

INDIA'S FOREIGN POLICY: PRIOR SIKKIM'S MERGER

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Abstract: Sikkim on account of its proximity to Tibet became a sensitive area between India and China since Chinese government's callous activity over Tibet to drop Lamaism. In the limelight New Delhi became alive to the paramount importance of Sikkim due to its strategic location. Given the worsening situation in Tibet, On 14th December 1950, by signing treaty with India, Sikkim became protectorate of India enjoying autonomy in its internal affairs, while India would look after defense and territorial integrity of Sikkim. Since Sikkim is only feasible overland trading route between Chinese-occupied Tibet and India, its geopolitical importance is highly significant for Indian foreign policy dynamics and in the 'Great Game' interest in Himalayan politics.

Keywords: *China, Lamaism, New Delhi, Sikkim, Tibet*

I. INTRODUCTION: HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

Sikkim was a tiny Himalayan Kingdom tucked between China and India till its merger with the latter in 1975, is at present one of the smallest states of North East India. Bounded by four lands, namely, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and India, Sikkim had to come in contact with all of them in the course of its history. To understand the nature and dimensions of the situation that arose, it is necessary to refer to some of basic features of Sikkimese society, its politics, and the history of its relationship with India. Its social and cultural life at first bears the predominant influence of Tibet. Sikkim had always looked upon itself as a dependency, a vassal of Tibet, not because of any compulsion but because of a sort of voluntary submission springing from the Sikkimese Bhutia's origin, religion and above all, the proximity of the two territories. The political system of Sikkim was typically theocratic feudalism parallel to the Tibetan Lamaist pattern. The ruler was not only the secular head of the state, but also the incarnate lama with responsibility to rule over subjects.

The advent of the eighteenth century saw an aggressive Nepal encroaching on the Sikkimese territory. While a small filter of Nepalese into Sikkim had started at the beginning of the eighteenth century, Nepal's invasion and subsequent occupation of Sikkim led to a substantial settlement of the Nepalese on her territory. Helpless against the powerful invaders, the Sikkim ruler sought the assistance of the British East India Company who had by then established their stronghold in eastern India with the weakening of the Mughal rule. Nepal's occupation of Sikkim came to an end in 1816, when the British troops intervened and defeated the Nepalese forces, but the Nepalese settlers stayed back. In 1835 the ruler of Sikkim presented Darjeeling 'out of friendship' for the Governor General of India, Lord William Bentick, to the East India Company.

The British interests in Sikkim were linked to their trade and political interests in Tibet. Both Bhutan and Sikkim were the possible gateways to Tibet. Sikkim, being weaker was the easy access. On February 10, 1817, Sikkim signed a treaty with the East India Company surrendering all her rights to deal with any foreign power and conceded unhindered right of free access to the British to Tibet border. Sikkim became a de facto protectorate in 1861 when treaty was further revised. The Anglo-Chinese Convention of 1890 put a seal on this status.¹ The ethnic scene of Sikkim began to undergo a rapid change with the advent of British. Not only had the early Nepalese settlers multiple in numbers, the British needed more Nepalese labour to develop Sikkim's communication network to access to Tibet. As a result Nepalese outnumbered the Bhutia and Lepcha in the environment of its population. The entire ethnic scene had changed in Sikkim by 1947 when the British left India and India became independent. In terms of inter-ethnic group interaction, it acquired the attributes of a plural society with the focal point of its management, as ruler being succeeded in placing at the top, the ethnic notables in the economic, administrative and political fields.

The Bhutia rule saw the emergence of a new social class called kazis who constituted the top rank of the bureaucracy for the Bhutia rulers. They became the power behind the throne acquiring the social and economic domination. The Bhutias retained their dominant position supported by the elites from various other groups. The Lepchas remained as a member of the Bhutias with hardly any political or economic control. Barring a few elite among the Nepalese, the vast majority was sharecropper or confined to petty trade or employed as labourer or workers. As long the British ruled directly through their Political Officer, the ethnic imbalance and interaction of this had no major impact on Sikkim's governance.

It is important to note that the British Government as the paramount power studiously follow till 1935 a policy of distinguishing Sikkim from about 600 princely states of India. By admitting Sikkim to the Indian

'Chamber of Princes' in 1935 it had been expressly recognized that Sikkim was a 'special case'. The reason noted was that, unlike any other Princely States, Sikkim was bounded on three sides by foreign territory and only on one side by British India.² There were other reasons that Sikkim could be considered as exception. Religiously and culturally Sikkim was very different from the other Princely States. Across the country the Princely rulers were mostly Hindu or Muslim. Sikkim, like neighbouring Bhutan, was a Buddhist state with strong religious ties to the theocracy of Tibet and its spiritual leader, the Dalai Lama. And until 1947 when British left India, Sikkim continued to roll under a feudal order. The scene changed when in August, 1947, the British left India and their paramount over Sikkim, as over other Princely Indian States lapsed. Sikkim suddenly discovered that the 20th century had arrived.

Democratic movement could not make much progress during the British dispensation owing to several factors. The British protectors of Sikkim in alliance with the feudal elements never encouraged political activities. There were no political parties worth the name, but only political groups, no democratic institutions existed and there was no tested democratic leadership. The state was kept economically backward. Yet stir was there owing to relentless exploitation of the people. The democratic experiment that was going on in India fanned the flame indirectly. The Indian National Movement always sympathized with the Sikkim people. It was therefore, expected that India, after independence would go whole hog of bringing about democratization in Sikkim.

On 15th August 1947, India became free and the British paramountcy in the sub-continent lapsed making all the princely state free. It broke the spell of the Middle Ages under which the Sikkimese had lived until then. This historic event sent its tidal waves lapping inside of Sikkim, which disturbed the quiet and calm surface of Sikkim politics. People aspired to breathe free air and be independent. Therefore, number of political parties emerged and began to cry for nationalism. They expected that India would support their fight against feudalism and bring change in the state. But, contrary to this expectation, India did not favour any drastic change in the political and socio-economic set up of the state, because truncated India was weak, engaged in the spill-over, problems of partition and the new Indian ruling elite appeared too indecisive and too idealistic. Believing that gradually the situation in Sikkim would so develop as to help the process of democratization, India decided to keep the separate identity and status of Sikkim as a protectorate which was confirmed by signing Indo-Sikkim Treaty on 5th December 1950.³ During this time, there were some dramatic events on the other side of the Himalaya. The seizure of Tibet by the Chinese in 1950 suddenly brought Sikkim into the current of international politics. The Chinese communists, as heirs to the Chinese empire, made no secret of their ambition to be the dominant power in Asia. This made Sikkim, along with the rest of the Himalayan region, an area of geo-strategic importance overnight. The Tibetan revolt against the Chinese and the consequence flight of the Dalai Lama to India in 1950, and the Sino-Indian border conflict- a series of events placed Sikkim in the centre of an area of tension.

II. INDIA AND SIKKIM: BRIDGING THE GAP

When the British withdrew from the Indian sub-continent, a controversy rose almost immediately over whether India automatically inherited the paramount rights the British had enjoyed over Border States. India's view point was that as the successor government, it enjoyed all the rights, privileges and responsibility of the British, and on the other hand the Sikkimese king wanted to disengage the state from the Indian and to re-establish the royal authority that had been eroded by the British. But, the differences over the succession issue proved to be of only temporary significance, because the new Indian government quickly signed Standstill Agreement with Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet.⁴ The agreement with Sikkim stipulated that all existing arrangements, formal or informal, in operation on August 15, 1947, would be retained until new treaty could be negotiated. India was prepared to accept varying degree of autonomy for the Border States in exchange for recognition of her special interest within their territories. The character and scope of these 'special interest' were determined by a number of factors such as historical precedents from the British period, the strategic significance of the area and the internal political conditions. Sikkim, which had been directly administered by the British government of India in the past, inevitably found its own internal and external autonomy more fully circumscribed than either Nepal or Bhutan, whose internal autonomy had always been respected by the British. But, New Delhi's policy after 1947 reflected its preference for the minimum degree of intervention considered consistent with India's political and security requirements in the border area.

The process of negotiating new treaties with the Border States got underway only in the latter part of 1949. The first of these treaties- with Bhutan had guaranteed the country internal autonomy and conceded only that India should guide its foreign affairs. By 1950, however, when New Delhi was negotiating new treaties with both Sikkim and Nepal, Peking had announced its intensions to liberate Tibet.⁵ The necessity for more substantive methods of protecting India's special interests in the Himalayan range had been duly impressed upon the Indian authorities. At the same time, the political condition in Sikkim was seriously disadvantages to the Sikkim government. There was increasing opposition to the royal authority from political elements demanding democratic institutions in Sikkim to replace the feudal order. Internal disorder in the state had

reached alarming proportions the very survival of the ruling dynasty had seemed to require Indian support. All these factors left the ruler of Sikkim with no alternative but to seek Indian support to maintain his position and the democratic elements, because he knew that these elements could be checked only by India.⁶

Under the circumstances, India could have demanded and obtained the accession of Sikkim to the Indian Union if it had been so inclined. Furthermore, this could have been accomplished with some degree of popular support in Sikkim, the largest and most representative party at that time Sikkim State Congress had made accession to India a policy in its program. But, India was adopting a policy of gradual transformation in Sikkim and, therefore, she refrained from active interference in the Sikkimese internal affairs. She in a way supported the status quo because any drastic change in Sikkim would have prompted China to go ahead with its intention to liberate Tibet. And even more important, perhaps would have been the inevitably adverse reaction in Nepal and Bhutan to such a move, for both of these states would have interpreted Sikkim's accession as a prelude to their own involuntary merger with India. In a way India was conscious of being accused by international opinion that a small state like Sikkim has been coerced to join India. So, India favoured Tibet's status as buffer zone between her and China and wanted to avoid any direct confrontation with her northern neighbour. Thus a basis existed for a compromise between India and Sikkim ruler, by signing Indo-Sikkim Treaty on 5th December 1950. The 1950 Indo-Sikkim Treaty, in particular, reflected New Delhi's heightened concern with frontier security.

Under the Indo-Sikkim Treaty, Sikkim's status as a protectorate of India was confirmed; Sikkim would enjoy internal autonomy, while the government of India would remain responsible for the defence and territorial integrity of Sikkim with right to station troops there too. Sikkim was to have no dealings with any foreign power. In the administrative sphere also Sikkim-Indian ties are no less intimate. Good administration ensuring equal rights and social justice for all section of the Sikkimese people was India's responsibility. The political Officer and Dewan was Government of India's instrument to ensure peace and stability in Sikkim so necessary for India's security. If a situation arose Delhi had full right to intervene. The pervasiveness of Indian influence and domination in Sikkim is further enhanced by the state's heavy dependence upon India for its economic development. Virtually the entire development budget is met by India through direct grants-in-aid, loans or subsidies. Broad as are the rights and responsibilities of Indian under the 1950 Treaty, these have not entirely removed the ambiguity as to Sikkim's international status.

As the new arrangement bedded down, there was news of Tibet's absorption by China, which led to Sino-Indian border a live one and the importance of Sikkim for India's defence and security vis-a-vis China increased greatly. India could not be indifferent to what happened in Sikkim and helped her in economic development and political stability. Under letters exchanged after the Treaty of 1950, India was responsible for good government.⁷ With the merger of Tibet with China in 1951, and the consolidation of Chinese hold over Tibet, the situation had changed. Sikkim could no longer be a buffer, with Tibet. India had to strengthen her defence, communications and security in and through Sikkim.

Large-scale internal autonomy was still enjoyed by Sikkim and this could perhaps have continued as long as defence, security and communications were looked after by India and Sikkim cooperated fully. But the new ruler Palden Thondup Namgyal, had eroded Delhi's authority inching his way to ultimately seek a revision of the protectorate concept and acquire for Sikkim a status similar to that of Bhutan and finally independence. And under the influence of his newly wedded American wife Hope Cooke started giving pin-pricks to India on matters, big or small. When he and his American wife were crowned they assumed the title of Chogyal and Gyalmo, i.e. king and queen, instead of the traditional maharaja and maharani, an attempt to raise the status of the state. He also wanted to double the strength of the Sikkim guard and to play a role in the defence effort. The Indian government agreed in the interest of good relations, but some doubts arose about the Chogyal's intensions when Sikkim national anthem was played. In addition, the new Gyalmo had questioned the legitimacy of Indian ownership of Darjeeling, which was a clear challenge to the territorial integrity of India. She started taking the message of Sikkimese independence to the youth.

India's defeat in Sino-Indian war of 1962 had lent some credibility to Chogyal's anti-India propaganda. India's weakness in relation to China inflamed his ambition, which was further fuelled by China's ambiguity over the recognition of India's treaty right in the Himalayan states. Support from external powers was also seen; both China and the West encouraged, for different reasons. The policy makers at Delhi also noticed that there was a convergence of interests between the Americans and the Chinese. Therefore, India could no longer afford to take risks in the matter of its security and had to make sure that the autonomy of Sikkim remained within the limits defined by the 1950 treaty, i.e. freedom in internal matters without the international identity which the Chogyal was seeking. To his dismay the Chogyal found that, barring some officials, the majority of his people were not interested in his pretentious ambitions their main interest was transfer of power to their elected representatives and faster economic progress.

The movement for greater political freedom was led by the Sikkim National Congress (SNC) and Sikkim Janta Congress (SJC). Both these parties had their support base among the Sikkimese of Nepali origin, from whom Chogyal and his establishment were alienated. These political parties continued their struggle for

more autonomy and political reforms. The situation changed after 1971 when Bangladesh was created as a new nation to the boosting of democratic tendencies in the whole region. During April 1973, there was political turmoil in the state and the discontent grew against the rule of the Chogyal, consequently a demand was raised for democratic form of Government. Which led to the tripartite agreement among the Government of India, the Chogyal and political party, a new political and constitutional arrangement is worked out under the label of 'democratization'. India openly supported the movement against the Chogyal. Eventually this was followed by associating Sikkim with the Indian Union in 1974 and providing her representation in the Indian Parliament. But even after the subsequent Associate Status relationship with India, the political climate in Sikkim was far from stable. The situation grew worse and finally the State Assembly headed by new Ministry of SNC, declared Sikkim to be constituent unit of India, thus putting a sudden end to the Associate Status. The resolution was then placed before the people for its approval. The majority of people voted for it, which was then placed before the Indian Government for consideration. Soon, Indian parliament passed the Constitutional 36th Amendment Act, 1975, which made Sikkim the 22nd State of the Indian Union.

III. NEHRU AND INDIRA GANDHI: IDEOLOGICAL DIFFERENCES

After the independence it was challenging for independent India to sustain the security structures created by British. Partition made India weak, the task before India was to integrate the princely states of about 600 of them with independent India and also the question of India's relationship with the Himalayan kingdoms. For India the choices before them in dealing with the Himalayan kingdoms was to sustain the old framework that bound these kingdoms with the British or to simply merge them into the Union and reduce any ambiguity about their status. Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel, who was the Home Minister in Nehru's Cabinet, believed that the kingdoms must be treated as princely states that should be brought into India's fold. Nehru, however, opted for a more complex policy that avoid forcible accession but bind them into stronger economic interdependence with India. Had India wished she could have merge Sikkim, but at that time, there was no Chinese threat to India. Tibet was still buffer between India and China, and it was thought desirable by Nehru to leave Sikkim as another buffer.⁸ Nehru's denial for the accession of Sikkim even there was popular demand was that he wanted to avoid of being accused by international opinion that a small state like Sikkim has been coerced to join India.

After independence, Nehru curbed the temptations in the kingdoms to separate themselves from India, and signed treaties with them during 1949-50 that largely followed the template of the earlier agreements signed by the British. The agreements India signed with Sikkim in 1950 were more attuned to the challenges that China's control of Tibet posed to the security of the Subcontinent. India's December 1950 Treaty with Sikkim reaffirmed its status as a protectorate of India and gave Delhi the right to deploy troops on its territory. Nehru's reconstruction of security ties with Sikkim was not just the replication of the treaties that the British had with Sikkim. Nehru vision was to maintain peace and peaceful methods of solving international problems and favoured the gradual change by nurturing rather than breaking old links. He hoped to ensure that India would be able to prevent internal conflicts in the state from undermining regional security.

The 1950 treaty marks a shift in the policy of the Indian Government regarding Sikkim. During the 1947-48 democratic movement in Sikkim, India has assured that voice of people will be regarded as supreme authority in shaping the destiny of Sikkim. However, by signing the 1950 treaty Nehru favoured to maintain the status quo and suppress the democratic movement. It can interpret on one hand, Nehru's policy toward Sikkim was influenced by his fondness with the place, which is reflected by his desire to retire in Sikkim,⁹ and to keep the Chogyal happy for as long a time possible and on the other Nehru did not want to encourage democratic populism in sensitive border areas and did not trust either the palace or the politicians, but felt confident of being able to control the state. The treaty that Nehru made with Sikkim, however faced with challenges- the treaty did not clarify Sikkim's international status, there was discontentment from the political parties of Sikkim as they wanted accession and Chinese occupation in Tibet which placed Sikkim in the centre of an area of tension. Delhi decision of adopting gradual change that neither appeased the Chogyal(king) nor satisfied the popular aspiration for change. India could neither sustain the internal autonomy of this kingdom nor could it hold down the ruler to the terms of a protectorate. This resulted in unending instability in the state which in turn provided an opportunity for other powers to undermine India's primacy.

The biggest challenge to India's treaty with Sikkim was the emergence of Communist China on its frontier through its occupation of Tibet in 1950. The emergence of Chinese threat in Tibet raised the stake of Sikkim in the security partnership with India. Tibet was no longer buffer between India and China. Immediately Sikkim's geopolitical importance became more glaringly obvious than ever. India could have helped Tibet, but it developed cold feet. Nehru must have calculated that if he accepts the Chinese control in Tibet, he could win China's acceptance of India's primacy in Sikkim and believed that it will improve Sino-Indian relation. China, however, never really accepted this proposition. Chinese government has on one pretext or another, been challenging the position of India in Sikkim. Under this circumstance, Nehru adopted the policy of politically and

diplomatically cautious and to continue the tranquility in the state. Thus, it is apparent that Nehru's policy towards Sikkim was largely influenced by the China factor.

Unfortunate for Nehru, the 1962 conflict with China weakened India's position somewhat in the eyes of its neighbours. Nehru was chastened by the collapse of his dream of a pan-Asian federation with the Chinese, was now coming under political pressure to tighten up security across the entire northern frontier. The northern border became a military as well as an intelligence priority. There was rapid deployment of Indian army. Chogyal viewed with much apprehension, as there was fear with the presence of Chinese in Tibet and also feared that New Delhi, faced with overt Chinese aggression, may feel impelled to intervene in Sikkim to safeguard its own vital interests. During this time it could be seen that Chogyal started showing sign for being an independent nation. But Sikkim had no power to fully break their geopolitical bonds with India. Nehru sought to continue the security politics created by British in Sikkim on a modified basis, showing accommodation where possible towards the interests of the state but making it clear that they were integral part of India's defence.

If Nehru had difficulties in managing, his successors struggled continually to adapt and offer concessions to the neighbours but never agreed to undo the framework that he had put in place. After the Sino-Indian war and the Chinese occupation of Tibet, American interest in Himalayan politics had seen. The growing international interest in Sikkim and the emerging sense of national identities, it was inevitable for the Chogyal sought to end their traditional international isolation. The arrival of Hope Cooke as Gyalmo turned out to be an important event. She started fanning Chogyal's ambition and questioning the legitimacy of Indian ownership of Darjeeling, which was a clear challenge to the territorial integrity of India. By winning new partners the ruler knew would increase their autonomy and secure them greater status. For this purpose Chogyal started to establish diplomatic relations with other states, acceptance of external aid besides Indian, the use of events like coronations, the issue of postage stamps and attendance at international meetings. Meanwhile, Sikkim filled with tension; the political parties within Sikkim became more disgusted with the Chogyal. Thus, the rising tension in the Sikkim made the Indian government even more cautious about the Chogyal's continued desire for increased autonomy.

Chogyal's demand for revision of Indo-Sikkim Treaty and increased autonomy arose with an unexpected change in Indian political leadership. Sikkim managed to overcome the crisis then but after Indira Gandhi became Prime Minister, Sikkim found itself in a crisis from which it could never escape. Like Nehru, Indira also often employed a discourse of fraternity with India's neighbours. Initially, Indira was not yet out of woods politically and needed to be more secure before contemplating anything as radical as treaty revision. In course of time Chogyal held out prospect for the membership in UN and thus believed that Delhi was too weak to resist his demands. In 1970 the Indian Government was indeed a weak preoccupied with its own problem but was also suspicions and paranoia about the foreign hand in Sikkim. Again in 1973 Chogyal indicated a desire to change the limited nature of his power. At the same time he also faced anti-Chogyal movement launched by the Sikkim National Congress (SNC) led by Kazi Lhendup Dorji and this paved the way for India's intervention against the Chogyal who, fell out of favour with Indira Gandhi because of the American connections and anti-Indian moves of the Chogyal's American wife.¹⁰

The foregoing sum up the situation as it obtained on the eve of the election held in 1973. This election furnished the direct and immediate cause of the subsequent uprising, as election result were the decisive factor in bringing about a complete turnabout in the India's policy in Sikkim. The election was in favour of Sikkim National Party (SNP) which was pro-Chogyal party and it posed a direct challenge to the India's interest in Sikkim. It was a foregone conclusion that the SNP would take up the issue of the revision of the 1950 Treaty. The Indian Government was bound to be placed in a very embarrassing position: if they allowed the SNP to go ahead, they would have to reconcile to giving up their special interest in Sikkim; and if they did not, they would not only be interfering in the internal autonomy but would also be acting contrary to their professed creed that of honoring the right of people. Indian Government were thus on the horns of the dilemma when anti-King movement, launched by SNC under Kazi came to them as godsend. Here was the opportunity to rectify at one stroke their past policy of maintaining the status quo and also to secure their own position. The political office and numerous other Government of India agencies, operating in Sikkim, including the strong Intelligence apparatus, openly supported the movement against Chogyal. Kazi's movement was depended mainly on Indian financial assistance.

The stormy event convinced Mrs. Gandhi to make drastic revision. Thus, taking advantage of the situation, Indian political officer in collaboration with Kazi prepared the draft requesting Indian government to take over the Sikkim administration. Chogyal reluctantly signed the draft and soon India took the control. Indian intelligence agents were already deployed to support the anti-Chogyal forces. Finally, an agreement was reached which pledged that India would maintain law and order as well as Sikkim's internal administration. Internal reforms by way of an elected legislature with the Chogyal as formal head were instituted and to hold regular election. The 1974 election saw the Sikkim congress victorious and India passed a constitutional amendment

making Sikkim an associate state of Indian Union. Soon after Sikkim Assembly voted to abolish the monarchy and joined Indian Union as a full state.

The credit for the Sikkim affair certainly goes to Mrs. Gandhi's resolute leadership. During the years beginning with the anti-Chogyal agitation of April 1973 and ending with its merger in 1975, she kept formulation and execution policy on Sikkim firmly under her own control. On the account of activities of political forces and Chogyal, she adopted the policy of employing Intelligence agency in Sikkim. Political official and intelligence agency having the full backup of Indian Prime Minister fully supported the anti-Chogyal forces. Another important apparatus was Indian Press and All India Radio present throughout Sikkim, which did not leave a chance to highlight the moves of Chogyal as anti-Indian and to give build-up to Kazi's movement so that Government of India could conveniently use Kazi to further their own design. Thus, merger of Sikkim was brought about by the interplay of internal factors and giving more weightage to it by the then Prime Minister Mrs. Indira Gandhi. That New Delhi encouraged and supported the Sikkimese people's movement for merger cannot be denied; it served securing the India's security interests, as an independent Sikkim had always posed a security threat to its Northern Frontier. As a full fledged state of the Indian Union, New Delhi could take care of the entire internal and external factor within the overall purview of national policy. India therefore stood to gain from every point of view.

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