

From subjects of Sikkim to citizens of India

Was there an '*ab initio*' default in the Thirty Fifth Constitutional amendment making Sikkim an Associate of India? Or did it collapse because of the failure of the Chogyal to read the changing circumstances? It is true that Kazi would have preferred 'merger', but even the Sikkim Assembly resolution of 20th June 1974 asked for 'fuller participation of Sikkim in the economic and social institutions of India'. Had the Chogyal gone along with the popular mandate, could he have maintained his 'kingdom' where the overwhelming majority was ethnically apart?

After the status of Sikkim changed from a protectorate to an Associate state, the subjects of Sikkim were almost equal in status to the citizens of India. They could be elected to the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha, and take the civil services exam at par with Indian students. Had the Chogyal reconciled with this situation he could have continued to exercise the moral, cultural and spiritual leadership not just in Sikkim, but perhaps on the larger canvas of India. However, in a complete misreading of the situation, he preferred to internationalize the issue, which was an unwise move, considering the mood of the then PM as well as the popular sentiments of the majority population of Sikkim. His parleys with the Chinese during his visit to Nepal on the occasion of the coronation of their king, and his statements against the newly elected government saw a massive anti Chogyal upsurge in the streets of Gangtok. When the Palace Radio made announcements in April, 1975 casting aspersions on the elections which had given the Kazi an overwhelming majority, and asking for a referendum on the status of Sikkim as an Associate state, he gave the Kazi a golden opportunity to organize a referendum but the agenda was now in the hands of the Kazi. Sikkim did have a referendum on 14th April, but on a different issue: that of abolition of the office of Chogyal and complete merger with India. The results were on expected lines: an overwhelming support for joining India and ending the monarchy. Within two weeks, the Parliament approved the Thirty sixth Amendment, incorporating Sikkim as an integral part of India.

One must mention that there are four eminently readable texts on Sikkim – and each one makes a convincing case. Of these, *Smash and Grab* by Sunanda K Datta Ray and *The Sikkim Saga* by BS Das, were published by Vikas in 1984. Both incidentally had similar cover pages – shades of blue, and none carried the map of Sikkim on the cover or the back page. The third and the fourth books : *Sikkim: Requiem for a Himalayan Kingdom* by Andrew Duff, and *Sikkim: Dawn of Democracy* by GBS Sidhu was published by Penguin in 2015 and 2018. While they all agree on the events, incidents and issues, the treatment meted out is quite different, and reading these books, side by side also confirms that

history is but an interpretation and perspective of facts , and that no one , especially the contemporary observer can claim to be 'objective'.

In *Smash and Grab*, Sunanda K Datta Ray's dedication of the book to *Jungkhyang* - the term used for the Chogyal in reverence - makes it clear that this is the perspective of the Chogyal. The *Sikkim Saga* , on the other hand ,is the narrative from the point of view of the of view of BS Das , who served Sikkim as the Chief Executive officer , maintaining a fine balance between the Chogyal, in whose name he carried on the administration , and the Foreign Office in Delhi which under Kewal Singh was quite adept at back seat driving . Then we have the Scotsman Andrew Duff, tracing his grandfather's travels to the Sikkim Himalayas undertaken a century ago. He was given Datta Ray's book as the first source but supplemented it with the reports from the FCO , in depth interviews with key stakeholders , but most of all from the weekly letters of the Scottish Headmistress(es) of the Paljor Namgyal Girls school in Gangtok : Martha Hamilton and Ishbel Ritchie . Both had access to the Palace, and were indeed beholden to their royal patrons. Their letters gave a first hand, contemporaneous account for the years from 1959 to 1975, albeit from the Chogyal perspective. One must add that his book is quite nuanced, for he gives adequate coverage to the views of the key dramatis personae as well. The last book is by GBS Sidhu, an officer of the R&AW, posted as an OSD in Sikkim to bolster the pro - democracy forces, led at that time by Kazi Lendhup Dorjee, who he feels was short charged by the Congress in the Emergency years and later .He mentions quite candidly that his purpose of writing the book was to salvage his reputation. He makes the point that *'kingdoms are created by force, military might, brotherhood, treaties or deceit. They crumble when people realize that the unpopular king has become powerless , as the very power (in this case India's protective cover) which had propped up the king or even sustained his unpopular rule , had disappeared , or withdrawn its protection, and was now willing to make amends for its past acts of omission or commission . Thondup Namgyal's dynasty lasted for 333 years. It could have survived longer had there been an enlightened ruler willing to adjust to changing environment by trying to accommodate the democratic aspirations of his people. But Thondup was not a person made out of that mould'*

Kind attention : Arif -Optional Para : space permitting - or use the italicized text as my intro -

At this point, one must disclose that your columnist knew both the Kazi and Kazini quite well socially - for having lost power in the 1979 elections, the Kazis retreated to their abode in Kalimpong, reviled by the Bhutias for not standing up to their clansmen, and distrusted by the Nepalis for he could not deliver on the promise of radical land reforms. To them, he was, after all, a patrician. *Your columnist started his career as an Assistant Magistrate, and later as SDO of Kalimpong when the GNLf agitation was at its peak, and the discussions with the Kazis in 1986-87 on the implications of demographic*

transitions in the fragile Himalayan geographies of Sikkim and Bhutan still resonate quite clearly in his mindscape.