

Ethnic Assertion in Sikkim: From Monarchical Rule to Contemporary Political Expression

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Abstract: *This paper examines the role of ethnic assertions in shaping Sikkim's socio-political landscape from the establishment of the Namgyal monarchy in 1642 to its integration into India in 1975 and beyond. Focusing on the interplay of the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali communities, it explores how ethnic identity influenced the decline of over three centuries of monarchical rule and continues to define contemporary dynamics. Unlike other north-eastern Indian states marked by ethnic violence, Sikkim stands out for its relative harmony, though tensions rooted in Bhutia dominance and subsequent political mobilization reveal underlying complexities. Drawing on historical analysis, the study highlights how ethnic competition for power and recognition has driven both conflict and cohesion, offering insights into identity politics in a multi-ethnic society. This study contributes to ethnic studies by analyzing Sikkim's rare stability amidst diversity, offering a counterpoint to the conflict-ridden narratives of north-eastern India and shedding light on how historical ethnic dynamics inform modern governance. This study employs a historical analysis of primary and secondary sources to trace ethnic dynamics.*

Keywords: ethnicity, Sikkim, monarchy, Bhutia, identity politics

1. Historical Evolution of the Concept of Ethnicity

The term ethnicity has its roots in the Greek word 'ethnos' which refers to "a range of situations where there is a sense of collectivity of humans that live and act together." Warner contextualises the term ethnicity as a "trait that separates the individuals from some classes and identifies him with others."¹

The term ethnicity was initially used in the 19th century referring to the "study of the origin, characteristics and progress of the worlds different people marked by differences in religion, behaviour, lifestyle." Later, in the 20th century the term was used to refer to the individuals who belonged to the 'minority cultural groups.' In the developed nations the term was referred to identify the indigenous groups but in the developing nations like India, the term ethnic included the religious groups and indigenous groups like Adivasis and the tribes in north-eastern region of India who have been formally categorised as the Scheduled Tribes in the Indian Constitution. (Baruah 2022)

Ethnicity is a concept rooted in relationship with others, which includes the categorisation of different groups in the context of cultural similarities and differences. Ethnicity as such involves both inclusion and exclusion of people/groups on the basis of their distinctive cultural identities. The concept of ethnicity that relies on cultural distinctiveness eventually metabolises into competitiveness among the various ethnic groups for 'recognition, access to resources and power. It is such competition that often leads to ethnic conflicts in the society. (Ibid.)

Ethnic Identities and the Socio-Political Discord in North-eastern region: Special reference to Sikkim

The north-eastern region is a region with ethnic conflict as a common phenomena. The eight north-eastern states comprising of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura and Sikkim have had episodes of ethnic conflict like for instance the conflict between the Naga and the Mizo and Riang in Mizoram, between the Arunachali and Chakma in Arunachal Pradesh etc. In addition to this, the region has also experienced episodes of insurgencies since the 1950's. However, Sikkim is an exception considering it did not have any major episodes of ethnic conflict or insurgencies. But the historical evidences also reveal that even though Sikkim did not face huge ethnic conflict or insurgencies but ethnic identity was definitely a major factor in the socio-cultural and political assertiveness of the people in the state. A phase wise analysis of the same would bring out a clearer picture.

1) Ethnic based rulership and aristocracy in Sikkim

The pre-monarchical phase of Sikkim has varied narratives; however it is the monarchical phase that gave Sikkim an identity and status as a kingdom. The historical narratives of Sikkim claims that the coronation of the first King (Chogyal) of Sikkim Phuntsog Namgyal in the year 1642 led to the establishment of the first and the only dynasty in Sikkim- the Namgyal dynasty. The mythical narratives state that Sikkim is a hidden land and that in the year 1642 three monks named Gyalwa Lhatsun Namkha Namgyal Jigmed Chempo, Kathog Kuntu Zangpo and Nga- Dag Sempa Phunsog Ringzing came to Yuksam from three different directions and carried out the coronation ceremony of the first Chogyal.²

The ethnic based rulership and aristocracy began with a Lepcha chief named Thekong Tek, whose daughter-in-law (wife of Yugthing Te- Tse) gave birth to an illegitimate son

¹ <https://egyankosh.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/67319/1/Block-6.pdf> accessed 19 March 2024.

² https://ir.nbu.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/5099/7/07_chapter%203.pdf accessed 21 March 2024.

with Chogyal Tensung Namgyal. (Tran 2012) This incident reflects the matrimonial bonds between the two ethnic groups of Sikkim-Lepcha and Bhutia. This would be further dealt in the later sections.

The first Chogyal (Dharma King) brought certain administrative developments in the kingdom. The administrative set up was organised on ethnic lines like for instance, the territory of Sikkim was divided into twelve (12) districts also known as *dzongs*. Each *dzong* was put under a Lepcha district chief also referred to as the Lepcha *dzongpen*. In addition to these, a body of councillors was also formed which constituted of twelve (12) Tibetans/Bhutia's.³ A closer analysis of the facts reveals that the Lepcha ethnic people were bestowed with administrative powers and responsibilities but on the other hand, the lamas (Buddhist monks) convinced the Lepcha *dzongpens* to "symbolically surrender" their lands to the ruler. So the land belonged to the ruler and the land occupants are mere trustees of the land. The latter could be evicted from the land anytime by the ruler. This indicated towards the ethnic supremacy of Bhutia over other ethnic groups in Sikkim. It was such supremacy that in the long term led to the voices of dissent among the ethnic groups in Sikkim (Basnet 1974)

But the history of Sikkim also records that the Bhutia rulers (Chogyal) shared close relations with the other ethnic group-like for instance the Lepcha chief was one of the favourite chief of the Chogyal and several Lepcha's joined to the service of the chief. It was also observed that the fourth Chogyal of Sikkim Gyurmed Namgyal was influenced immensely by the Lepcha and their practice of animism. The Lepcha's and Bhutia's also shared matrimonial ties with each other. The sixth Chogyal Tenzing Namgyal married the daughter of a Lepcha minister Changzed Karwang. (Siiger 1967)

2) Buddhism as the State Religion of Sikkim

The Bhutia rulers who were Buddhist by religion, intended to spread Buddhism in Sikkim. During the reign of the Chogyal's, within the territory of Sikkim several monasteries and Buddhist stupas were built. Infact, later Buddhism was declared as the state religion of Sikkim. Such a step was bound to affect the religions which existed prior to the spread of Buddhism in Sikkim.

The Lepcha's practised animism/bonism and the Limbu's practised Yumaism. One of the three monk named Lhatsun Chenpo, who initiated the coronation ceremony at Yuksam, is said to have set up the Sangcholing monastery in the year 1697 with the intention of teaching Buddhism especially to the Lepcha and Limboo⁴ community. Such ethnic dominance of Bhutia community in Sikkim made the other ethnic communities more conscious of their identity, which dented the relationships between the ethnic groups in Sikkim.

³ In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries religious strife between rival Buddhist sects in Tibet had resulted in frequent wars. As the Gelug-pas (Yellow Hat Sect) gradually gained the upper hand, priests of the rival orders fled with their chosen followers towards Sikkim. These Tibetans are claimed to be the Bhutia's of Sikkim.

⁴ Also known as Tsongs/Yakthungs are considered to be one of the earlier inhabitants of Sikkim.

In addition the Chogyal's established monasteries like Dubde monastery and Pemayangtse monastery in the year 1701 and 1705 respectively leading to the gradual increase in the number of monasteries in Sikkim thereby strengthening the existence of Buddhism in Sikkim which sowed the seeds of politicisation of identity and cultural dominance of one over others. (Subba 2008)

The Chogyals were successful to create a Buddhist embedded society leading to a diminished significance of other religions like Bon and Yumaism⁵ (religion followed by the Limboo community). However, it is believed that the Limboo community of Sikkim began working on reviving of their religion Yumaism amongst the Limboo community and as a result the Limboo's who were earlier receiving Buddhist teachings are said to have rejoined their old religion. (Subba 2008). This initiative of Limboo community was active in West Sikkim. Such outgrow of the Limboo religion was unacceptable to the Bhutia administration thereby creating a conflict between Bhutia and Limboo ethnic group. However, the influence of Buddhism on Lepcha ethnic group continued and remained strong. (Ibid) This could be due to the docile nature of the Lepcha's.

Until 1975, Sikkim under the Chogyal rule survived as a Buddhist kingdom and even after its integration into the Indian Union, Sikkim is constituted of communities following and practicing Buddhism. The major communities following Buddhism are Bhutia and Lepcha community.

3) Ethnic Bond and Resentment in Sikkim: Gradual Changes in the Ethnic Categorisation

The mythical folk history of Sikkim mentions that a Tibetan Prince named *Guru Tashe* was prophesized to visit Sikkim. The eldest son of the Prince was *Jo-Khye-Bumsa* who faced difficulty in child bearing and he was suggested to seek blessings from Lepcha spiritual head, *Thekong Tek* and his wife *Nelong Nyel*. It is believed that the blessings bestowed on him led to the birth of his three sons- *KayboRab*, *MiptonRab* and *Lhag-moRab*. This event, led to the conclusion of a blood-brotherhood treaty between *Khye Bumsa* and *Thekong Tek* thereby establishing the Bhutia-Lepcha friendship bond. *Khye Bumsa* has a strong status in Sikkim considering that the Chogyal's of Namgyal dynasty are the lineage of *Khye Bumsa*. Such ethnic bondness between Bhutia and Lepcha has influenced the socio-cultural and political set up in Sikkim. However, despite the blood-friendship bond the relationship between these two ethnic group was not equal since the Lepcha's were appointed in the "services of the Bhutia's."⁶

Saul Mullard in the book "Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History" mentions that the Namgyal dynasty and the supremacy of Bhutia ethnic community was faced with rebellion and one of such rebellion was in the late 1650's. It was later in the

⁵ It is a Henotheist or Kathenotheist religion and believes in a single goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma also known as Yuma. Religion practised by the Limboo community.

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https://ir.nbu.ac.in/bitstream/123456789/5099/7/07_chapter%203.pdf accessed 26 March, 2024.

year 1663 that a legal document was signed between the leaders of three ethnic groups: Bhutia, Lepcha and Limboo also locally known as Lho, Mon, Tsong respectively. The treaty is known as the treaty of brotherhood 'Lho-Mon-Tsong.' The conclusion of the treaty indicated the supremacy of Phuntsok Namgyal and the Namgyal dynasty. However, matrimonial ties between the ethnic groups helped to maintain the "balance of power." Like for instance, the second Chogyal Tensung Namgyal married a Limboo chieftain besides two other chieftains from Tibet and Bhutan. (Mullard 2011) Linda Gustavsson in M.A thesis writes that the Limboo ethnic community expressed the era of Namgyal dynasty as "dark and oppressive."

The ethnic categorisation in Sikkim traces back to the 1891 Census of Sikkim, when thirteen ethnic groups were identified. However, post- 1891 four ethnic groups were delineated in Sikkim: 'Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Nepali and the others.' Later, in the year 1915 the 'imperial regime' while finalising the revenue rates presented only two categories: Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepali. Thereafter, 1931 onwards people excluding the Lepcha's and Bhutia's were categorised as Nepali (Arora 2007). Such categorisation led to the gradual change in the composition of ethnic groups in Sikkim which created a conflictual relationship between the ethnic groups especially the Limboo ethnic group who claim to have a distinct identity than the Nepali ethnic community in Sikkim. So even in the present Sikkim, the Limboo ethnic group has continued to assert the same through different forums. This shall be discussed in the forthcoming sections below.

4) Post-independent India and the ethnically driven political assertiveness in Sikkim

With India's independence, the Namgyal dynasty brought changes in the ethnic categorisation in Sikkim. The Chogyal during the 1951 Census focussed on the religious categorisation of people in Sikkim into Buddhist, Hindu, Christians. (Arora 2007)

With India being a neonate independent country, the then authorities of Sikkim began to initiate talks with the first Prime Minister of India Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru. Sikkim also witnessed the formation of several political parties like the Praja Sudhrak Samai under the leadership of Tashi Tshering, Praja Sammelan led by Gobardhan Pradhan and Praja Mandal led by Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa. The three parties formed at Gangtok, Temi Tarku and Chakhung respectively (Sengupta 1985: 8).

Prior to the formation of the political party, there existed some local organisation like Praja Sudharak Samaj led by Tashi Tshering, Praja Sammelan, Temi Tarku led by D B Tewari and Gobardhan Pradhan, Praja Mandal, Chakhung which was led by Lhendup Dorji Kazi. These three organisations clubbed together to form the Sikkim State Congress.

By the end of 1947, Sikkim had its first joint political party under the leadership of Tashi Tshering named as the Sikkim State Congress. This party then laid down a memorandum which was constituted of the political and economic reforms. These reforms included three demands: abolishing landlordism, "forming of an interim government as a

precursor for a democratic form of government and the accession of Sikkim into the Indian Union" (Kotturan 1983: 95). The demand which did not go well with the Chogyal of Sikkim causing rift between Tashi Tshering and the Chogyal.

However, certain administrative changes had begun in Sikkim under the reign of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal like judicial reforms, adoption of the Indian codes of criminal procedure and the Indian Penal code for Sikkim, re-organised the administration and instituted the State Council of Sikkim as a legislative body in the year 1954. The State Council consisted of twenty members (20) out of which six members were nominated by the Chogyal and the rest members were directly elected by the people. (Rahul 1969)

The State Council eventually was reorganised to include ten members from among the prominent citizens, lamas (monks) and retired Darbar officials. The three people nominated for the Council were: Ragubir Prasad (Nepalese), Captain Dimik Singh (Lepcha) and Sonam Tsering (Bhutia). Such was the ethnic arrangement in Sikkim.

Later, elections were held in 1953 and its results indicated towards ethnic based political polarization with the National Party winning all the Bhutia- Lepcha seats and the State Congress winning all the Nepali seats. Thereafter, in the 17th March, 1958 the Chogyal issued an edict for forming a new State Council consisting of twenty members (fourteen elected and six nominated). The twenty seats of the Council were to be divided among the ethnic communities of Sikkim with six seats for Bhutia- Lepcha and six other seats for the Nepalese, one for the Sangha and one General seat. This further strengthened the ethnic politics in Sikkim. (Ibid)

The next election of 1958 was won by the State Congress and there was also the emergence of another party named the Sikkim National Congress under the leadership of Kazi Lhendup Dorji. This political party proposed a memorandum which was directed towards forming a constitutional monarchy. During the third elections in March 1967, the Sikkim National Congress emerged as the biggest party in the state.

5) Present Ethnic Dynamics in Sikkim

Sikkim earlier existed as a Buddhist Kingdom and post integration into the Indian Union, the strong presence of Buddhism is still prevalent with Sikkim being a home to 111 monasteries out of which 80 belong to Nyingma sect and 28 belong to Kagyupa sect. The total number of Manilhakhangs is 163 in number out of which 38 are small lhakhangs. 14

At present scenario, Sikkim also has non-Buddhist communities but till date there has been a blissful co-existence among the varied religions and ethnic groups. The two major ethnic communities following Buddhism is the Bhutia's and the Lepchas. There are several other sub-communities like Tamang, Sherpa, Gurung who follow and practice Buddhism in the state. The influence of Buddhism on Sikkim can be understood when one views and studies the art and architecture of Sikkim which is often a depiction of the Buddhist deities, scriptures and paintings. One of the

Buddhist paintings known as *Thangkas* are a significant part of Sikkimese art.

Besides, these the monk body in the state has been given a political status due to the provision of one Sangha seat in the Legislative Assembly as per 371F. Sikkim is the only state that has The Ecclesiastical Affairs Department, which exercise controls over the external affairs of the Monasteries, Mandirs and all other religious institutions in the State. The Department does not interfere in the internal affairs/ functioning of the religious institutions and organizations, particularly matters relating to religious protocols and ritual traditions.

Sikkim has been an exemplary state in terms of its tolerance towards multiple religions but Buddhism still has a notable presence in the state. The three major ethnic communities of Sikkim co-exists in harmony by participating and celebrating the various festivals together like- Losar (Tibetan New Year), Lossoong (harvesting festival) also known as Namsong in Bhutia and Lepcha respectively, Bumchu festival, Dusshera, Diwali, Panglhapsol. All these festivals are often witnessed as a collective celebration by the ethnic groups. In addition, to this another significant factor in Sikkim's ethnic concordance is the usage of Nepali language as "*lingua franca*" of the state. The state has several ethnic organisations like SIBLAC (Sikkim Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee), Sikkim Limboo Association, The Indigenous Lepcha Tribal Association. These organisations work towards the preservation of their respective ethnic identity, language and culture.

At present as per the 2011 census, the state has 6.90 lakh population out of which majority is Nepali then followed by Bhutia and Lepcha. There are 57.76 % Hindus followed by 27.39 % Buddhists, 9.91 % Christians, 1.62 % Muslims and 2.67 % other religions. Such data gives a clearer picture of the ethnic composition in Sikkim since, the Nepali ethnic community and the business community of Sikkim are majorly Hindus and the Bhutia-Lepcha's along with some sub-groups in Nepali ethnic community are Buddhists.⁷

The uniqueness of Sikkim lies in the fact that despite being a home to multiple ethnic groups, the state has experienced peace, and brotherhood among the ethnic groups though ethnic assertions at individual level exists but it has not escalated into ethnic intolerance.

However, one issue that witnessed intense resentment was the amendments that were made in clause (26AAA) of section 10 of the Income-tax Act, 1961 by the Finance Act, 2023.⁸

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<https://www.census2011.co.in/census/state/sikkim.html#:~:text=no%20correct%20answer,-The%20last%20census%20of%20Sikkim%20was%20done%20in%202011%20and,population%20is%20approximately%206.90%20Lakhs>. Accessed 28 March 2024.

⁸ [https://www.ey.com/en_in/alerts-hub/2023/04/supreme-court-expands-scope-of-tax-exemption-for-sikkimese-individuals#:~:text=10\(26AAA\)%20introduced%20in%20the,dividend%20or%20interest%20on%20securities](https://www.ey.com/en_in/alerts-hub/2023/04/supreme-court-expands-scope-of-tax-exemption-for-sikkimese-individuals#:~:text=10(26AAA)%20introduced%20in%20the,dividend%20or%20interest%20on%20securities) accessed 29 March 2024.

The tax payers in Sikkim through their association named "Association of Old Settlers of Sikkim" (AOSS) filed a case wanting their inclusion in the tax exemption. Besides, this they also challenged the fact that even Sikkimese woman who marries a non-Sikkimese on or after 1 April 2008 were denied the exemption which is also discriminatory.⁹ The Supreme Court Judges unanimously gave the verdict that the "denial of such exemption was discriminatory."

This led to the amendment of the Finance Act of 2008. According to Section 10 (26AAA) (which was introduced in the ITA by Finance Act 2008).¹⁰ This caused immense chaos in the state since the Sikkimese people (the Sikkim Subject holder) claimed that it led to the dilution of the special provision enjoyed by Sikkim under Article 371F. The Sikkimese people (comprising of all three major ethnic groups) along with various civil society organisations started a "black badge campaign" in social media opposing the Act. The image below shows the black badge campaign in social media. Image Source- Northeast Live

#blackday4sikkim
In protest of Finance Act 2023.



The Joint Action Council¹¹ organised a rally on 8th April 2023 opposing the Act and the definition of "Sikkimese" as per the Act (already discussed above). Due to immense opposition to the Act, the Ministry of Finance posted a clarification stating that the term "Sikkimese" has been defined only for the purpose of the Income tax Act of 1961

⁹ The earlier definition of Sikkimese led to the inclusion of only about 94.6 % of Sikkim's population under the tax exemption act who were registered as Sikkim subject thereby excluding the rest. The ones excluded are the ones who are Indian citizens domiciled in Sikkim prior to 26 April 1975 whose names or names of their close relatives were not recorded in Register of Sikkim Subjects.

¹⁰ "with retrospective effect from tax year 1989-90, provides tax exemption to an individual being a "Sikkimese" in respect of any income which accrues or arises to him/her:

The provision defines "Sikkimese" to mean:

- an individual, whose name is recorded in the register maintained under the Sikkim Subjects Regulation, 1961 read with the Sikkim Subject Rules, 1961 ("Register of Sikkim Subjects"), immediately before 26 April 1975; or
- an individual, whose name is included in the Register of Sikkim Subjects by virtue of the Government of India Order No. 26030/36/90-I.C.I., dated the 7 August 1990 and Order of even number dated the 8 April 1991; or
- any other individual, whose name does not appear in the Register of Sikkim Subjects, but it is established beyond doubt that the name of such individual's father or husband or paternal grandfather or brother from the same father ("close relatives") has been recorded in that register.

¹¹ An organization formed on 13th January 2023 with the intention of fighting for the protection of Sikkimese indigenous identity.

and not for any other purpose.” Further, the Chief Minister Shri P.S. Tamang Golay stated that “the inclusion of the old settlers within the definition of “Sikkimese” was only for the purpose of granting them tax exemption, and they would not enjoy any other benefits.” (The Telegraph Online 2nd March 2023). [https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/chief-minister-p-s-tamang-golay-cautions-joint-action-council/cid/1920308 accessed 29 March 2024.] However, the Sikkimese people (comprising of all three major ethnic community) argued that this dilution could “open floodgates” in the future and the possibility of the old settlers (not registered as Sikkim subject holder) claiming the rights and privileges which only the indigenous Sikkimese people are enjoying till date like for instance government jobs, free education, health benefits etc.

One of the doctoral scholar writes “their struggle to gain this identity is not so much about rights, exemptions, and welfare facilities. It's about recognition. Recognition that their forefathers too toiled, that they also find a home in this beautiful place surrounded by the majestic Himalayas, and perhaps, most importantly, they too have been as responsible as any other social group in state-building. The

only difference is that they look different, and their ancestors came from a land farther away. But in terms of their love for the land and her people, no animosity exists.” (Malu 2023)

On the other hand, the indigenous Sikkimese under Joint Action Council (JAC) organised “Sikkimese Unity Day” on 8th March 2023 with the intention of showcasing the “unity” in the state. This event was in response to the Finance Act 2003 definition of the term “Sikkimese.” In the press conference, the JAC mentions that the objective behind the event is to make everyone including the Central government aware of the unity amongst the people of Sikkim. Furthermore, the opposition party Sikkim Democratic Front declared that it would mark their foundation day on 4th March 2023 as a “*Shok Diwas*” (Day of Mourning) as they were of the opinion that the Finance Act of 2023 compromised with Article 371 F (special provisions for Sikkim in the Indian Constitution) and also caused loss of Sikkimese identity. (The Telegraph Online 2nd March 2023). The image below shows the Unity Day celebration at MG Marg, Gangtok. Image Source- Northeast Live Desk



2. Conclusion

A comprehensive study of the ethnic assertiveness in Sikkim reveals that the state has in the past experienced both alignments and clashes among the ethnic groups existing within the state. However, amongst the eight north-eastern states, Sikkim has been one of the most peaceful state considering it has never till date had any episodes of armed rebellion. The multiple ethnic groups assert their own unique identity and culture but this assertion has not garnered hatred till date. In contrary, the state has witnessed unity, tolerance and inclusive attitude of the people of Sikkim towards each other.

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