

The transition of Sikkim from one of the six hundred odd princely states to a Protectorate to an Associate State, and finally an integral part of India is a fascinating story. The Maharaja of Sikkim was the Vice President of the Chamber of Princes (*Narendra Mandal*) established in 1920 by King-Emperor George V for rulers of the princely states to voice their needs and aspirations. As such it was clearly more like Patiala and Baroda, rather than like Nepal and Bhutan with whom the British arrangements were different. Another difference between Sikkim and Bhutan lay in the fact that the majority population of Sikkim was Nepali, and had no intrinsic affiliation to the ruling Bhutia clan, which ran the kingdom in an absolutely autocratic manner through their own clansmen the Kazis – who were the hereditary feudal lords with revenue and magisterial owners over their disenfranchised Nepali serfs and the dispossessed Lepchas. The condition of the region in 1947 is best described in the words of Tashi Tshering :

‘Sikkim is a small Indian state tucked away in a corner of the Himalayas. Its ruler Sir Tashi Namgyal, KCSI, KCIE is of Tibetan descent and so are his personal adherents called Kazi who form the majority of the landlords of Sikkim. His Highness has a state council consisting entirely of the landlords and a Secretariat which is largely controlled by the landlords, the subject people or Eyoys (peasants) have no voice in administration and they have long groaned under the pernicious yoke of landlordism”

This was also the time when the redoubtable Sardar Patel, and the constitutional expert B N Rau pressed for the integration of Sikkim to India , but they were overruled by Prime Minister Nehru , who under the influence of Verrier Elwin believed that *not only should the tribal way of life be preserved, it should be insulated from the impact of modern civilization* .Not only did he prevent integration with India, he indulged the Maharaja of Sikkim by anointing him the Chogyal (King of religions), and the Maharani as the Gyalmo, thereby giving him ideas about being ‘sovereign ‘and independent. The second blunder was to place Sikkim as well as NEFA under the specially constituted IFAS, and placing these territories under the MEA, thereby setting them apart from the administration elsewhere.

As such for nearly two decades the democratic movement in Sikkim was placed on the back burner and India preferred to run Sikkim as an estate of the External Affairs Ministry. While Nehru had his own ideas about these frontier areas, and Shastri did not have the time to look into these issues , Prime Minister Indira Gandhi was different . She not only got India her first decisive military history , she was determined to defend the borders, and show the world that India had emerged as the dominant regional power of South Asia. The UN recognition for Bhutan had also taken the MEA by surprise and she was upset. More of a realpolitik than a dreamer she put the Chogyal in his place , and when he assumed ‘sovereign and royal airs’ , he was hosting his own petard .

Even under the highly distorted electoral system, the National Congress led by Kazi had always scored the highest percentage of votes, but in the rigged elections of 1973, the Darbar party scored a landslide victory, which was suspect in the eyes of all concerned, and violent crowds moved to Gangtok and besieged the palace. Demands for his abdication became the dominant slogan. He was compelled to sign the India Sikkim Treaty which called for the establishment of a fully responsible government in Sikkim, with a democratic constitution, fundamental rights, rule of law, independent judiciary, voting on the basis of one man one vote. The Chogyal was to be the Constitutional head of the state. In the elections that followed, the Sikkim National Congress led by Kazi won 29 of the 32 seats, and the Assembly passed a resolution asking for greater participation in the economic and political institutions of India. This was followed by the thirty Sixth Constitutional Amendment Act of 1974, which made Sikkim an Associate state.

This was a compromise between the various factions in the political eco-system of Sikkim, which had as the key players: the Chogyal, Chief Minister Kazi Lendhup Dorjee, the radical faction of the Nepali peasantry led by the erstwhile protégé of Kazi, Narbahadur Khatiwada, and the civil servants under the Darbar. This arrangement, though unstable, would allow the Chogyal to continue as the titular, and hereditary head of Sikkim.

However, the personal ambitions of the Chogyal (which were more temporal than spiritual) coupled with the imprudent advice from his American Gyalmo and his complete misreading of the person, persona and determination of Prime Minister Indira Gandhi were not in sync with the times. The impertinent remarks made by him to the foreign press during his visit to Nepal on the occasion of the coronation of the King, as well as his parleys with the Chinese delegation were the last straw on the camel's back. Over the next few months, Sikkim would merge with India.

(to be continued)