

CULTURAL IDENTITY OF SIKKIM : A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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If we want to understand the cultural identity of people in a proper perspective, need to study different factors and forces which influence its development. The geographical factor is very important in this respect. Sikkim is bounded by Tibet in the north and in the east, Nepal in the west and the state of West Bengal in the south. It lies between 88°-4' and 88°-58' east longitude and 27°-5' and 28°-5' and 28°-10' north latitudes. Because of its geographical location in the Himalaya, Sikkim shares many things in common with other Himalayan states. All the Himalayan states have been dominated by high mountain ranges. The people of these states have high regards for mountains which are considered as abodes of their protecting deity. The worship of the snow-ranges of Kanchenjunga is for instance, one of the most important festivals of Sikkim. All the Himalayan states have by and large similar topographical features and similar flora and fauna. These similarities caused to some extent similar thinking pattern and cultural characteristics. However, the western sector of the Himalayan region extending from Kashmir to Nepal came largely under the cultural influences of India. The dominant cultural ethos in Nepal derived its origin from Hinduism in India. Buddhism also entered into Nepal from India. But the eastern sector of the Himalayan region is herein lay Bhutan and Sikkim, was to a great extent insulated from cultural influences from the south.

Bhutan and Sikkim both came under the Mahayana Buddhism. In the cultural history of these two Himalayan states the eighth century was important. It was in the eighth century that the Guru Padma Sambhava, known as the Guru Rimpoche brought Buddhism to these states through Tibet. Thi-Srong Deu-tsan (742-800), the king of Tibet invited the Guru Padma Sambhava whose fame as a teacher of mysticism had spread across the Himalaya into Tibet. Padma Sambhava arrived at Samye by way of Kathmandu and Kyirong about 747. He assisted the king in building the first monastery of Samye. Padma Sambhava is believed to have visited Sikkim and Bhutan during his travels in Tibet and its western regions. The establishment of Lamaism, however, took place in Sikkim about the middle of the 17th century.

The 17th century is significant not only in the political and cultural history of Sikkim but also in that of Tibet and Bhutan. In the first half of the 17th century the king of Tsang had threatened the Buddhist establishment in Tibet. In 1642 Gushri Khan, the Mongol chief, defeated the then king of Tsang. With his assistance the fifth Dalai Lama assumed temporal power and moved into the famous Potala palace. The Dalai Lama became not only the spiritual head but also the temporal ruler. Under this arrangement Tibet flourished during the 17th and 18th centuries.

In Bhutan also the political system was highly decentralised in the beginning of the 17th century. It was in 1616 that Ngawang Namgyal, an influential Drukpa Lama came to Bhutan from Tibet. He made himself the supreme religious and political head of Bhutan with the title of Shabdrung. He established a regular system of administration in the country. It was during his reign that Bhutan emerged as a distinct political entity. In Sikkim also the Namgyal dynasty was established around the middle of the 17th century. In 1642 Phuntshog Namgyal

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was consecrated as the king of Sikkim. Since the rulers of Bhutan and Sikkim hailed from Tibet, Tibetan influences on the region, culture and arts of Bhutan and Sikkim has been profound. This could be discerned in the institution of Lamaism and the building of dzongs, monasteries, Lhakhangs, Chortens, paintings, murals, thangkas, mandalas and dances.

However, the growth and sustenance of a culture is depend on political power. Sikkim is the smallest Himalayan state. While the areas of Nepal and Bhutan are about 54,000 square miles and 18,000 sq.miles respectively, Sikkim has only about 3,000sq. miles. Hence its identity was endangered by its neighbours several times. Although Bhutan and Sikkim both followed Mahayana Buddhism, there was no political cordiality between them. Bhutan invaded Sikkim in 1700 and occupied for about seven years. It also Sikkim in 1770, but a serious threat to its existence emerged from the west when the Gorkhas expanded towards the east. Under the command of Damodar Pande the Gorkhas defeated Sikkim in 1789/90 and occupied most of western Sikkim. The expansion of the Gorkhas was halted when the forces of the East India Company defeated the Gorkha army in war in 1814-15. The company restored the Sikkimese territory lying between the river Mechi and Teesta by a treaty signed at Titalia in 1817. The East India Company treated Nepal as its ally its Nepal war in 1814-15. In fact Sikkim's status war was similar to the Nepal and Bhutan in the first half of the 19th century. But it began to be eroded in the second with the British Government of India by which it undertook to provide freedom of trade between the two countries, to abolish all restrictions on travellers in its territory and afford every protection and aid to the British in constructing a road to the Tibetan border.

In the second half of the 19th century the British Government of India was a supreme power in Asia. It brought almost all border-states under its supremacy. Nepal which fought war with the East India Company in 1814-15 became an ally of the British Indian Government by the 1850^s. Bhutan which went to war with the British in 1864-65 became aware of British power and was not prepared to join the Tibetans in their conflict with the British in 1888. But Sikkim looked upon itself as a vassal of Tibet and defied British power. Hence the British acquired a direct and exclusive control not only over the foreign relation but also over the internal administration of Sikkim by signing a convention with China in 1890. It was a turning point in the history. J.C. White who was appointed political officer at Gangtok encouraged the settlement of immigrants in pursuance of the policy of replacing Buddhist prayer wheel with the Kukri.

The colonial ruler of India thought that there was basic antagonism between the prayer wheel and Kukhr, i.e. between the Buddhist and the Nepalese. But in Nepal where the Buddhists constitute about 14 per cent of its population, there is not hostility between the two communities. In Sikkim also the cultural tradition has evolved along secular lines. The monasteries and temples are part and parcel of the cultural heritage of Sikkim.