *kazis* (landlords) was very powerful and enjoyed both administrative and judicial authorities within their territorial jurisdiction. The officials of the *Darbar* were mostly chosen from among the *kazis* and by virtue of their proximity with the *Chogyal*, they used to influence decision in their favour.”²¹ It is due to this discriminating and divisive policy of the rulers the Sikkimese nationalism and identity could never flourish. The ethnic politics became more prominent but despite that the nascent urge for democracy brought people from all the ethnic groups together in the same platform.

The Merger

In the year 1963, the then *Chogyal* of Sikkim, Sir Tashi Namgyal died and Palden Thondup Namgyal was sworn in as the *Chogyal*. The era of Palden Thondup Namgyal remained chaotic as the people’s movement became more and more vibrant. On 26th October 1972, a new party ‘Sikkim Janata Congress’ was formed. The Sikkim Janata Congress was not in favour of the merger of the country with India. Immediately after its formation party declared that “Sikkim was not an Indian state but a separate country.”²² The Janata Congress also demanded the abolition of parity formula signed in 1951 and introduction of democracy in Sikkim with *Chogyal* remaining as the constitutional head. However, the demand of democratic form of government was restrained by the *Darbar*. In 1973 the movement for democracy became more vibrant. Immediately after the election of Fifth Council in January 1973, a joint petition by Sikkim Janata Party and Sikkim National Congress was handed over to *Chogyal*. The parties demanded “full-fledged democracy, a

written constitution, fundamental rights, universal adult franchise and abolition of parity formula.”²³ Later on a Joint Action Committee of two parties with L.D Kazi Khangsherpa, was formed to press their demand but the Sikkim Durbar was not at all willing to succumb to the demand of the Joint Action Committee (JAC). As a result thousands of general masses supporting the cause of democracy and party supporters demonstrated in the capital Gangtok continuously for three days from April 3rd to 5th 1973 leading the killing of six people and hundreds injured. The government of India and the then Prime Minister, Indira Gandhi was immediately approached by the political parties and the JAC. As a result, the government of India intervened in restoration of law and order situation in country, its protectorate. Further, “the political officer of Sikkim persuaded *Chogyal* to make a plea to the government of India for taking over the administration of Sikkim until some workable formula was evolved. The draft was endorsed by all the 20 members present, including *Chogyal*’s trusted Jigdal Densapa.”²⁴ Subsequently, a tripartite agreement was signed between the JAC, *Chogyal* and the government of India which “drastically reduced the power of *Chogyal*.”²⁵

As agreed the constituents assembly was formed and the number of seats was raised to 32, of which 15 seats were reserved for BL, 15 for the Nepalese and 1 seat each to SC and *Sangha*, the monk body. The assembly election held in 1974 was won by Sikkim Congress with thumping victory winning 31 out of 32 seats. The newly constituted Sikkim Assembly “unanimously adopted a resolution... to take immediate steps for Sikkim’s participation in the political and economic institutions of India.”²⁶ One of the very vital requests made to the government of India by the popular government under L D Kazi was “to provide representation for the people of Sikkim in Indian Parliament.”²⁷ This move of the state assembly provided a much awaited opportunity to the government of India. “After having a careful and detail

study of the requests of the government of Sikkim, the union cabinet of India took the crucial decision to accord Sikkim, the status of an 'Associate State' of India on 29th August 1974.²⁸ In this regard 'The Thirty Fifth Constitutional Amendment Bill 1974,' was introduced and passed in the Parliament. The clause 2(a) of article 35 stamped the association of territory of Sikkim with the union of India. The unfolding of the events disappointed the Chogyal of Sikkim. "In view of Chogyal's endeavour to internationalize the issue, Sikkim Assembly, on 10th April 1975, unanimously adopted a resolution abolishing the institution of the Chogyal and declared Sikkim as a constituent unit of India. The state assembly also conducted a special opinion poll [referendum] on 14th April 1975 and according to the verdict of the poll, the government of India decided to accord the status of a full-fledged state of India to Sikkim. On 23rd April the Lok Sabha passed the Constitution (Thirty Sixth Amendment) Bill, 1975, providing Sikkim, the status of a 22nd state of India. The president of India gave his assent to the Bill on 16th May 1975."²⁹ The Thirty Sixth Amendment Act also provided a special provision for the state of Sikkim under article 371F of the Indian Constitution, which safeguards the old laws of Sikkim including the interest of the 'domiciled Sikkimese.'³⁰

Conclusion

As India secured Independence the desire to have people's government in Sikkim grew and the movement for democracy got escalated. It was perhaps, obvious for the Sikkimese people to get more into the demand for democracy as they witnessed the development taking place in Independent India through Five Year Plans. As such, the aspirations of the people were fulfilled with the achievement of self-rule which also brought to an end of the 332 years' rule of the *Chogyals* and the tyranny of the *kazis* and *thikadars*. This period of Sikkim's history witnessed the

active participation of the autochthones Lepchas in the state politics. The leadership given by the Lepchas and concern shown towards the community's interest was both-encouraging and appreciating. However, one needs to research further whether the BL grouping in Sikkim after the post merger period safeguards the interest of the indigenous Lepchas and the opportunity for them to have the absolute participation in the socio-political domain or not.

Notes and References:

¹ Kalo-bhari means black load. Commoners were forced to carry the load covered with black tarpaulin which the Kazis, Thikadaars and later on the British, used to send to Chumbi, Zgyantse, Yatung and other places in Tibet. They had to carry the load back and forth from far off places of Sikkim, Dooars and Geil Khola, the last railway station during the time of British in Darjeeling and back from Tibet. It used to take weeks to reach and come back but the masters never used to pay them. Jharlangi was also a practice of forced unpaid labour followed by their masters. The general mass, especially tenants, under the lordship of their respective kazis and Thikadaars had to work on the private estates and farms of these lords, even after paying the rent. Kuruwa is forced labour in attendance at staying points in anticipation of his masters and tourists.

² BL is the abbreviation for the Lepcha and Bhutia communities in Sikkim. To safeguard their rights, these two communities jointly have reserved seats in the legislative assembly of Sikkim. In addition, the preferential quotas are also followed in administrative posts, certain economic facilities and further state sponsored activities. See, Sinha, *op.cit.*, p.74.

³ N. Sengupta, *State Government and Politics in Sikkim*, Sterling Publication Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 1985.

⁴ *op.cit.*, p. 111.

⁵ L B Basnet, *A Short Political History of Sikkim*, S. Chand & Co. (pvt.) Ltd, New Delhi, 1974 pp. 149-50.

⁶ Suresh Kumar Gurung, *Sikkim Ethnicity and Political Dynamics, A Tragic Perspective*, Kunal Books, New Delhi, 2011 p.160.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid., p.166.

⁹ Ibid., pp.166-167.

¹⁰ Ibid., p.167.

¹¹ L.B. Basnet, *op.cit.*, p.173.

¹² Suresh Gurung, *op.cit.*, p.168.

¹³ Ibid., p.170.

¹⁴ Sikkim Darbar Gazette, Ex. Gazette, No. 123, dated 21.12.1966, Gangtok, pp.148-151.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Lal Bahadur Baasnet, *op.cit.*, p.120.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 22.

¹⁹ Suresh Kumar Gurung, *op.cit.*, p.197.

²⁰ P.R Rao, *Sikkim: The Story of its Integration with India*, Cosmos Publications, New Delhi, 1978, p.53, cited in Suresh Gurung, *op.cit.*, p.203.

²¹ N. Sengupta, *op.cit.*, pp. 117-118.

²² Sunanda K Datta Ray, *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim*, New Delhi: Vikash Publication, 1984, p.164

²³ Suresh Kumar Gurung, *op.cit.*, p.201.

²⁴ Ibid., p.202-203.

²⁵ Ibid., p.203

²⁶ P R Rao, *op.cit.*, p. 49, cited in Suresh Gurung, *op.cit.*, p. 204.

²⁷ Suresh K Gurung, *op.cit.* p. 206.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 207.

²⁹ Ibid.

³⁰ A person possessing the Sikkim Subject Certificate issued by the Chogyal in 1960s, or his legitimate descendent, who either possess Sikkim Domicile Certificate or Certificate of Identification of Government of Sikkim are considered as Sikkim Subjects or Sikkim Domiciled, or the Local Sikkimese.