

# DEMOCRATIC INVENTION IN INDIA'S NORTHEAST SIKKIM : ROLE OF ACTORS AND ORGANISATIONS

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## ABSTRACT

*Getting a firm hold on the process of democratisation has not been an easy task. The process of inventing democracy in the region which has experienced a different set of rule for a long time is often challenging, the intense power struggle, the viability of the situation, the human suffering, the hope and the despair. The most promising insights in the process of democratisation comes from understanding the factors that shape political behavior and the way in which people, political actors and institutions interact with one another in the establishment of the new system. The effective participation of the citizens as political actors and organisations provides the principal bodies representing and articulating public concerns and which will act as a medium of negotiation. Therefore, the paper intends to focus upon the role of actors and organisations that played a major role in Sikkim democratisation process and at the same time discusses how parties have engaged with one another in helping citizens understand, navigate and shape the process of democratic establishment. Democracy as a term indicates the equality of opportunity as between different individuals and different classes, not only political, but also educational, social and economic opportunity (Gillin, 1919). The meaning of democracy as a form of government goes way back to the understanding of the Greek Philosopher, however the usage of its term in the western society can be traced through the definition given by Dahl (1971), Schumpeter (1942) who has defined democracy as a political space or institution where there is relatively low barrier on the participation of the people, a genuine political competition and the active involvement of citizens in the formation of an independent association or organisations. The realisation of the forms of democracy has been the essential task in any democratic invention. Many a times when people speak of democracy, they usually refer to the political democracy, limiting its definition to the government or the state. However, if we need to understand the essence of real democracy, it needs to possess the characteristics of participation of the people in all the spheres of relationships. The broader understanding of democratic invention in the state becomes possible with the involvement of the study of political actors and various political institutions that emerge or re-emerge during the process of democratisation. Therefore, the study focusses upon the role of actors and organisations in the democratic invention of India's northeast Sikkim, which was once a monarchical institution.*

**KEYWORDS:** Sikkim, Democratic invention, Actors, Organisations

## INTRODUCTION

Democracy as a term indicates the equality of opportunity as between different individuals and different classes, not only political, but also educational, social and economic opportunity (Gillin, 1919). The meaning of democracy as a form of government goes way back to the understanding of the Greek Philosopher, however the usage of its term in the western society can be traced through the definition given by Dahl (1971), Schumpeter (1942) who has defined democracy as a political space or institution where there is relatively low barrier on the participation of the people, a genuine political competition and the active involvement of citizens in the formation of an independent association or organisations. The realisation of the forms of democracy has

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Getting a firm hold on the process of democratisation has not been an easy task. The process of inventing democracy in the region which has experienced a different set of rule for a long time is often challenging, the intense power struggle, the viability of the situation, the human suffering, the hope and the despair. The most promising insights in the process of democratisation comes from understanding the factors that shape political behavior and the way in which people, political actors and institutions interact with one another in the establishment of the new system. The effective participation of the citizens as political actors and organisations provides the principal bodies representing and articulating public concerns and which will act as a medium of negotiation. Therefore, the paper intends to focus upon the role of actors and organisations that played a major role in Sikkim democratisation process and at the same time discusses how parties have engaged with one another in helping citizens understand, navigate and shape the process of democratic establishment.

#### **SIKKIM'S MONARCHIAL INSTITUTION AND DEMOCRACY**

The human history in the past has been the witness of what we popularly term as authoritarian or non-democratic regimes which is often term as tribes, monarchies, empires, oligarchies, city-state, slave republics (Anderson, 2011). The state of Sikkim witnesses the similar pattern of history of a monarchical regime. The Namgyal Dynasty which was established in Sikkim in 1642, continued to rule Sikkim roughly for more than 330 years (Sengupta, 1985). It was under the reign of the last king P.T. Namgyal, who went in to recess for making a room for the democratic forces for his independent country bringing about a drastic political change towards the democratic invention in the Sikkim's political history. It is often assumed unless the ruling political elites are forced into accepting a firm limitation on their power; the state could not exert even a minimum of legitimacy. Only legitimate power could in turn guide societal development that could help address the political and economic injustices in the state (Dolenec, 2013).

The independence movement, which was taking place in the immediate neighbour, India, brought a different political sketch encouraging the young, aspiring and intelligent minds of Sikkimese people to set the machine to action and freeing themselves from the long-accustomed yoke of feudalism (Basnet, 1974). It is important to understand how the process of institutional change are negotiated and rooting of political actors and organisations were organised as a regular social practice of democracy in the context of Sikkim's democratic invention. Every time a world has undergone a change from an authoritarian to a democratic institution, the

long oppressive rule of the elite class has been the major factor for the demand in change in the present political regime where the people were oppressed and being a subject of a domination. It was only in 1975 by 36<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act; Sikkim became the full-fledged constituent state of Indian Union, taking a turn to a democratic liberal state from a monarchical regime (Basnet, 1974).

The new wave of change brought lot of expectations to the people of Sikkim that how this new sets of laws and regulations will reflect the popular sentiment and the aspirations of the people. How the core concept of people's participation is welcomed by the new democratic set up. Until then the political status of people of Sikkim under the monarchical regime was characterised by a lack of political consciousness, widespread illiteracy, and economic dependence of the vast majority of the people upon the economically dominant class who were the beneficiaries of the feudal system (Sengupta, 1985). In Sikkim the people's sufferings, their woes, trials and tribulation were enough to blow the wind of revolution towards the collapse of the monarchical regime. Further, the coming up of political actors and organisations played their major role in providing the space for the people of Sikkim to place their demands and aspirations in the establishment of democratic setup in Sikkim.

#### **EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL ACTORS IN SIKKIM**

Until 1940s, the politics of Sikkim was characterised as undemocratic and non-participatory process with centralised, authoritarian and unsuitable to the conditions and the needs of the expanding population, limited human resources and current demand for civil and human rights (Yasin & Chhetri, 2012). It was only after 1940s, the birth of three political organisations paved a way for the democratic participation of people in Sikkim. However, the three political organisations had no such cohesive and set goals, but had a few demands in common which tied them together against the existing regime. The three political organisations were Praja Mandal at Chakung under the leadership of Kazi Lhendup Dorjee Khangsarpa, Praja Sammelan at Temi Tarku under the leadership of Gobardhan Pradhan and Dhan Bahadur Tiwari and Praja Sudarak Samaj at Gangtok under the leadership of Tashi Tshering, Sonam Tshering and Kezang Tenzing (Basnet, 1974).

They all brought an early reformist movement in Sikkim giving birth to the institution of party system, responsible government, local self-government and universal suffrage (Sinha, 1975). With their constant increasing demand for the representative government, the election to the state

council was conducted but the concrete institutionalisation of democracy was still uncertain. The successful establishment of democracy requires the over-all development of the institution, increasing enough space for the people to participate in the public affairs, reducing the gap between the citizen and the governmental institutions. Moreover, the process would be successful only when there come groups of different actors and organisations, which brings out the demand of the subject to a larger political space.

### **EARLY DEMANDS OF THE POLITICAL ACTORS**

The most intriguing insight in the study of democratic invention in any part of the world is in understanding the factors that had shaped the political behaviour and the way in which different actors and organisations have interacted with one another with their demands in the establishment of the new regime.

The three different pioneers of political organisations in Sikkim around 1940s ultimately merged to form a new political party, Sikkim State Congress, under the presidentship of Sir. Tashi Tshering (Basnet, 1974). The main objective of the party remained to be the abolition of the landlordism, to form a responsible and interim government and the merger of the country with the Indian Union. With such demands arising from the political party, made the Maharaja of Sikkim assent the call of party while curbing the powers of the landlords eventually leading to the abolition of the system. However, the demand of the merger of the state with the Indian Union was kept aside. In the process of democratisation, the political parties have seen to be the key factor in providing the principal bodies for representing and articulating the people's concern and demands with the negotiation of an establishment of the new political institution. Soon, the influence of the Sikkim State Congress started to increase in such a pace that it started to threaten the existence of the royal establishment. In the counter attack of the party, the Sikkim durbar introduced a new political party, Sikkim National Party. The policy of the party was an anti-thesis to the policy of Sikkim State Congress (Basnet, 1974). They stood against the democratic agitation and opposed the demand of the Sikkim State Congress for the accession of Sikkim with the Indian Union. According to the National Party, accession of Sikkim with the Indian Union was unacceptable (Basnet, 1974).

The unattended attitude of the Sikkim durbar towards the demands of the Sikkim State Congress led Tashi Tshering and his other members to go to Delhi and meet the Indian Government. Within no time, the Maharaja of Sikkim was advised by the Indian Government to appoint Dewan to look after the administration of Sikkim, and J.S Lall was appointed

as the Dewan of Sikkim in August 1949 (Sengupta, 1985). The appointment of an Indian Dewan in the state of Sikkim was purely done with an intention to bring close the Sikkimese people with the Indian government.

### **INSTITUTIONAL AND POLITICAL CHANGE**

According to Huntington (1993), the most direct implication of the third wave democratisation was witnessed with people's elemental attachment with their political system and the most visible gain have been the election as the functional basis for the political power. In relation to this, a famous parity formula was agreed upon in which the Nepalese were equated with the Bhutia and Lepcha population in distribution of seats in the State Council, present day State Legislative Assembly (Basnet, 1974). In 1953, an election for the first time was noted in Sikkim's political history to the State, on the basis of the parity formula. There were twelve elective seats in the State Council, where six were reserved for the Nepalese and other six for the Bhutia and Lepcha. The Maharaja was to nominate five members. Thus, seventeen members of State Council were formed with the Dewan as the President (Sengupta, 1985). The Constitutional Proclamation of 1953 formed a diarchy reserving the subject interested under the jurisdiction of the king, while only the transferred subjects were to be administered by the people's representatives. However, a major change was not seen where none of the institution went on strengthening the idea of popular democracy in Sikkim for which a political organisations and parties came to existence.

The Second General Election in Sikkim to the State Council took place after the Royal Proclamation of 1958, according to which the seats in the Council were raised from 17 to 20. The six Bhutia- Lepcha and six Nepali seats remained unaltered. The two new elective seats, one General and one Sangha were added to the State Council. The number of nominated seats was raised from 5 to 6 (Basnet, 1974). With the clear majority of 8 out of 14 elected seats in the council, the State Congress came out to be victorious and fulfilled all the conditions needed to form a one-party Executive Council (Chakravarti and Nepal, 2012). The different stages of development determined the dominant political culture and steadily provided to be the basis upon which different sections of the society engaged with one other.

To the existing wave of political change, a Joint Convention was seen in 1959 which reiterated the old Congress demand for a responsible government and set out the demand for the drafting of democratic constitution for Sikkim which should incorporate the Fundamental Rights and the Directive Principles as inspired by the Indian Constitution

(Chakravarti and Nepal, 2012). They demanded the interim coalition government and the convention came to a point that democracy could be established only with the INTRODUCTION of the Joint Electorate system based on universal adult franchise as was in India (Sengupta, 1985). With regard to their demands, there was no sign of positive feedback from the Sikkim Darbar and this led the political parties to realise their weakness in not able to avoid the conflicting and divergent views regarding each other.

Therefore, keeping in the mind the welfare and the interest of the people at a large, a new party came into existence that was Sikkim National Congress. It was in 1960; new party came into existence through the merger of Swatantra Dal, Praja Sammelan, the dissident of Sikkim State Congress and the dissident of National Party which was led by Sonam Tshering (Sengupta, 1985). The new party was seen as a serious threat to the Sikkim Darbar. The leaders of the Sikkim National Congress forwarded their demand for establishing a responsible government, adoption of a written constitution, universal adult franchise based on the joint electorate. Within no time, Sikkim National Congress became the most powerful political party in the state (Chakravarti and Nepal, 2012). Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa was elected as the President, Sonam Tshering and D.B. Tiwari was elected Vice President and Bhim Bahadur Gurung was elected as the General Secretary (Chakravarti and Nepal, 2012).

Further, in the process of political development, the Royal Proclamation of 1966 took place, which granted a representation in the existing State Council to Tsong and the Schedule Caste tribe, at the same time increasing the Bhutia-Lepcha and the Nepali seat too in the State Council. With that, the third General Election for Council took place in 1967 where Sikkim National Congress came out to be majority securing 8 out of 18 elective seats, National Party with 5 seats, the State Congress with two and one each of the Tsongs and Schedule Caste seats were won by the unattached independents (Sinha, 2008). In a mean time, there came inner conflict within the political parties which led to the fractions within the party. B.B. Gurung who was the General Secretary of the National Congress was expelled from the party and he formed a faction of the National Congress. Even a minor party like Schedule Caste League went through a split. The more confusion was added up with the formation of the new party Sikkim Janata Party by L.B. Basnet. The basic principle of the Janata Party was based upon the ideology of socialism, democracy and the unity of the entire Sikkimese citizens (Sengupta, 1985).

The fourth general election to the State Council took place in April 1970, with some of the rapid political development, which started reflecting in the Indo-Sikkim

relationship. In the preceding year of the fourth General Election, the political situation of Sikkim was stagnant and remained far from reaching a goal of progressive association of the people of the State with Indian Union (Basnet, 1974). Until, the Fifth General Election to the State Council in 1953, the polarisation or the communities the distinctive political parties were completed. The National Party stood as a party of Bhutia and Lepcha communities, while the Sikkim National Congress and Sikkim Janata Congress stood as a party of Nepali population of Sikkim (Sengupta, 1985).

During the process of counting of votes of elections, an incident took place which spark a fire for the revolt. Sikkim National Congress protested against the members of the Election Committee when it was found that some of the ticket polled at Rabong Polling Station in the South Constituency of Sikkim had not been separated at the perforated point. This resulted to a heated exchange of words between Sikkim National Congress and Sikkim National Party. The election of 1973 was regarded to be null and void. Therefore, the Sikkim National Congress and Sikkim Janata Congress submitted a written protest to Chogyal for alleging the polling at Rabong and demanding the arrest of those officials involved in rigging (Basnet, 1974). However, the negligence of the Palace towards their demand brought both the party together under one banner and formulated a list of demand for creating a full-fledged democracy, a written constitution, fundamental rights, one-man one vote principle and the abolition of the Parity System. However, their voices were being neglected and the Palace was busy in the celebration of the Chogyal's 50<sup>th</sup> birthday on 4<sup>th</sup> April 1973 (Sinha, 2008).

While at the other side of the political development, a Joint Action Committee was being formed under the leadership of Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa who put the demand of change and restructuring of the existing system against the Palace. However, the negligence of the Palace towards the mass uprising and their failure to measure the anguish of the masses resulted in serious lathi charge and firing where thousands of demonstrators were pouring from all the parts of Sikkim (Sinha, 2008). It was a time when the morning atmosphere echoed with the Anti-Chogyal slogan. The Chogyal made a request to the Government of India to intervene the situation and restore law and order and to take over the administration. The revolt ended with the intervention of the Government of India, appointing B.S. Das as the Chief Administrator of Sikkim and to look in to the over-all administration of Sikkim (Basnet, 1974).

## **THE REFORMATION IN SIKKIM**

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The process of democratic invention in any state provides the extreme stress test for the political actors and the existing institution, of their capability to respond to the concern of the subjects. Some of the constitutional reform remained imperative and could not avoid the involvement of different variables. The Tripartite Agreement of 8<sup>th</sup> May 1973, which was signed between the Chogyal, the Foreign Secretary, Government of India, and the representatives of three political parties, provided the basis for future Constitutional set up in Sikkim and its relation with India (Sengupta, 1985). The Agreement called for the establishment of fully responsible government in Sikkim with more democratic constitution, the guarantee of Fundamental Rights, the rule of law, an independent judiciary and greater legislative and executive power for the elected representative of the people (Basnet, 1974). This led to the introduction of the Legislative Assembly based on one-man one vote, the election on the basis of universal adult franchise and a cabinet which will be responsible to the State Assembly (Sinha, 2008). With that the first general election to the 32 members Legislative Assembly took place in April, 1974. There were 15 representative seats of Bhutia-Lepcha and 15 for Nepalese and one each representative of Sangha and the Scheduled Caste in the State Assembly. The Sikkim Congress swept the poll by securing 31 seats, while the National Party could secure only one seat in Assembly election (Sengupta, 1985).

The Government of Sikkim Bill, 1974 was scheduled to be discussed in the Assembly before the 20<sup>th</sup> June, 1974 for the discussion and the approval. According to this bill, the whole administration of Sikkim was to be restructured. Such drastic developments were not acceptable by the Chogyal and he refused his consent to section 30(c) of the constitution which he claimed to deteriorate the Sikkim separate identity and international personae as a protectorate of India under the Indo- Sikkimese Treaty of 1950 (Sinha, 2008). The disagreement between the Chogyal and the State Congress over the Government of Bill 1974 led to a serious confrontation. Another set of change came to be seen through the 35<sup>th</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act that was passed by the Indian Parliament providing Sikkim the status of an Associate State of India seeking more closer tie with the Indian Government (Chakravarti and Nepal, 2012). Within no time, the 36<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act of the Constitution of India was being proposed in the Lok Sabha, but there were flow of debates in the parliament regarding the conflicting interest among the Sikkimese people, many of whom considered the move to be very hasty, the effect of which would be the destruction of the separate identity of the Sikkimese people (Sengupta, 1985).

The ministry and the Sikkim Congress found it difficult to run the administration of Sikkim along with the Maharaja as the head of the state. The mutual distrust and antagonism reached to such an extent that they demanded for the complete abolition of the institution of monarchy on 10<sup>th</sup> April, 1975 (Sengupta, 1985). A referendum was called upon on 14<sup>th</sup> April 1975 to know the opinion of the people towards the future political set up in Sikkim and the result of the referendum came as a removal of monarchy from Sikkim and development of the democratic institution for the State with the Indian Union. The Government of India accordingly proposed a Constitutional Amendment Bill, seeking to make Sikkim the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union. With the 36<sup>th</sup> Amendment Act, 1975, Sikkim forever ending the rule of monarchy established a liberal democratic institution becoming 22<sup>nd</sup> state of the Indian Union (Sengupta, 1985).

### CONCLUSION

Sikkim became the constituent unit of the Indian Union with effect from 26<sup>th</sup> April 1975. The idea of an association of people with the government, the demand for the increase in the level of people's participation, the task of different political parties and organisations to provide as a vehicle proved to be successful in laying down the initial foundation for the people of Sikkim to understand, navigate and shape the process of the democratic invention. The Government of India intervention and their support had a clear notion of political transformation in the state of Sikkim and clearer scheme for its future course of action. The democratic invention in Sikkim is a complicated reality, since the event is not born out of concession from the established order but rather a consequence of the balance of power between the force of the existing regime and that of the opposition and other external factors.

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