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Regionalisation and Ethnification of Electoral Politics in Post-Merger Sikkim

Maheshwari Kharga

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Abstract

This paper engages with the peculiar features of Sikkim's electoral politics which is characterized by the electoral dominance of regional political parties and consecutive electoral victory of Nepalis political leaders since 1979 assembly election. The first section provides analytical framework on the rise and success of regional parties in Sikkim's electoral politics. It seeks to probe the underlying causes and contextual factors that have facilitated the success of regional parties and at the same time, failure of national parties in Sikkim. To this end, it will analyse the electoral performance, electoral tactics and social support of successful regional political parties of Sikkim. The second section looks into the efforts of different Nepalis Chief Ministers of Sikkim in term of facilitating ethnification of Sikkim's electoral politics for their electoral gains.

Keywords: *Caste, Election, Ethnification, Political Parties, Regionalisation, Sikkim*

Introduction

The small Himalayan state of Sikkim having an area of 7,096 sq. km is inhabited by a sparse population of 6,10,577 (as per 2011 Census). The ethnic composition of Sikkimese society is different from other North-Eastern States of India. It is inhabited by twenty communities belonging to one of the three major ethnic groups wherein, Nepalis account for the highest population (73 per cent) followed by Bhutias (11 per cent) and Lepchas (7 per cent) (as per 2011 census).

Nepalis is a heterogeneous category which include various sub-groups belonging to different castes and tribes whose common *lingua franca* is Nepali. The indigeneity of Nepalis is largely contested as only two Nepali communities viz., Limboos and Mangars have documented history of their political presence in Sikkim, while other communities have migrated to Sikkim from different places.

Original Bhutias migrated to Sikkim centuries earlier than the Nepalis from Kham-Mina-

Andong, Tibet. But since 1978 onwards, the political category of “Bhutias” has emerged which include other eight immigrant sub-groups viz., Sherpas, Dukpas, Tibetans, Dophthapas, Kagateys, Yolmos, Trompos and Chumbiapas. Finally, Lepchas are the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim whose place of origin is also contestable².

Over the years, Sikkim has been subject to political control of different ethnic groups. In pre-modern Sikkim (prior to 1642), Lepcha and Limboo Chiefs ruled over small and independent chiefdoms or what British historian Saul Mullard referred to as “proto-states”³. Thereafter, in 1642, Bhutias founded the kingdom of Sikkim under the religious patronage of Tibetan *lamas* (monks) belonging to the red hat sect. From 1947 onwards, Nepalis leaders resisted feudalistic elements of monarchy and instead, installed democracy with the help of Indian Government. Since 1979 assembly election onwards, these Nepalis political leaders have been successful in terms of ensuring their consecutive electoral victory in Sikkim.

Regionalisation in Sikkim

Sikkim’s electoral politics is characterised by consecutive electoral dominance of regional parties thereby, giving rise to regionalisation. Regional parties are those which either emphasise on regional or national perspectives but their existence is confined to a particular state (Mehra 2003). Sikkim’s democratic transition gave rise to regional parties as a “natural consequence” of federal democratic establishment (Pai1990). These regional parties marked the transition from what Sudha Pai referred to as a shift from “traditional class politics to democratic mass politics”(ibid). They came to the fore by arousing “sub-regional consciousness” among Sikkimese and also, by opposing the Central Government’s interference in Sikkim (Mishra1983). This was evident during Rajya Sabha election of 1981, when the then ruling regional party, Sikkim Janata Parishad (SJP) alleged the Central Government of imposing its candidate without paying heed to the choice of Sikkimese people (ibid).

In Sikkim, regional political parties have been able to dominate state level politics due to their ability to showcase “regional pride” (Mehra 2003) of the state in the form of its special status which is guaranteed under Art.371 F of the Indian Constitution. Their ideological position has been to protect and preserve the distinct regional identity of Sikkim within the broader national framework of Indian Union. To this end, they have invoked strong sense of regionalist identity which overrides nationalist identity. Such identity discourse appeals to different sections of Sikkimese society considering the rights and privileges associated with it.

Leaders of national parties like Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP) and Indian National Congress (INC) along with regional parties like Sikkim National People’s Party (SNPP) and Hamro Sikkim

Party (HSP) have mentioned that Sikkimese do not trust national parties in terms of protecting their interests, rights and aspirations (Sikkim Express; Times of India). Mishra (1983) has also claimed that Sikkimese since monarchical days have exhibited their apathy towards plainsmen owing to which they view national party as “party of plainsmen or *dhotiwallas*” that seeks national integration. Therefore, voters are more inclined to support regional parties even if such a party is a faction of the ruling party or members of such party were former members of the ruling regional party.

While national parties have failed to carve their niche in Sikkim’s electoral politics as they remain active only during the time of assembly election due to asymmetrical representation of small state having less population. Also, they do not have their organisational structures like women or youth wings in the state which could garner them the support of different segments of Sikkimese electorate (Lama 1994). They are also not concerned with the functioning of their party’s state unit which was evident when recently President of BJP’s state unit, D. P Chauhan resigned from the party due to “high command’s apathy” towards issues concerning BJP’s state unit (the print). While INC lost its support base in the state due to party factionalism and defection of its members.

For this reason, national parties’ field few party candidates for contesting Sikkim’s assembly elections as shown below in Table 1. It shows that INC accounts for the highest number of fielded candidates over the years while other national parties have remained largely inconsistent. While some national parties rely mostly on regional parties with whom they have direct connection; for example, in 1979 assembly election, Sikkim Rajya Janata (SRJ) was an affiliate of Janata Party, Sikkim Kisan Sabha (SKS) was an affiliate of Communist Party of India (Marxist) CPI (M) and Sikkim Prajatantra Congress (SPC) was an affiliate of INC (Phadnis 1980). But INC and CPI (M) could not secure a single assembly seat while percentage of votes polled for SRJ party was also exceptionally low as compared to previous assembly elections (ibid).

Table 1 Fielded Candidates by National Parties for Assembly Elections

<i>Assembly Election</i>	<i>INC</i>	<i>BJP</i>	<i>AITC</i>	<i>NCP</i>	<i>CPI (M)</i>	<i>CPI</i>	<i>Janata Party</i>
1979	11	0	0	0	3	0	31
1984	32	0	0	0	1	2	19
1989	31	0	0	0	0	0	0
1994	31	2	0	0	2	0	0
1999	31	0	0	0	2	0	0
2004	28	4	0	0	1	0	0
2009	32	11	0	11	3	0	0

2014	30	13	6	0	0	0	0
2019	24	12	0	0	0	0	0

Source: Statistical Report on General Election, 1979 to Sikkim Legislative Assembly.

*Note: BJP: Bharatiya Janata Party, AITC: All India Trinamool Congress, NCP: Nationalist Congress Party, CPI: Communist Party of India.

In Sikkim, national parties have adopted the electoral tactic of parties' merger which becomes all the more convenient for them to use if such party is in power at the Centre. They adopt this tactic due to their concern of losing elections and therefore, determine the electoral outcome by joining other political forces. Coffe & Torenvlied (2008) in their study have identified interplay among three complex and inter-related factors for parties' merger. First, contextual factors arise out of the structural conditions of party system and the socio-economic environment. Second, inter-party factors are those which facilitate interaction and relation among possible merging parties. Finally, intra-party factors may vary among possible merging parties but there should be some similarity among them in certain respects and also, willingness among party leaders to cooperate.

In Sikkim, INC initially merged with Sikkim Prajatantra Congress (SPC) by dissolving its state unit but this merger did not last long as later SJP became an alliance partner of INC. SJP went even further to prove its allegiance to INC by removing the word "*Janata*" (public) from its party's appellation. This instigated few Nepali leaders of other regional parties like Sikkim Congress (Revolutionary) and SPC to request INC for forming its own state unit under their leadership but their plan could not materialise. Chakaravarthi (1994) referred to this as a "phenomenon of conversion" rather than defection (Lama 1994). He further claimed that INC gained such a strong foothold in Sikkim's politics that it turned out to be a "third political force" (ibid).

In 1984, former Chief Minister (CM) of Sikkim, Lt. Nar Bahadur Bhandari's along with his supporting legislators left INC and formed another regional party, Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). When Lt. Bhandari's successor Lt. Sanchaman Limboo lost majority in the House due to the resignation of his two legislators, then once again INC came to his rescue by merging with his party. This was the last time that INC had a share in power of the Sikkim Government, albeit it was for a brief period of time.

The other common electoral tactic adopted by national parties to have a share in power is party alliance with regional parties. Alliance is an "association of associations" (White 2018) which is explicit in nature as public recognition of such alliance ensures desirable ends for which it was formed. Alliance preserves distinct identity of the involved parties but at the same time, it

ensures them the possibility of voluntarily exit. The “intrinsic value” of alliance is that it enhances the political outlook of the involved parties by giving rise to fresh and better perspectives. While its “instrumental value” is that it plays an influential role in achieving the desirable goals of involved parties especially if they have common programmatic ends and dominant opposition. But concurrently, alliance is perilous and subject to scrutiny as its formation cannot be denied if it is subject to negative public reactions. It can adversely affect any party individuals or involved party itself. Also, parties face the challenge of harmonizing their search for common agenda with preservation of distinct establishments. Moreover, the problems of bargaining and adversarialism remains persistent (White 2018).

In Sikkim, national parties agree to be subordinate partner in the alliance for the sake of merely ensuring their political presence as a pan-India party. INC and Janata party followed the tactic of party alliance but they could not sustain it for longer duration. But BJP was successful in adopting this tactic by following ethno-regionalist approach in terms of addressing issues which are specific to Sikkim. In 2016, the former ruling regional party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) joined the regional political alliance, North-East Democratic Alliance (NEDA) of BJP, albeit it did not agree to pre-poll alliance with BJP for contesting 2019 assembly election⁴.

But recent assembly election marked the unexpected backdoor entry of saffron party into Sikkim’s politics as in other North-Eastern states of India. Such development occurred at the cost of SDF witnessing a severe political jolt when its ten elected MLAs defected to BJP prior to two months of by-elections in Sikkim (Roy 2023). Thereafter, Sikkim ceased to be the only north-east state where BJP could not secure a single assembly seat. BJP further received a political boost when two Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) party members joined BJP to contest the by-election for two vacant assembly seats and subsequently, they won those seats. Moreover, SKM party after forming the government joined NEDA, albeit earlier it had refused to forge pre-poll alliance with BJP due to differences over sharing of assembly seats (Gogoi 2019).

So, the paradox in current political landscape of Sikkim is that BJP not only became the major opposition party but it also became an ally of the present ruling party, SKM⁵. The startling shift in regional balance of power from SDF to SKM allowed BJP to carve its strong foothold in Sikkim’s electoral politics in spite of not winning a single assembly seat and securing only 1.62 per cent vote share in 2019 assembly election⁶. Such electoral trend proves that alliance of SDF with BJP weakened the former while it strengthened support of new political entrant, SKM in Sikkim’s politics (Teehankee & Echle 2023)⁷.

Table 2 provides a detailed analysis of electoral performance of elected political parties over

the years. It shows that different regional parties have secured absolute majority twice in assembly elections of Sikkim. Table 3 provides a comparative and comprehensive detail on the electoral performance of all political parties which contested Sikkim's assembly elections since 1979 onwards. It can be inferred that the vote share of national parties was lowest in 1999 assembly election. While in 2014 assembly election, the difference in the vote share of national and regional parties was highest (93.77 per cent). Table 4 shows that vote share of INC has been higher than that of BJP except in the last two assembly elections of Sikkim. Table 5 shows a detailed electoral performance of all political parties in the latest assembly election of 2019. It shows that SKM could manage to win by a slim margin of two seats in spite of having less share of votes (47.03 per cent) than SDF (47.63 per cent). It also shows the electoral failure of all state registered unrecognised parties in Sikkim owing to which they have not been able to secure recognition from the Election Commission of India (ECI).

Table 2: Electoral Performance of Elected Political Parties in Sikkim

<i>Election</i>	<i>Elected Party</i>	<i>Votes obtained</i>	<i>% of Votes</i>	<i>Candidates Elected</i>
1979	SJP	22776	31.49%	16
1985	SSP	60371	62.20%	30
1989	-,-	94078	70.41%	32
1994	SDF	72856	42%	19
1999	-,-	107214	52.32%	24
2004	-,-	139662	71.09%	31
2009	-,-	165891	65.53%	32
2014	-,-	169986	55%	22
2019	SKM	165508	47.03%	17

Source: ECI

Table 3 Electoral Performance of National and Regional Parties

<i>Election</i>	<i>Vote Share of National Parties</i>	<i>Vote Share of Regional Parties</i>	<i>Vote Share of Registered Unrecognized Parties</i>
1979	15.55 %	67.94 %	16.51 %
1985	25.46 %	62.65 %	11.89 %
1989	18.05 %	79.21 %	2.74 %

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1994	15.33 %	78.76 %	5.91 %
1999	3.86 %	94.20 %	1.94 %
2004	26.54 %	71.71 %	1.75 %
2009	28.95 %	69.45 %	1.6 %
2014	2.33 %	96.1 %	1.57 %
2019	2.39 %	94.65 %	97.04 %

Source: Singh & Singha, 2016.

Table 4 Vote Share of BJP and INC in Assembly Elections of Sikkim

<i>Election</i>	<i>Vote Share of BJP</i>	<i>Vote Share of INC</i>
1998	-	33.11
1999	-	4.76
2004	-	27.43
2009	1.77	29.59
2014	2.39	2.36
2019	4.71	1.13

Source: Teehankee, J. & Echle, C.2023.

Table 5: Electoral Performance of Parties in Assembly Election, 2019

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>Party Type</i>	<i>No. of Seats Won</i>
SKM	Regional party	17
SDF	-, -	15
INC	National party	0
BJP	-, -	0
HSP	Registered unrecognized party	0
SRP	-, -	0
SRMP	-, -	0

*Note: HSP: Hamro Sikkim Party, SRP: Sikkim Republican Party, SRMP: Sikkim Rajya Manch Party

Ethnification in Sikkim

In multi-ethnic society of Sikkim, political leaders seek to garner the support of different ethnic groups thereby, giving rise to ethnification. Sikkim's merger with India instilled democratic impetus upon the numerically dominant Nepalis community to such an extent that their leaders started endorsing majoritarian politics in Sikkim. But since 1979 assembly election onwards, electoral politics of Sikkim has been largely determined by ethnic considerations (Chakraborty 2000). It is characterised by successful attempts of Nepali political leaders to ensure ethnification of electoral politics owing to which they have consecutively ruled Sikkim in the last four decades. Table 6 shows the tenure and party affiliation of all Nepali CMs of Sikkim over the years.

Table 6 Chief Ministers of Sikkim Since 1979.

CM	Ruling Party	Term
Lt. Bhandari	SJP	1979-1984
Bhim Bahadur Gurung	B.B Gurung faction of SJP and INC	1984
Lt. Bhandari	SSP	1985-1994
Lt. Sanchaman Limboo	Sanchaman Limboo faction of SSP and INC	1994
Pawan Kumar Chamling	SDF	1994-2019
Prem Singh Golay	SKM	2019-incumbent

Source: Statistical Journal 2015.

The first Nepali CM of Sikkim, Lt. Bhandari ruled Sikkim for three terms with two breaks in between due to corruption charges and party factionalism. He could secure simple majority (16 out of 31) in 1979 assembly election by successfully arousing nationalistic feelings among Sikkimese (Times of India). Table 7 shows the number of assembly seats won by Lt. Bhandari from all districts of Sikkim in 1979 assembly election. Lt. Bhandari won equal number of Bhutia-Lepcha (BL) seats and General seats which represents Nepalis and plainsmen population of Sikkim.

Table 7 : Ethnic Representation of Seats won by Lt. Bhandari in 1979 assembly election

<i>Districts</i>	<i>General</i>	<i>BL</i>	<i>Total No. of Actual Seats</i>
West	5	2	9
South	1	0	7
East	2	3	11
North	0	3	3
Total	8	8	30

Source: Phadnis, 1980

*Note: There are 17 General seats open for all the communities while 12 “BL” seats are reserved ethnic seats.

Lt. Bhandari, in spite of being removed from power, could bounce back in 1985 assembly election with a thumping majority. His SSP party’s absolute electoral victory set a new record not only in Sikkim but also at the national level. SSP also won the lone Lok Sabha seat by securing 56, 614 votes out of 86, 024 polled votes but he relinquished the Lok Sabha seat in order to become the CM of Sikkim for the second time (Lama 1994). He won assembly election of 1985 due to his upper caste viz., Bahun’s, Chettri’s and Newar’s support base as they collectively accounted for almost 40 per cent of the Sikkim’s electorate. He could easily win their support not only because he was Chettri but also by offering them high rank positions in politics and administration as shown in table 8 (Chakraborty2000).

Table 8 Representation of Communities in Sikkim Legislative Assembly

<i>Community</i>	<i>1979</i>	<i>1985</i>	<i>1989</i>
Bahuns and Chettris	7	7	6
Newars	1	1	2
OBCs	6	6	7
Plainsman	Nil	1	Nil
Bhutias	11	10	10
Lepchas	2	3	3

Source: Gurung 2011

*Note: Other Backward Classes (OBCs) included Limboos, Tamangs, Rais and Mangars.

Lt. Bhandari’s popularity increased to such an extent that in 1989 assembly election he secured all assembly seats by raising issues that were beneficial to discrete Nepali communities. But in 1994 assembly election, he was voted out of power by another Nepali leader and his former accomplice P.K Chamling. When Chamling was a cabinet minister of Lt. Bhandari’s Government, then he sought the creation of Backward Class Commission and implementation of the Mandal Commission’s recommendation in Sikkim. His “pro-OBC” and “pro-poor” image cost his removal from the ministry and later, from the party by Lt. Bhandari. So, when Chamling formed his own party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), then it was viewed as an “OBC party”. Fortunately, SDF party could win 1994 assembly election due to strong support of OBC communities which constitute the largest section of the electorate in Sikkim (Bora2004; Gurung2011; Kazi2009.). Thereafter, Chamling constituted OBC board to identify backward classes in Sikkim (GoS 2016). He ensured central level recognition to Limboos, Tamangs, Bhujels, Gurungs, Rais, Mangars and

Sunuwars as OBCs (ibid). In 1995, he also accorded official recognition to the local languages of OBC communities (Chakraborty 2000; Sinha 2008).

By 1999 assembly election, Chamling was also able to gradually win the confidence of other sections of the Nepalis population which Lt. Nar Bahadur Bhandari lacked. He strengthened his support base of non-OBC Nepalis by fielding their candidates from his party, raising issues that were pertinent to their interests and demanding their inclusion in the central list of OBCs (Chakraborty 2000). When the Central Government accepted the proposal of recognising only Thamis and Sanyasis as OBCs at the central level, then Chamling declared Dewan, Jogi and Thami as OBCs at the central level in 2000 (Chennattuserry et. al 2023). In 2003, he ensured OBC recognition to non-listed Nepalis castes viz., NBCs (Newar, Bahun and Chettri) at the state level but by doing so, he clubbed Sanyasi community along with them in spite of their differences in caste hierarchy. He was aware of the criticisms that he could face for this move because of which he changed the nomenclature of Central listed OBCs to Most Backward Classes (MBCs) at the state level. In 2014, he again changed the nomenclature of MBCs to Central listed OBCs considering the futility of the category in terms of reservation quota. In 2015, he included one of Scheduled Caste community, Majhi in the state list of OBCs so as to facilitate their “caste climbing”.

Chamling employed the rhetoric of inclusion-exclusion on the basis of caste of various Nepalis communities. He resorted to backward caste politics by enabling reservation to all communities of Nepalis. Such caste based ideological position ensured his uninterrupted rule for more than two decades thereby, making him the longest serving CM of Sikkim as well as of India. Likewise, his party also ensured one-party dominance and a balanced policy of inclusion without any pattern of political alteration and electoral cycle or oscillation of political parties (Giri 2009).

But in 2019 assembly election, Chamling was voted out of power by the incumbent Nepalis CM of Sikkim, P.S Golay. Multiple factors are attributable to his electoral victory such as public discontentment against one-party dominance, defection of elected SDF MLAs and “political vacuum” (Pai 1990) in Sikkim’s politics. Above all, P.S Golay belongs to Tamang community which made strong and valid claims for their reserved assembly seats as a part of their constitutional right of being recognised as Scheduled Tribes in 2003.

Conclusion

The co-relation between success of regional parties and ethnic mobilisation in Sikkim’s electoral politics differentiates it from other states of India. To this end, it is rather intriguing to investigate as to how a community that migrated from the late 19th century onwards became successful in not only outnumbering the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim but also ensuring their dominance in Sikkim’s electoral politics. Since 1979 onwards, Nepalis political leaders have been successful in

bargaining with the Centre and fulfilling the demands of their support base. They have continuously redefined the social relations of different ethnic communities and catered to the needs of different sections of the society. They have been able to retain and sustain their power even at the cost of opposing, merging or aligning their regional parties with the ruling national party. Consequently, national parties have become dependent on regional parties to mark their political presence in Sikkim, albeit regional parties of Sikkim have not even able to enter national level politics.

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Notes

Sikkim is the second smallest state and least populated state of India.

- ² Some believe that Lepchas have originated from Upper Burma and Assam while others believe that they originated from Kailasa which is on the way to Tibet (Chakrabarti 2013). Juxtaposed to these beliefs is a myth which reverberates the rationale behind Lepchas following animism (worship nature) that is they have migrated from the slopes of Mt. Khanchendzonga.
- ³ Proto-state is similar to a state in terms of organizational structure and functioning but it cannot be called a full-fledged state as it does not have clearly demarcated boundaries (Mullard 2011).
- ⁴ On 24th May, 2016 NEDA was formed in Guwahati by BJP along with ten regional parties (including SDF) as the first “political coalition” of a national party for north-east states (Gogoi 2019). It was formed a day after the formation of first BJP led coalition government in Assam.
- ⁵ SKM attempted to forge an alliance with BJP prior to 2019 assembly election but it was not successful due to disagreements between the two parties over seat-sharing and common minimum programme. Moreover, SDF as a partner of NEDA was also opposed to such alliance owing to which SKM-BJP alliance was forged prior to the by-poll elections (Swarajya 2019).
- ⁶ Elections in India, <http://www.electionsinindia.com/subscription.aspx>.
- ⁷ The Buddhist minority communities of Sikkim expressed their apprehension of being subsumed by *Hinduvta* nationalist ideology of BJP (Roy 2023). While social media users were aggrieved by the fact that BJP would eventually rule even if SKM or SDF wins public mandate (ibid).

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Bio Profile of the Author:

PhD (Submitted), CPS, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

Assistant Professor of Political Science,

Sikkim Government College, Bortuk

Email ID: maheshwari.khargal0@gmail.com

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