

Socio-Economic and Political Status of the Bhutias in Sikkim Since 1975: Change and Continuity

ABSTRACT

A close look at the socio-economic and political status of the Bhutias of Sikkim during monarchic rule unravels that the Bhutias were the ruling community. Bhutias are descendants of Tibetans who migrated to Sikkim in different phases of time and finally established their rule in Sikkim. The first phase of history of Sikkim reflects the political hegemony of the minority Bhutia over the Lepchas and Nepalese. The Lepchas are among the earliest and the original inhabitants of Sikkim. When the Lepchas came to contact with the Bhutias, they got influenced by the Bhutia culture, tradition and religion and became 'inferior subject race'.

The Bhutias rose into the position of political and socio-economic prominence after consecrating Phuntsog Namgyal, as the first ruler or the Chogyal (Dharma raja) of Sikkim at Yoksum in 1642. The Chogyals ruled till Sikkim became a part of India in 1975. Sikkim, under the Chogyals, developed as a strong feudalistic state. The Bhutias occupied a high position in the society and were regarded as elites. The Landlords or Kazi and the Lamas were the class of people with high position and status in the society.

The next community living in Sikkim is Nepalese. They were the last one to enter Sikkim in the 19th century. Composed of different tribes and communities, they not only changed the demographic profile but also there was a gradual wave of change in the socio-economic structure in the country. The Nepalese managed to outnumber the early inhabitants, Bhutias and Lepchas in course of time and finally played a crucial role in changing the entire political history of Sikkim.

The entry of the British which led to the rise in the increase of Nepalese migration to Sikkim tremendously effecting the Bhutias status. Demand for land rights and proportionate representation of the Nepalese paved way for merger of Sikkim. The introduction of parity system in 1953 paved way for the entry of other communities into politics. Even though an elective system was introduced, it was found that still the Bhutias were represented well in politics through representation in the State Council till the first election under uniform electoral system in 1974.

The introduction of Sangha seat in 1958 further allowed the Bhutias to extend their influence in politics. The Lamas continued to enjoy the privileges as before. Lamas always represented in the

State Council as a nominated member. Later on, the monasteries had one elective seat in the State Council, a reserved seat as Sangha seat, which is still preserved in the State Assembly.

However, a review of the history of Sikkim shows that marginalisation of Bhutia-Lepcha communities had started during the pre-merger period. This process began when the British through the Political Officer took over the administration of Sikkim. Since then the political and economic powers of Kazis and Lamas was reduced. The Nepalese immigrants posed a great threat to the powers and positions of the Bhutias. New power equation rose when Nepalese were also made the landlords gaining equal economic power with the Lepcha-Bhutia Kazis and landlords. The political uprising in 1940's against the Bhutia rule and feudalism and the inclusion of Nepalese in the politics through representation in the State Council gradually accentuated the process of marginalisation of Bhutias in politics.

The mid 20th Century was the period of political turmoil which ultimately culminated into the merger of Sikkim with democratic and secular India in 1975. Political developments originated from the demand of the Nepalese for change in the administration and abolition of absolute and feudalistic rule of the Chogyals. Monarchy was replaced by a democratic set-up. The Bhutias were now in danger of being relegated to a subordinate position in the sphere of political, social and economic hierarchy. After merger Sikkim not only introduced all the democratic practices of India but Buddhism also ceased to be the state religion. There was a fundamental change in the political and social status of the Bhutias who lost their political authority.

In the post-merger period, the expansion of Scheduled Tribe list with the inclusion of other tribes of Bhutia origin in 1978 and inclusion of Limboos and Tamangs in 2002 made the position of Bhutias more insecure. The Bhutias have been representing themselves through various political and social organisations in the state as they have been relegated to as minority and Nepalese the majority community. The post-merger period also paved way for the development of ethnic identity discourse. New ethnic organisations competing for ethnic space and dominance emerged. The Bhutias also took recourse to this and strived to maintain their identity.

An analysis of the available data points out that, though small in number, Bhutias hold on state bureaucracy, government jobs and land holding is still proportionately very high. Their high bureaucratic positions in the state with sound socio-economic background particularly their hold on land have helped them to maintain their identity as an elite community in spite of the 'change' that had set in the polity and economy of the state.

It is seen that the Bhutias in spite of their smaller number enjoyed certain privileges. One of those is with regard to the number of seats in the Assembly, Bhutia and Lepcha (BL) are allotted 12 seats and one *Sangha* seat (monks representing monasteries) in the State Assembly. Out of the total 32 seats, the Bhutias and the Lepchas have share of 37.5 % of seats. The study reflects that though the Bhutias are numerically less, they still continue to be the most dominant group in Sikkim. In post-merger period, the Bhutias as a single community had a larger share with total of 67 Bhutias contesting and being elected in the assembly elections from 1974-2019. They have the highest number contesting the election in the state. Bhutias have majority share among the 12 BL seats in the state. Most of the reserved BL seats are contested by the Bhutias.

The findings substantiate that transformations and diversification in the occupational pattern among the Bhutia families in Sikkim is noticed. Agriculture as their traditional occupation has declined as they are pursuing other alternative occupations. The case study shows that the number of Bhutia agricultural households, both as agriculturist and agricultural labour has declined, but they continue as owners of large land plots. While members of Bhutia families have taken up new professions and switched over to different business enterprises, they continue to hold plots of lands and therefore have different sources of income. Pursue of education and literacy has increased among the Bhutias and majority of them have received education up to graduation and most of them have received their higher education outside Sikkim. Employment structure has changed from agriculture sector orienting towards non-agriculture sector with the changes in specialisation, technology, education and economy. Education is a major determining factor for a change in employment structure.

The Bhutias, established their own kingdom, but in course of time they had to surrender their political power to the demand for constituting a democratic state. In spite of this 'change', the Bhutias, today continue to occupy high position in the society. Occupying most of the high posts in the state administration, the Bhutias still maintain their position as elite in post-merger Sikkim. Though the influence of *lamas* and monasteries in administration has ceased, but the influence of the Bhutias in the society continues, and so does the role of *lamas* in the society through the reservation of one *Sangha* seat in the state Assembly allowing the *lamas* to get directly involved in state politics.

The state government has expressed the importance of the community (Bhutia) by retaining few of their practices even today. Bhutia has been recognized as state languages in addition to Lepcha and Limboo. The influence of Bhutia culture and traditions on Sikkimese society is also evident from the

fact that the state government annual calendar is still based on the Tibetan Lunar calendar. The Tibetan influenced Bhutia architecture with paintings of Buddhist motifs and ornamentations are evident in the structure of government buildings, including schools and colleges.

The study tries to understand the social, economic and political status of the Bhutias in the pre-merger and post-merger society of Sikkim with the immigration of Nepalese, political and administrative changes in Sikkim. The study is based on a diachronic approach, focusing on the study of Bhutias present condition in context to the past. The study includes field survey, secondary and primary sources for studying the present status of Bhutias. Case studies of certain Bhutia families in three districts: North, West and East were conducted as an oral source for understanding their present status. The case studies added more information on their socio-economic status in relation to the other communities.