

CONSTRUCTING SIKKIMESE NATIONAL IDENTITY IN THE 1960s AND 1970s

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A generation has elapsed since Sikkim was annexed by India. Yet symbolic remnants from its former life as a semi-independent Buddhist kingdom linger: the election system reserves twelve seats for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha community; the Sikkim national flag decorates the rear windows of vehicles plying the steep streets of Gangtok;¹ and the towering, five-peaked Mount Kangchendzönga still stirs the hearts of Sikkimese from government bureaucrats in the capital to cardamom cultivators in remote hamlets. These legacies hark back to the 1960s and 1970s when the last Chogyal, or king of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal (1923-1981), and others led domestic efforts to create and shape a national identity for the kingdom, namely, an identity embraced by the multi-ethnic people of Sikkim and accepted as the foundation for a collective interest. Concurrently, the Chogyal strove to carve out a distinct international identity for Sikkim, specifically, a political presence on the world stage clarifying his country's status as an independent entity that enjoyed special treaty relations with India.

In their seminal texts on the creation of nationalism, Eric Hobsbawm and Benedict Anderson argue that national identity is "invented" or "constructed."² The process, usually directed by the educated elite, serves to advance the interests of the nation and encourage allegiance to it. This perspective is the lens through which I shall examine Sikkimese efforts in the 1960s and early 1970s to craft and promote a distinct identity. There are many forms and purposes of identity construction, but this article will focus on the political and cultural components of domestic and international identity formation in Sikkim, and mainly considers pertinent developments in the capital Gangtok, the administrative and political centre of Sikkim and the

¹ Up until at least the spring of 1999, the national flag of Sikkim fluttered over the Palace in Gangtok.

² See Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds, *The Invention of Tradition* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1992), Eric J. Hobsbawm, *Nations and Nationalism Since 1780: Programme, Myth, Reality* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1990), and Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origins and Spread of Nationalism* (London: Verso, 1991).

district with the largest concentration of educated Sikkimese. The drive to create a distinct, recognized identity for Sikkim, I argue, was spurred by the intersection of two forces, the era of decolonization and the personality and experiences of Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal. It was shaped by two overarching challenges: 1) forging a shared identity out of a multi-ethnic society, and 2) convincing the world community of the separate political identity of Sikkim.

In this article I suggest that the seeds of an articulated national consciousness took root in Sikkim due to the efforts of the last Chogyal and others. Yet the terrain upon which the seeds were sown has radically shifted. An examination of the experiment of the 1960s and early 1970s together with a recognition of the changed political circumstances in Sikkim, point to timely questions: how might the Sikkimese people continue to imagine and assert their unique identity within the framework of the Indian union? And, more generally, how might a stateless people keep alive and flourishing their distinct character when they are a minority in a large nation-state?

THE HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The early history of Sikkim reads like waves of bloody attacks from the east and west.³ Bhutan and Nepal plundered hamlets and the capital, and seized chunks of Sikkimese territory, altering its borders forever. It was the East India Company that, in 1817, with the Treaty of Titalya, put an end to the devastating raids. Through this treaty the British government gained a permanent foothold in Sikkim. Over the course of the nineteenth century, the three Himalayan kingdoms came to function as a buffer zone for the British Raj, a mountainous bulwark protecting India from the Chinese and Russian empires. In an arrangement that suited British India, the exact terms of its relationships with the three states were never completely spelled out.⁴ Sikkim was destined, however, to emerge as the lynchpin for British aspirations to “open” Tibet and so was brought more closely into the political orbit of the British colonial system than either Nepal or Bhutan.

Sikkim possesses what has been described as the “single most strategically important piece of real estate in the entire Himalayan

³ Incursions from Bhutan began in 1700, and the first clash between the Namgyal and Shah (Nepal) dynasties occurred in 1778.

⁴ Leo E. Rose, “India and Sikkim: Redefining the Relationship,” *Pacific Affairs*, vol. XLII, no. 1 (Spring 1969): 32.

range.”⁵ Sikkim’s Natu La and Jelep La, two 14,000-foot-plus passes descending into Tibet’s Chumbi Valley, provide one of the easiest passage through the vertical reaches of the Himalayas and have invested Sikkim with a geopolitical importance disproportionate to its tiny size. In the late 1800s as the British became involved in the “Great Game” with Russia and increasingly keen to expand commercial interests north of the Himalayas, Sikkim was transformed into a protectorate of British India. The Anglo-Chinese Treaty of 1890 gave the British government exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of the kingdom.⁶ For almost twenty years, the British directly administered Sikkim and in 1908 restored the internal administration to its ruler. The exact political standing of Sikkim remained ambiguous; that is, “Sikkim was never a feudatory ‘Native State’...but neither was it independent or entirely autonomous.”⁷ Two things, however, were clear: Sikkim was more limited in its internal and external affairs than either Bhutan or Nepal; and the ambiguity surrounding the political status of Sikkim would plague the kingdom in later years. In 1947 the British left India. Democratic India would play a large role in the future of the three monarchies.

A few years later, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim negotiated treaties with the government of India that mirrored historical relationships with British India and were tinged with India’s anxiety over China’s ancient claims to India’s northern frontier. Because the Indo-Bhutan Treaty was signed in 1949 just prior to the Chinese invasion of Tibet, Bhutan secured very favourable terms: India recognized Bhutan’s fundamental independence and guaranteed not to interfere in its internal affairs; Bhutan agreed to be “guided by the advice of the GOI [Government of India] in its external relations.”⁸ Nepal had remained the most independent of the three Himalayan states during imperial rule in India. Yet, even its 1950 treaty reflected India’s security concerns in the

⁵ John W. Garver, *Protracted Contest: Sino-Indian Rivalry in the Twentieth Century* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2001), p. 167.

⁶ Formal relations between British India and Sikkim began with the Treaty of Titalya in 1817 after the conclusion of the Anglo-Gurkha War (1814-1816). The Tumlong Treaty of 1861 allowed the British government to intervene in the internal affairs of Sikkim but left the ruler of the kingdom sovereign.

⁷ Rose, p. 32.

⁸ Amar Kaur Jasbir Singh, *Himalayan Triangle: A Historical Survey of British India's Relations with Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan 1765-1950* (London: British Library, 1988), pp. 369-70. In the early 1960s India assumed responsibility for Bhutan’s defence “by implication.”

northern reaches of the subcontinent; in effect, India retained de facto control of Nepal's defence and external relations. The Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950 was the most restrictive of the three treaties: Sikkim remained a protectorate of democratic India with responsibility for its internal affairs; India looked after its defence, foreign relations, and communications. A three-page letter, sent by the Political Officer to the Palace and commonly known as the 'Exchange of Letters,' further defined the relationship and stated that the government of India could intervene in the internal administration of Sikkim "should a situation arise in which law and order are seriously threatened within the State."⁹

Palden Thondup Namgyal, in his early twenties and crown prince at the time, negotiated the terms of Sikkim's treaty with India. As the second son of Chogyal Tashi Namgyal (1893-1964), he was expected to live in the shadow of his older brother, Paljor Namgyal, and make his mark in the realm of religion. Because he was the incarnation of two eminent Buddhist figures, Palden Thondup Namgyal received monastic training in Tibet. In 1933 he was installed as the head of two important monasteries in Sikkim. Besides his religious education in Tibet and Sikkim, he attended school at St Joseph's Convent in Kalimpong, St Joseph's College in Darjeeling, and Simla's Bishop Cotton School. He also spoke five languages, including English, fluently. His plans to study science at Cambridge were dashed when his brother, a member of the Royal Air Force, was killed in a plane crash in 1941. Suddenly, Palden Thondup Namgyal found himself at the helm of the kingdom.¹⁰

Due to the changed circumstances, Namgyal attended the Indian Civil Service training camp in Dehra Dun. In 1963 he married an American, a recent graduate of Sarah Lawrence College named Hope Cooke. (His first wife, a Tibetan aristocrat, died in childbirth along with their fourth child.) By the time Palden Thondup Namgyal was consecrated as the twelfth Chogyal of Sikkim in 1965, he had served as his father's principal adviser for over twenty years, had traveled more than any of his predecessors,¹¹ was an honorary Lieutenant-Colonel in the Indian Army, and was president of the Mahabodhi Society of India,

⁹ "Exchange of Letters," February 25, 1951. "See Sunanda Datta-Ray, *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* (Delhi: Vikas, 1984), p. 61, and L.B. Basnet, *Sikkim: A Short Political History* (Delhi: Chand, 1974), p. 96.

¹⁰ His father, Sir Tashi Namgyal, more inclined to religious and artistic matters than *realpolitik*, had virtually retired from active participation in the administration of the kingdom.

¹¹ Except perhaps for his uncle, Sidkeong Tulku, the tenth Chogyal.

an international Buddhist organization. Namgyal lived these formative years against the backdrop of decolonization, in the era when many non-self-governing territories were gaining independence from their colonizing powers. By the early 1960s, he and others in Sikkim, believed that most terms of the Indo-Sikkim Treaty—Namgyal never advocated exclusive Sikkimese control of defence¹²—had outlived their purpose. It was within this context, in the period that Anderson calls “the last wave of nationalism,” that the quest for a Sikkimese national identity was launched.¹³

FORGING A SHARED IDENTITY

Sikkim evolved into a Buddhist monarchy in which a religious king, or Chogyal, and minority Bhutia people dominated a population overwhelmingly Nepali by ancestry, and Hindu by religion. Beginning in the 1860s and continuing over several decades, the British with Sikkimese collaborators settled many Nepalis in the sparsely populated southern and western tracts of Sikkim. This policy was driven by the British desire to balance the pro-Tibetan Bhutias, or Sikkimese of Tibetan descent, with pro-British-India Nepalis.¹⁴ By 1891, according to the census, “Nepali Sikkimese” outnumbered the earliest Sikkimese subjects—the Lepchas, considered the first inhabitants of Sikkim, and the Bhutias,¹⁵ or settlers from Tibet who founded the kingdom of Sikkim in the mid-seventeenth century.¹⁶ Yet, in spite of ethnic and

¹² Because of Sikkim’s vulnerable location, India was particularly concerned about defence issues in the kingdom. Concerns intensified after 1959 when China tightened its control over Tibet, and during the Himalayan border wars that began in 1962 and continued as skirmishes into the late 1960s.

¹³ See, Anderson, chapter 7, “The Last Wave.”

¹⁴ Despite protests from the Chogyal and the powerful Bhutia-Lepcha landlords, this wide scale migration continued virtually unchecked until the last part of the nineteenth century.

¹⁵ Tibetan and Bhutanese migration to the area which became what we now know as Sikkim began in the thirteenth century. In this article I use the term “Bhutia” to refer to Sikkimese of Tibetan and Bhutanese descent.

¹⁶ The earliest inhabitants of Sikkim also included Limbus and Magars, sometimes referred to as “Tsong” in Sikkim. There are claims that these two Mongolian ethnic groups originally hail from Tibet. For example, *History of Sikkim* states that the Tsong “revered the Matog Lama as their Guru, followed him from Tsang [Tibet] and settled with him in Sikkim,” Sir Thuthob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma, *History of Sikkim* (Unpublished typescript, 1908), p. 21. Their exact origins, however, have not been authoritatively established. For electoral purposes, they are usually lumped together with the Nepali Sikkimese.

religious differences, there was a cohesion among Sikkimese subjects that anchored them to the mountains, river valleys, and rice paddies of the kingdom.

Anderson argues that the foundations of modern nationalism, or national identity, are embedded in cultural systems, such as dynasty or religious structures.¹⁷ Sikkim is no exception. Before Indian independence, one could argue that most Sikkimese, no matter what their background, were commonly attached to Sikkim as homeland through two phenomena: 1) a deep reverence for their Buddhist ruler and 2) veneration of Mount Kangchendzönga or the guardian deity said to reside within the mountain. Although many Nepali Sikkimese practiced Hinduism, they felt a strong allegiance to the Chogyal because of the ingrained Nepalese tradition of honoring their ruler, who in Nepal is an incarnation of Vishnu.¹⁸ And rock-solid Mount Kangchendzönga, visible from every district in Sikkim, was a constant reminder of a shared landscape, if not shared traditions¹⁹. For the Chogyal, the daunting task of the 1960s and 1970s was to tap into those common attachments and expand upon them in ways that acknowledged the demographic shift within Sikkim and protected the traditional prerogatives of the Bhutia-Lepchas.

Cultural efforts: "Tibeto-Burman" trend and textbooks

In the summer of 1967, two Sikkimese women, Gayatri Devi Gurung and Chum Dorji Wongmu, traveled to Manila, where they represented the Sikkim Social Welfare Society, a nonpolitical but official organization, at a conference on women's leadership organized by the

¹⁷ Anderson writes, "What I am proposing is that nationalism has to be understood by aligning it, not with self-consciously held political ideologies, but with the large cultural systems that preceded it, out of which—as well as against which—it came into being," p. 12.

¹⁸ Chandra Das Rai, retired from government service since 1983, was one of several Nepali Sikkimese interviewed who confirmed this. Interview, Gangtok, April 24, 2001. It should be mentioned that some wealthy Nepali Sikkimese, mostly Pradhans, or members of the Newar community, owned land in both Nepal and Sikkim, which left them vulnerable to accusations of divided loyalties.

¹⁹ See Anna Balikci-Denjonpaga, "Kangchendzönga: secular and Buddhist perceptions of the mountain deity of Sikkim among the Lhopos," *Bulletin of Tibetology* 38 (2) November 2002. She writes, 'Dzö-nga played an important role as a national symbol and it is said that all ethnic communities, whatever their origins and whether Hindu or Buddhist, used to recognise and worship Kangchendzönga if they considered themselves first and foremost as Sikkimese,' p. 2.

Associated Country Women of the World. In addition to participating in a seminar, the two women displayed a collection of items (or representations) from Sikkim including: a mask of Kangchendzönga, the Sikkimese national flag, a “lucky sign” *thangka* (religious painting), a yak, a mule, *somba* (boots), a cup and saucer, *thongba* (wooden mug for the local beer), *mani* (Buddhist rosary), booklets about Sikkimese history and society, postcards of Buddhist sages, birds of Sikkim, and skins of wild animals. The women also exhibited color slides showing the Chogyal, the Gyalmo (queen), and other members of the royal family; the diverse flora, fauna, and unusual natural environment of Sikkim; and folk dances and rituals.²⁰

A consideration of the collection is illuminating. The items as symbols evoke the agrarian rhythms of Sikkimese society. They point to the profound influence of Buddhism and the distinctive role of landscape and nature in Sikkimese life. Finally, they underscore the centrality of the Namgyal dynasty, and Kangchendzönga, both as physical landmark and paramount deity in Sikkimese Buddhism. The exhibit demonstrates a self-conscious effort to single out objects that offered crystallized and idealized versions of what it meant to be Sikkimese in the late 1960s. As a whole, it reflects a constructed image of Sikkimese identity. For our purposes, it is useful to bear in mind that “images are not only self-projections, but also tools of self-creation.”²¹ The collection perhaps reflects the Bhutia bias of the group’s advisor, the Chogyal’s sister, Princess Pema Choden Yapshi Phunkhang. Yet, in a somewhat exaggerated way, it also mirrors a cultural trend noticeable from at least the early 1960s.

Hobsbawm describes “invented traditions” as “practices normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behavior by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past.” Invented traditions often refer to a historic past, but their continuity with it is “largely fictitious.”²² Hobsbawm’s concept was at play in the shaping of Sikkimese national identity during the 1960s. In the book *Nations of Asia* (1966), the Chogyal remarked that although two-thirds of the Sikkimese population speak Nepali, “[m]any in this group are

²⁰ *Sikkim Herald*, vol. 8, no. 41, July 28, 1967.

²¹ Bhikku Parekh, “Defining National Identity in a Multicultural Society” in *People, Nation, and State: The Meaning of Ethnicity and Nationalism*, ed. Edward Mortimer (London: I.B. Taurus & Co, Ltd, 1999), p. 67.

²² Hobsbawm, *The Invention of Tradition*, pp. 1-2. He also notes that “[w]here the old ways are alive, traditions need be neither revived nor invented,” p. 7.

not ethnically Nepali but are of Mongoloid stock.”²³ The suggestion was that most Nepali Sikkimese are not Indo-Aryan but, rather, culturally Buddhist with ancestral links to “Mongolian” tribes: Gurung, Rai, Tamang, Newar, Limbu, and Magar, or mountain peoples, some of whom, generations back, had migrated from the Tibetan plateau to Nepal, and their ancestors, finally to Sikkim.²⁴ Although many members of these tribes no longer spoke Tibetan (or a Tibeto-Burman dialect), or observed the customs of their forebears, the potential to draw upon what was perceived as the basic kinship of the tribes—one that dovetailed with Bhutia history and culture—provided inspiration for the construction of national identity.

This idea gained some traction in Gangtok. Around the time of the coronation of Palden Thondup Namgyal in 1965, the term “Tibeto-Burman” became popular in the capital, particularly among a sizable group of educated elite—Anderson’s “intelligentsia”²⁵—mostly younger, educated bureaucrats who shared the Chogyal’s vision of greater autonomy for Sikkim. This group of mostly government bureaucrats hailed from different tribal and socioeconomic backgrounds, embraced the notion of a Tibeto-Burman identity for Sikkim, and adopted Tibeto-Burman trappings, a blend of Tibetan-inspired clothing, food, music, and handicrafts.²⁶ While obviously a linguistic term,²⁷ Tibeto-Burman “was understood to be a vague supratribal category that more or less embraced all the tribes in Sikkim

²³ Donald Wilber, ed., *Nations of Asia* (New York: Hart Publishing., 1966), pp. 478-79. This reference appears in Leo Rose, “Modern Sikkim in an Historical Perspective” in *Reflections on Tibetan Culture*, eds Lawrence Epstein et al (Lewiston, NY: Edwin Mellen Press, 1990), p. 71.

²⁴ These groups are often referred to as “matwali” castes, or alcohol-drinkers. As if to echo the Chogyal, M.M. Rasaily, a retired, senior-level bureaucrat and close adviser to the Chogyal, told me: “Sikkimese people are different; they are of Mongoloid background. We are more akin to Tibetans,” interview, Gangtok, March 28, 2001. Princess Bhuvnesh Kumari Patiala, the Chogyal’s legal adviser from 1974, told me, “Not all Nepali Sikkimese were Nepalese proper. They come from the tribes of the Himalayan belt,” interview, December 7, 1998. Again, the subtext here is that many Nepali Sikkimese are culturally Buddhist.

²⁵ See Anderson, pp. 116-139, for a discussion of the role of the intelligentsia in the rise of nationalism in colonial territories.

²⁶ It should be noted that Sikkimese subjects were never required to wear certain clothes, speak a particular language, or practice foreign customs.

²⁷ Paradoxically, since most Nepali Sikkimese—and increasingly more Bhutia-Lepchas—could not speak Tibetan (or the Sikkimese dialect of Tibetan, Denjongke), Nepali was in essence the *lingua franca* of Sikkim.

and meant ‘Not Indian.’”²⁸ Supporters of this theory believed that if only Nepali Sikkimese with Mongolian roots could hark back to their ancient origins and claim them with pride, they would discover their affinity with the Bhutias and Lepchas.²⁹ In this way, a united Sikkim could be forged and withstand Indian hegemony. While such notions may appear naïve or even restrictive,³⁰ they seemed to be sincere, and some people in Gangtok at least, acted upon them. The Chogyal’s comment cited above suggests his implicit, if not explicit, support of these efforts.

*Education*³¹

As Anderson points out, the educational system of a nation is often used to promote a shared history, culture, and language among its youth.³² The quest for a national identity in Sikkim led to a review and transformation of primary education. Prior to 1967 no coherent program or policy for grades kindergarten through eight existed in

²⁸ Hope Cooke, *Time Change: An Autobiography* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1980), p. 130. Cooke writes that most Gangtokers were unsure of the precise meaning of “Tibeto-Burman.”

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 129-30.

³⁰ Many critics have argued that forging a common identity in Sikkim was unattainable, or that it was not desired by the Chogyal. For example, the anthropologist T.B. Subba writes, “The Buddhist theocratic and hereditary rulers there [in Sikkim] did not allow such groups to come together nor did they recognise the cultural, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity within the so-called Nepalis. To them, such communities were basically ‘migrants’ from Nepal, Hindu by religion and ‘troublesome as neighbours’” (Subba, *The Politics of Culture: A Study of Three Kirata Communities in the Eastern Himalayas* [Chennai: Orient Longman, 1999], p. 2). Former dewan Nari Rustomji writes that the differences between the Nepali Sikkimese and the Bhutias and Lepchas, most significantly the “rigidities of the caste system,” were substantial, implying that finding a common identity would have been next to impossible. See Rustomji, *Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy* New Delhi: Allied Publishers, 1987, p. 16. Leo Rose writes of the large Nepali Sikkimese population as “essentially indigestible” and presenting “a persistent political crisis.” See Rose, “Modern Sikkim,” p. 70.

³¹ This section is based on discussions with Sikkimese involved in educational efforts during this time, including Santosh Kumar Bardewa, who wrote the Nepali textbooks; and a paper, “Development of Curriculum and Textbooks Grades Kindergarten – VIII in Sikkim 1967-1973,” by Hope Cooke Namgyal, Columbia University Teachers College, 1977. Namgyal was the chairman of the textbook and curriculum committee.

³² Anderson, pp. 113-14.

Sikkim.³³ Education hinged on rote learning and memorization; textbooks, when available, came from India and did not contain any Sikkim-specific material. In 1967 a “textbook and curriculum committee” was established; its goals were to “define and develop educational goals and curriculum” for grades K-8 and to make education “more suitable to the special conditions and character of Sikkim.” Over the next five years, in addition to extensive teacher training, textbooks were produced for social studies (including books on community studies, Sikkimese history, geography, and nature studies 1-8), English (readers based on Sikkimese folks tales and literature 1-8), and the three mother tongue languages (primers 1-3 and readers 1-8).

In Sikkim the complicated issue of language posed challenges for the educational system. English was the official language in this small country where people spoke three distinct languages—Denjongke (a Sikkimese dialect of Tibetan), Lepcha, and Nepali—but in fact, Nepali was the unofficial lingua franca. In grades 1-3, children were to be instructed in their mother tongue, with English taught as a second language, but in reality, this was rarely the case as most schools were understaffed. For reasons too detailed to go into here, English was the medium of instruction in schools after third grade. Since English continued to be used for most of the grades even after the review, the committee amplified efforts to make the content of what the children studied “more relevant, more Sikkimese.” The committee developed an archive of Sikkimese material for the textbooks through the efforts of teams of high school students. Armed with tape recorders, the volunteers fanned out across the most remote reaches of the kingdom to collect Sikkimese myths, folk tales, and music from every possible ethno-linguistic group, which were then translated into the three national languages of Sikkim. In this way, “all the children, although studying different languages would absorb a shared frame of reference on their national culture.”³⁴

³³ In 1960, 9,700 students were enrolled in 117 lower primary schools (grades 1-3), 47 upper primary schools (grades 4-5), 13 middle schools (grades 6-8), and 5 high schools. By 1975, 20,959 students were enrolled in 52 lower primary, 176 upper primary schools, 29 junior high schools, and seven higher/senior secondary schools. Amal Datta, *Sikkim Since Independence: A Study of Impact of Education and Emerging Class Structure* (New Delhi: Mittal Publications, 1991), p. 41, 50.

³⁴ The social studies series for early grades was titled “Tashi, Mohan, and Kipu,” which are common first names in the three main ethnic groups of Sikkim. The series was illustrated with professional photographs of three Sikkimese children, as the series namesake, acting out daily life in Sikkim.

Political efforts: parity and citizenship

While there may have been sincere, if visionary efforts, in Gangtok to build a shared Sikkimese identity, the complicated electoral system in Sikkim heightened the basic differences between the two main communities. Established under the “guidance” of the government of India and initiated with the election of the first Sikkim Council in 1953, the election system divided the electorate into Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepali Sikkimese constituencies, reserved seats in the Sikkim Council for these communities, and required a weighted voting system for the reserved seats. Each community received equal representation in the elected government—even though the Bhutia-Lepchas now only comprised less than thirty percent of the population. To win a seat, the candidate had to secure the most votes from his own community and in addition, at least fifteen percent of votes from the other community. Eventually, parity through seat distribution was extended to the entire administration. The two communities were represented equally in the Sikkim Council, the State Cabinet, and in secretary posts of the state government.³⁵

The introduction of the electoral system in 1953 obligated the Chogyal and his advisers to begin the process of defining Sikkimese citizenship for the first time.³⁶ It would take eight years and several drafts before they produced a “Sikkim Subjects Regulation” mutually agreeable to the Palace and the main political parties. Once a person’s name made the Register of Sikkim Subjects, the person was regarded as Sikkimese³⁷ and guaranteed legal rights, such as voting. Although there was vigorous debate over elements in the draft considered hostile to the Nepali Sikkimese, a compromise was reached, and eventually the Regulation was deemed acceptable.³⁸

³⁵ Jigme N. Kazi, *Inside Sikkim: Against the Tide* (Gangtok: Hill Media Publications, 1993), p. 222.

³⁶ According to Leo Rose, the failure to do this earlier may have been due in part to Sikkim’s status as protectorate of the British and, later, Indian governments. Rose, unpublished manuscript, p. 97.

³⁷ *The Sikkim Subjects Regulation*, July 3, 1961, p. 7. The three categories defined by the regulation were: 1) persons living in Sikkim since 1946; 2) persons not domiciled in Sikkim but of Lepcha, Bhutia, or Tsong origin whose father or grandfather was born in Sikkim; 3) persons not domiciled in Sikkim but whose ancestors were deemed to be Sikkimese subjects before 1850.

³⁸ Leo Rose, unpublished manuscript, p. 172.

As all communities in Sikkim eventually consented to the criteria for citizenship, they, too, agreed in essence to the parity system.³⁹ Parity was justified on the principle that it would be unfair to deny the Bhutia-Lepcha minority, the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim, at least equal status with the more recent immigrant groups. Some sources close to the Chogyal believe that he viewed the parity system as an interim solution, that once all Sikkimese recognized their common destiny and saw themselves first as Sikkimese, the need for parity would dissolve.⁴⁰ But that would take time—and some safeguards to protect against the submersion of Bhutia-Lepcha interests by the majority Nepali Sikkimese. Others contend that parity was a deliberate strategy “manufactured to protect the interests of the minority” indefinitely and that it emphasized and widened the divisions between the two main communities.⁴¹ One thing is definite: the system itself became a valid point of contention and ultimately undercut efforts at creating a common identity.

The principle of parity was also applied to situations outside of politics. The choice of delegates attending the Manila conference of 1967 is an example. Gayatri Devi Gurung and Chum Dorji Wongmu respectively hailed from the Nepali Sikkimese and the Bhutia-Lepcha communities. In other domains, such as education, employment, and cultural life, an unofficial policy of equal representation was generally followed. For instance, the Tashi Namgyal Academy in Gangtok, a public high school for boys, offered three scholarships for Bhutia-Lepcha boys and three for “Sikkimese students of Nepali origin.”⁴²

THE QUEST FOR INTERNATIONAL RECOGNITION

Interlinked with the construction and promotion of a Sikkimese national identity were efforts to cultivate and garner worldwide

³⁹ The three main political parties in Sikkim agreed with the fundamentals of the system, although in varying degrees.

⁴⁰ See Cooke, p. 127.

⁴¹ C.D. Rai expressed the sentiments of several Nepali Sikkimese I interviewed: “What did our administration do to perpetuate the communal angle? They divided the seats between the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Nepali Sikkimese. Once divisions were created, they remained. . . . We were constantly reminded that we were Nepali—and not Bhutia-Lepcha. In order to create a unified Sikkim, you have to wipe out all these divisions, but our government devised means to keep us divided. It was a strategy,” interview, April 10, 2001.

⁴² *Sikkim Herald*, vol. 9, no. 59, May 1, 1968.

awareness of Sikkim's distinct political identity. In Sikkim the spectrum of meanings for "distinct political identity" ranged from more autonomy in internal affairs and foreign relations at one end, to complete independence from India at the other end.⁴³ In some circles there was talk of Sikkim achieving a political status like Bhutan (which lobbied for and finally gained a seat in the United Nations in 1971), if not Nepal. No matter where politicians, civil servants, well-educated citizens, and Palace officials positioned themselves on that spectrum, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty came to be viewed, in the words of Sikkimese politician and writer Lal Bahadur Basnet, as the "fetters that bound Sikkim."⁴⁴ While it is true that signing the treaty had affirmed Sikkim's identity and a degree of international personality, many Sikkimese now believed that treaty revision was essential: it would protect Sikkim from Indian hegemony and amplify its international personality in the mind's eye of the world community. In certain circles, constitutional comparisons between Sikkim and the "princely states" of India still lingered. The Chogyal and others wished to invalidate those associations—and the notion that India could absorb Sikkim whenever it chose.⁴⁵

Momentum for treaty revision grew in the early 1960s and intensified after the coronation of the Chogyal in 1965. A "study forum" of younger senior government bureaucrats, a large subset of the "intelligentsia" referred to earlier, was formed ostensibly to facilitate distribution of development funds from India to Sikkim. The study forum was also used as a venue to informally vet issues of treaty

⁴³ Extreme demands for treaty revision often appeared as editorials in the patriotic fortnightly newspaper, *Sikkim*. Its editor, Kaiser Bahadur Thapa, was an ardent nationalist: "Revision of the 1950 treaty there must be, and in keeping with the present-day trend, not only should our treaty be revised but it should also be registered with the United Nations Organisation. If our rights are not given to us gracefully, we are prepared to get it anyhow. But in doing so let us hope that we will not be driven in the extreme so that we are compelled to repeat the underground Naga story." *Sikkim*, Gangtok, August 6, 1968, as quoted in Datta-Ray, p. 137.

⁴⁴ L.B. Basnet, p. 143. Some Sikkimese I interviewed used revealing metaphors to describe Sikkim at this point in its national development. One informant compared Sikkim to a bird "ready to spread its wings." Another said: "What are you when you're a protectorate? ...You're a ward, and you have a guardian. After some time, the ward is going to grow up. We thought we were growing up, and the government of India thought otherwise and made us a member of their family!"

⁴⁵ Rustomji, p. 65.

revision and Sikkimese nationalism.⁴⁶ In May 1967, the Chogyal announced at a Palace press conference that his country's goal was political freedom at "the convenience of government of India" and through "mutual discussions."⁴⁷ One month later, representatives from the three main political parties in Sikkim serving as executive councillors issued a joint statement declaring that "[s]ince Sikkim signed the Treaty with India surely it is within her sovereign right to demand the revision of the Treaty as one of the signatories... . Every country has its inherent right to exist and maintain its separate identity and, therefore, to review and revise its treaty obligations in the wake of changing circumstances."⁴⁸ Although the Chogyal publicly repudiated their statement when pressured by the government of India, one year later during Prime Minister Indira Gandhi's official visit to Sikkim, he spoke of Sikkim as earning its "rightful place in the comity of nations" in his welcome address.⁴⁹

While various groups in Sikkim were pushing for treaty revision, symbols of sovereignty—the national flag and anthem, and the Sikkim Guard—were developed and integrated into state functions with the goal of projecting Sikkim's distinct identity. The national flag, a banner of white with a crimson border and a yellow eight-spoked *chakra*, or wheel of righteousness, in the center, had been in use since 1950 but became omnipresent after the coronation.⁵⁰ The Sikkim Guard, "a company-strength unit traditionally recruited from the Bhutia-Lepcha community," was expanded to a company twice the usual size, with nearly half Nepali Sikkimese.⁵¹ The national anthem of Sikkim, "Why

⁴⁶ C.D. Rai interview, April 24, 2001. The Chogyal's exact role in the study forum has been disputed. Because its members were government officials, it is reasonable to expect his implicit, if not direct, support of its activities.

⁴⁷ Datta-Ray, pp. 137-38. An article from the *Times of India* published in the *Sikkim Herald*, the official publicity organ of the Palace, quotes the ruler's thoughts on treaty revision as "...barring defence, leave the rest to us," ("Man in the News: The Chogyal of Sikkim," vol. 8, no. 60, September 14, 1967).

⁴⁸ *Sikkim Herald*, June 16, 1967, as quoted in P.R. Rao, *Sikkim: The Story of Its Integration with India* (Delhi: Cosmo, 1978), p. 25. B.B. Gurung, one of the executive councillors and now retired and serving as political advisor to the chief minister, told me, "We didn't like the word 'protectorate.' We didn't like the legacy of the British. We wanted independence to run our affairs, like Bhutan, if not Nepal," interview, March 29, 2001.

⁴⁹ *Sikkim Herald*, vol. 9, no. 61, May 7, 1968.

⁵⁰ Keshab Chandra Pradhan, interview, March 28, 2001.

⁵¹ Leo Rose, "Summary Technical Report: The Defence and Security System in Sikkim," p. 2. For an overview of the development of the Sikkim Guard in the 1960s, see Rose, "India and Sikkim: Redefining the Relations," pp. 40-42. After 1960 the

Is Denzong [Sikkim] Blooming So Fresh and Beautiful?," was set to music so that it could be played by a band of the Sikkim Guard.⁵² These symbols of sovereignty were integrated into official events. For example when Indira Gandhi visited Sikkim in May 1968, she was received on the helipad at the Palace, where the Sikkim Guard "sounded out the national anthem of India and the host country." The prime minister then inspected a guard of honour presented by the Sikkim Guards. Nine hundred alternately spaced flags of India and Sikkim lined the route of her motorcade.⁵³

There were cultural efforts, too, aimed, according to one insider, at "keeping Sikkim in the public eye."⁵⁴ The Gyalmo had succeeded in revitalizing Sikkimese handicrafts through the Palden Thondup Cottage Industries Institute. Careful attention to design, materials, and quality had resulted in Lepcha-inspired textiles, vegetable-dyed carpets, hand-made paper, clay and wood-carved masks, and Newari-like silver jewelry sold in Sikkim, India, and New York. In 1966 the Asia Society in New York established a "Sikkim Council." In 1967 a Sikkimese delegation of "Tibetologists" led by the queen mother of Sikkim travelled to Moscow, Leningrad, and Ulan Ude to examine Tibetan Buddhist collections in museums and libraries. In 1968 Sikkimese artists and citizens attended the World Craft Council meeting in Peru.⁵⁵ And in 1971 fashion events showcasing a kaleidoscope of traditional clothing worn by the many ethnic groups in Sikkim were staged at a few upscale department stores, exclusive clubs, and museums in New York City and Washington, D.C.⁵⁶ As world events tightened around Cold War politics, and Indira Gandhi's usual affection for Sikkim dried up, a certain urgency crept into these endeavors.⁵⁷

Sikkim-Tibet border was guarded by the Indian army, but a lone Sikkim Guard was posted at Natu La, one of the passes into Tibet.

⁵² Rustomji, p. 90.

⁵³ *Sikkim Herald*, vol. 9, no. 61, May 7, 1968.

⁵⁴ Cooke, *Time Change*, p. 200.

⁵⁵ Rose, "Redefining the Relationship," p. 39.

⁵⁶ Cooke, p. 200.

⁵⁷ Cooke, p. 201. She writes, "We wanted people to have Sikkim in their consciousness. If...something happened, we wouldn't be quite so alone. We knew that they wouldn't be able or willing to help, but somehow the mere fact of people knowing of us seemed to diffuse the awfulness of a potential take-over and possibly...keep it in abeyance."

A SIKKIMESE IDENTITY WITHIN THE INDIAN UNION?

In April 1973 popular demonstrations against the Chogyal led to a breakdown of law and order all over Sikkim, except in the Bhutia- and Lepcha-dominated north district⁵⁸. Several days after the collapse of his government, the Chogyal handed over the administration to the government of India. Two years later, after a surprise attack on the Sikkim Guards, a dubious “special poll,” and an act of the Indian Parliament, Sikkim became the twenty-second state of India.⁵⁹ The world community failed to rally any sustained interest in questioning the legitimacy of the “merger.” Sikkim’s experiment in creating and shaping a modern national identity was cut short or, as some critics say, failed. Yet, in the elections of 1979, six years after the demonstrations, the ruling party, the faction that facilitated Sikkim’s annexation, lost all but one seat in the legislative assembly. Inspired by the nationalistic sentiments of the deposed Chogyal and promising “de-merger,” Nar Bahadur Bhandari’s Janata Parishad emerged as the ruling party. Their victory was anchored in opposition to the annexation and fueled by Sikkimese nationalism. In the intervening years, however, the tenuous unity demonstrated in the 1979 elections disintegrated. A society once split into two main political communities is today splintered into almost as many ethno-linguistic groups as live in Sikkim, each community clinging to its tribal or caste roots in the hopes of claiming economic and political privileges.

Sikkim is at a crossroads. A generation has passed since the kingdom was incorporated into the Indian union; the number of Sikkimese who remember the state as a kingdom dwindles. Its population increases at an accelerated rate, much of the growth due to

⁵⁸ 6,000 men from Lachen and Lachung converged at the north district headquarters in Mangan ready to travel to Gangtok to defend their king with swords and sticks. They were turned back by the Indian army. The Chogyal had also communicated to them that he would not sanction the armed resistance. See Datta-Ray, p. 184.

⁵⁹ Many blame India for stage-managing these developments. Others argue that the Chogyal’s political system, based on parity for the two main political groups, led to great disaffection among politically conscious Nepali Sikkimese—and ultimately the anti-Chogyal demonstrations of 1973. For different interpretations of what happened, see the following: Sunanda Datta-Ray’s *Smash and Grab*; P.N. Dhar, “The Merger of Sikkim” in *Indira Gandhi, the ‘Emergency’, and Indian Democracy* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000); B.S. Das, *The Sikkim Saga* (Delhi: Vikas, 1983). Leo Rose, “Modern Sikkim in an Historical Perspective.” L.B. Basnet’s *Sikkim: A Short Political History* covers events until just after the 1973 demonstrations.

migration from other Indian states. As if to parallel the demographic shift in Sikkim at the turn of the twentieth century, the majority Nepali Sikkimese face the possibility of becoming a minority in their own state in the twenty-first century.⁶⁰ In light of the changed political circumstances and demographic realities, how might Sikkimese imagine and assert their regional identity—one that affirms yet transcends the ethnic and cultural plurality that has both handicapped and enriched the former kingdom? As we have seen in this examination of the quest for Sikkimese national identity in the 1960s and 1970s, there is no simple way to reconcile the conflicting requirements of a multi-ethnic society. Furthermore, it remains to be seen if the preservation and reinvention of Sikkimese identity is even a priority in the state. That said, in this age of the nation-state, there are multiple examples around the world—on the southern fringes of Russia, along the coast and in the mountains of northern Spain, in the northwestern reaches of India—where minority groups with distinct identities thrive. Those examples, together with an analysis of the pitfalls and successes of the experiment of the 1960s and 1970s, can perhaps offer guidance for the Sikkimese people as they traverse the twenty-first century.

⁶⁰ Article 371F of the Indian constitution (1975) gives Parliament the power to reserve seats in the Sikkim state legislative assembly for various communities in order to protect their rights and interests. In 1975 fifteen seats were reserved for Nepali Sikkimese and fifteen for Bhutia-Lepchas. In 1979 the Bhutia-Lepcha seats were reduced to twelve, with the definition of “Bhutia” enlarged to include others groups of Tibetan descent. The Nepali Sikkimese seats were eliminated, thus making it likely that, with the mostly unchecked influx of outsiders to the state, their interests, too, will soon be submerged.