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Research Article

Migration and Marginalisation in the 'Himalayan Kingdom' of Sikkim

Anjan Chakrabarti

Assistant Professor of Economics, St. Joseph's College (University Section), PO: North Point, Darjeeling-734104, India
Email: anjaneco@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

A close look at the political history of Sikkim during monarchic rule unravels some disconcerting features. If the first phase of history (pre-British phase) showed marginalisation of the *Lepchas* and the *Limboos* by the immigrant *Bhutias*, the second phase of history (after the British became the *de facto* ruler) reflected the political hegemony of the minority *Bhutia–Lepcha* combination over the majority Nepalese who were mostly landless. The entry of the bulk of Nepalese did contribute to bring in changes in production techniques, especially in the agricultural sector, but appropriation of surplus by the landed gentry of *Bhutias* and *Lepchas* only helped to sustain feudalism. Demand for land rights and proportionate representation of the Nepalese paved way for integration of Sikkim with India, and monarchy was replaced by a democratic form of governance. By dint of absolute numerical majority, the Nepalese became the guiding force in shaping the economy of post state-hood Sikkim.

Keywords: Marginalisation, Migration, Political History, Demography, Land Management

INTRODUCTION

Marginalisation is a derivative of the word 'marginalise' and it is a loaded word, which incorporates multiple aspects such as economic, political, social, cultural marginalisation and may be many more. However, economists tend to focus more on economic marginalisation than on other forms of marginalisation. Again, economic marginalisation is also a relational category. If category 'A' is marginalised, then it must be with respect to some other category, say 'B'. Now 'B' can implicitly be treated as 'the rest of society' or the 'rest of the economy' or the 'average'. Economic marginalisation can either be an outcome or a process (or structure). Therefore, economic marginalisation is closely linked to the economic structure; contrary to it, non-economic factors like gender, caste or ethnicity may cause exclusion (Kanbur 2007). Migration and immigration do create a situation in which linkages between migration and marginalisation of varying degrees may become obvious.

A million years ago, the *Homo erectus* left Africa and possibly that marked the beginning of continuous movement of people from one place to another. Migration thus considered as a key human reaction to social, political, economic and environmental changes and human beings reached all parts of the earth 10,000 years ago (Kardulias and Hall 2007: 1). Therefore, mobility may be considered as a 'normal' condition and 'sedentary stability' the exception. However, migrants are very heterogeneous in nature and they differ at least as much from each other as they differ from the population. Looking at the varying nature of the movements of humans, attributes such as 'nomadism', 'mobility', 'migration', 'immigration', etc. were coined by social scientists and social anthropologists. From the definitional point of view, nomadism implies a movement within a fixed trail but with no permanent residence of living, whereas mobility is a movement from one fixed location to another. Migration is treated as an intentional

movement of an individual or a group to a new location or territory that may or may not be occupied by others. Immigration is also an intentional movement of individuals to an already occupied location with an intention to stay permanently (*ibid*.; 4 and 5). Keeping aside the varying nature of movement of people and also accepting the fact that the decision of migration is a complex matrix of various pull and push factors, it is imperative to note that human migration affects population patterns and characteristics, social, political and cultural patterns, as well as processes, economies and physical environments. This also creates a conflicting scenario among various social groups within a geographical boundary. The history of human civilisation and its evolution bears testimony for it.

Against this backdrop, this paper chooses to trace the process of migration and the resultant political, economic and cultural metamorphosis that the 'Himalayan Kingdom' Sikkim experienced from the seventeenth century till it became an Indian state in 1975. This paper also implicitly looks into the process of possible political, cultural and economic marginalisation of some of the ethnic groups in Sikkim in a historical context.

IMMIGRATION OF *BHUTIAS* AND CHANGING TRAJECTORIES OF THE PRE-COLONIAL POLITICAL HISTORY OF SIKKIM

The recorded history of Sikkim begins from the seventeenth century. *Limbu* Chronicles, *Lepcha* folklores and legends, Tibetan texts and traditions that are often used to illuminate the past, substitute authentic records. However, 'the strong presence of allegories and prophecies' in them proved these documents to be a poor substitute (Census of India 1981).

Lepchas are supposed to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim (White 1909:9). One school of thought believes that the *Lepchas* might have come from the east of the mountains from Assam and Upper Burma, but the other view looks at them 'as migrants from hilly mountain of *Kailasa*, way up in Tibet' (Singh 1993:89). However, Geoffrey Gorer has the opinion that the '*Lepchas* were mongoloid people and they were originally the only inhabitants living in the Himalayas on the southern and eastern slopes of Mount Kinchennjunga.' He further added that the word '*Lepcha*' was a derivative of a Nepali derogatory word *lap-che*, which means 'the nonsense talkers'. Originally, the *Lepchas* did not call themselves *Lepchas*, but rather they identified themselves as '*Rong*' (Gorer 1996, Reprint) or *Rong-pa*, which means people living in ravines. Before being overshadowed by the Tibetans, the *Lepchas* had been organised by *Turve*, who acquired the title '*Punu*' or king. *Lepcha* kingship came to an end after the death of the fourth successor of *Turve*; thereafter, a 'respected old man' elected by the society guided the *Lepchas*. Prior to any infiltration of others tribes and communities in Sikkim from outside, the lifestyle of *Lepchas* was marked by a high degree of mobility subsisting on roots, tuber, fishing and hunting (Das 1978). Their agricultural knowhow was restricted to shifting cultivation or slash and burn method of rotational cultivation of rice, maize and millet (Thapa 1966). They believed in animism and lived in completely harmony with nature.

A small group of *Limbus*, known as *Tsongs*, who were believed to be migrants from the Tsangpo valley in Tibet, were also visible in a disperse hamlet. Towards the southwest, the Mangars (according to Risley, their original homeland was in Western Nepal from where they migrated to Eastern Nepal and finally came to Sikkim) used to live by occupying a small territory there (Risley 1928:74).

A fleeting glance at the early history of Sikkim revealed that Sikkim before the beginning of the seventeenth century was under the complete domination of migrant Tibetans. The *Lepchas* and Limboos were marginalised culturally and partially economically by the Tibetans. The process was started prior to the fifteenth century. However, it gained momentum in the late fifteenth century. As mentioned earlier, during that period Sikkim was sparsely populated by the *Lepchas* and Limboos. Among the early immigrants, Tibetan graziers and *lamas* who belonged to the 'Red Hat' or Nyingmapa sect were the first to reach Sikkim. Graziers were in search of new grazing pastures, and Tibetan lamas were on a mission to spread Tibetan Buddhism in Sikkim. They were followed by Tibetan traders and peasants. The Tibetan immigrants established themselves strongly as traders and pastoralists. During the later half of the fifteenth century,

Khye Bumsa, a *Bhutia* chieftain from the Chumbi Valley of Tibet, reached Sikkim and met the then *Lepcha* chief, Tho-Kung-Tek, and established 'blood-brother hood'. Legends say that the famous Tibetan king, Khey Bhumsa and his wife were childless and they came to seek the advice of Thekung Tek and the latter said that their wish would be fulfilled but they would have to rule Sikkim. However, Khey Bhumsa did not take the mantle; instead he agreed to send one of his sons. Henceforth they became blood brothers and sisters. The agreement took place at Kabi Longtsok, in the northern district of Sikkim. In the initial phase, when the lands were abundant, the Rongs or *Lepchas* preferred to shift their habitation in order to remain separated from the Tibetans. However at a later stage, when the presence of Tibetans and their influence gained prominence, the *Lepchas* accepted the superiority of the Tibetans and the latter were treated as a 'Bar-fung-mo', meaning flowing from the high (Shukla 1976:14).

In 1642 at Yoksom, in the western part of Sikkim, three monks consecrated Phunshong Namgyal as the first 'religious and temporal ruler' of Sikkim. The recorded history of Sikkim is available since then (Singh *op.cit.*). The monks conferred Phunshong Namgyal with the title of *Chogyal*, which means the king who rules with righteousness (Verma 1990:8). Later, a treaty was signed between the *Lepchas* and *Bhutia*s, wherein the former accepted the latter as the spiritual and secular head of the Sikkim kingdom. Through this treaty, the *Bhutia*s established their supremacy over the *Lepchas*. *Lepchas* were converted to the Lamaist Buddhism of the Tibetans (Das 1983:5). This marked the beginning of the unbroken rule of the Namgyal dynasty in Sikkim. Phuntsong Namgyal, after being consecrated, divided the territory of Sikkim into twelve *dzongs* or districts each under a *Lepcha dzongpen* or district chief. A symbolic surrender of lands by the twelve *dzongpen* to the *Bhutia* king created the notion that all lands belong to the *Bhutia* ruler, and that the *Lepchas* were mere occupants, who could be evicted at the will of the ruler (Shukla *op.cit.*). The best lands were taken by the Bhotias. Both the Limboos and the Mangars extended their solidarity to the *Bhutia* ruler and accepted the *Chogyal* as the spiritual and temporal head of the Sikkim kingdom. *Lepchas* were gradually converted to Lamaism. The *Lepchas* and Limboos were pushed back west-ward towards Nepal and south-ward to India. It was observed by John Morris and Geoffrey Gorer, from the ethnographical studies of the *Lepchas* carried out in the Talung valley of Dzongu, North Sikkim, that the *Lepchas* had intermarried with the Tibetans and later with the Nepalese to such an extent that they lost all traces of tribal consciousness, probably except in the Talung valley of Dzongu where the entry and settlement of any other communities were strictly prohibited by law (Gorer *op.cit*.). It was further observed that a 'proletarian *Bhutia* labourer' by marrying a *Lepcha* chief's daughter could move up the social hierarchy and would be recognised as *Kazi*. In the process, between the early fifteenth century and the beginning of the seventeenth century, cultural, social and economic domination over the *Lepchas* by the immigrant *Bhutia*s was accomplished. However, there was no reason to believe that the *Lepchas* were alienated from their land and, therefore, were removed from the eminence of landed aristocracy.

BRITISH INTRUSION IN SIKKIM, NEPALESE IMMIGRATION AND CHANGING DEMOGRAPHY IN SIKKIM

During the period 1641-1817, Sikkim was engulfed in a series of war. The first attack came from Bhutan in 1706 during the reign of Chakdor Namgyal. In the process, Kalimpong, which was a part of Sikkim, was lost to Bhutan. In 1788-89, Rabdanste, the then capital of Sikkim (Tensung Namgyal, the immediate successor of Phunstok Namgyal, had shifted the capital from Yoksom to Rabdanste) was devastated. Subsequently, the entire west of river Tista was conquered by Nepal. In 1791, Tibet was invaded by the Gorkha army and this brought the Chinese intervention. The Chinese defeated the Gorkhas, and the Sino-Nepalese Treaty was signed. Although monarchy was restored in Sikkim, owing to the absence of their representative at the time of signing the treaty, Sikkim had to surrender a vast territory to Nepal. Sikkim lost the entire lower Tista basin to Nepal, and the entire region of east of Tista including Kalimpong to Bhutan, and Tibet went away with the Chumbi valley.

At this juncture, the British East India Company had gradually been making slow inroads into the Himalayan kingdom. Their primary interest was to find a possible trade route to Tibet, and Sikkim provided the most feasible one. A conflict of interest to occupy the Terai

region had ultimately culminated in the Anglo–Gorkha war of 1814-16 where the British wanted Sikkim to be an ally and it was promised that Sikkim's lost territories would be restored. The British won the battle. The treaty of Segowlee was signed on December 2, 1815 and ratified on March 4, 1916 between the East India Company and Nepal. The Raja of Nepal agreed never to 'molest' the Raja of Sikkim and in case of any differences between them, the British Government would arbitrate.

Nepal also surrendered the entire hilly region to the east of the Mechi river and west of the Tista river to the East India Company, which the former had annexed from Sikkim in 1788-90. Finally in 1817, through the Treaty of Titaliya, the British restored the same area to Sikkim. Articles 3 and 8 of the treaty finally gave the British their long cherished goal to control the polity and economy of Sikkim (Basnet 1974). Trade interest of the East India Company was also protected through this treaty. However, fear of Gorkha invasion persisted, and as a result of that the capital was further shifted from Rabdantse to Tumlong (Risley *op.cit.*).

G.W.K. Lloyd along with J.W. Grant, while coming to Sikkim for arbitration, spent a couple of days in a small place called 'Old Gorkha Station' on a ridge known as *Dorje Liang* (modern Darjeeling) (*ibid*.). The favourable climatic condition encouraged them to write to the then Governor General of Bengal, Lord Bentinck, and they were empowered to judge the suitability of the place as a sanatorium. Although the need to open a sanatorium might have received the prominence to bring Darjeeling under the British fold, economic gain could also not be overlooked. As a matter of fact, tea plantation in Darjeeling was started on an experimental basis in 1840, and by 1860 the tea industry had emerged as a large-scale industry. However, Sikkim was bypassed even though the place was as conducive as Darjeeling for cultivation of tea. Darjeeling was also identified as a suitable place from where Sikkim and Tibet could be monitored closely. Finally in 1835, Darjeeling was ceded to the British. In the Treaty of Tumlong (1861), Sikkim lost all freedom of action and became a *de facto* protectorate of the British. Sikkim was opened for free trade with India. It also agreed to render all possible help to the British for establishing a trade route to Tibet. British residency was established in Gangtok, and J.C. White was appointed as the first political officer. Claude White introduced revenue-earning agricultural methods, and to till the land a large number of Nepalese were encouraged to migrate. They also supplemented the demand for labour, especially required for British-led construction activities. Claude White, in order to protect feudal interest, made it mandatory that Nepalese or people from any other community would not be able to purchase lands belonging to the *Bhutia*s and the *Lepchas*. By the Treaty of Tumlong, the British established complete monopoly over trade and commerce and removed all barriers to open trade with Tibet (Namgyal 1966:48).

With the advent of the British, the demographic composition of Sikkim underwent a rapid change. Nepali settlers soon outnumbered the *Bhutia–Lepcha* combination of the population in Sikkim (Table 1). Both pull and push factors worked in favour of in-migration of the Nepalese in Sikkim. The rise of Prithvi Narayan Shah in Nepal forced the lower-caste small peasants and artisans to leave Nepal and this was treated as push factors. At the same time, recruitment in the British army and demand for cheap labour for carrying out British-led construction works in Sikkim worked as pull factors for the poor Nepalese to leave Nepal and to settle in Sikkim with British encouragement. Migration of the Nepalese into Sikkim brought a technological change in agricultural practices in Sikkim, because neither the *Bhutia*s nor the

Table 1: Ethnic distribution of population (1891 and 1931)

Ethnic Group/Year	Lepcha	Bhutia	Nepalese	Total
1891	5762 (18%)	3356 (16%)	20352 (66%)	30458 (100%)
1931	13060 (12%)	11955 (10%)	78783 (71%)	109808 (100%)

Sinha (1975): 9.

*Lepcha*s had any knowhow of settled cultivation. Therefore, migration of the Nepalese helped settled cultivation to expand in Sikkim. The migrant Nepalese were allowed to clear forests and carry on cultivation but without having any land rights. It not only had a positive impact on agricultural production and average productivity but also strengthened the feudal structure. The rise in agricultural surplus had accentuated surplus appropriation by the landed gentry and the process of subinfeudation was also multiplied. Immigrant Nepalese as an agrarian community had undoubtedly increased the size of the economically marginalised section. This has been dealt with in the following section.

THE IMMIGRATION OF THE NEPALESE TO SIKKIM AND ITS IMPACT ON LAND MANAGEMENT

At the top, there was *Chogyal* or the King and according to the traditional Sikkimese economic system, all land belonged to him (Sinha 1975:47). The first king, Phunshong Namgyal, after being consecrated in 1642, appointed twelve *kalons* (ministers) from *Bhutia* immigrants and divided Sikkim in twelve *Dzongs* (fort areas - administrative units) headed by twelve *Lepcha Dzongpens*. The king leased out a portion of land as gifts to the *kazis* and *thikadars*, who were primarily the absentee landlords. The *kazis* and *thikadars* finally leased out the lands to peasants under different exploitative terms. They employed *mandals* (headmen) and *karbaris* (account assistants of headmen or *mandals*) to collect rent from the tenants and were also entrusted with the responsibility to settle disputes of the tenants. For collecting revenue, the State of Sikkim was divided into 104 estates, and out of that 61 estates were leased out to the *kazis* and *thikadars* and they were assigned to pay a fixed sum to the State. Five estates belonged to the monasteries and fifteen estates, which formed his private estates, exclusively belonged to the king or the *Chogyal*, (Report on Agricultural Census 1976-77: 13).

As per the Revenue Circular (No. 8554/G) of 1924, a *kazi* could hold up to 100 acres of land. However, with special permission, they could hold up to 200 acres of land, and for *mandals* it was settled at 30 acres. The landlords enjoyed and exercised enormous magisterial power relating to civil and criminal matters, and they generally used this power to evict the tenants or subjects according to their wish. Generally, four types of tenants could be found and they were *adhiadar/adhiawal*, *kutdars*/*tanam*, *pakhureys* or *sukumbasis* and *chakureys* (*ibid*.; 9).

An *adhiawal*/*adhiadar*, although a sharecropper had to pay half of the produce as rent, did posses a sizeable amount of land. A *kutdar* had to pay a specific amount of grain (minimum half of the produce) as rent to the landlord at the end of the harvest. In case of *tanam*, rent was paid in cash and tenure was for 1 year subjected to yearly renewal, which was at the discretion of the landlords. Landless agricultural labourers were identified as *pakhureys* or *sukumbasis*. The *pakhureys* had to pay rent in terms of labour and packets of gift or '*koseli*', which consisted of milk, butter eggs and fowls (Subba 1989: 73-79). It was mentioned in the Census of 1891 that ~1 per cent of the then population were slaves. As mentioned by Subba, *chakureys* and slaves were probably the same group of people (*ibid*.; 83). In addition to rent, landlords (*kazis* and *thikadars*), *mandals* and *karbaris* forced the raiyats to render free service to them. However, this system was scrapped vide notification number 5874/G dated 15.8.1924 and instead cash payment was introduced and rates to be paid were Re. 1 to landlord, 50 paise to *mandal* and 25 paise to *karbari*. This system was in place till 1949 and thereafter it was abolished (Subba 1985: 37).

The amount of rent to be levied was fixed on an ethnic line and was discriminatory in nature. The Nepalese had to pay higher rent than the *Lepchas* and *Bhutias*. It was only in 1956 that the king abolished the discriminatory rent system and declared that *Lepchas*, *Bhutias* and Nepalese would pay rent at an equal rate.

The Revenue Order No.1 of 1917 was an act to protect land possessed by *Lepchas* and *Bhutias.* It prohibited alienation of the land of *Bhutias* and *Lepchas* in favour of non-hereditary subjects (Nepalese). However, gradually as the number of Nepalese immigrants increased and nearly outnumbered the *Lepcha–Bhutia* population, the King of Sikkim through a notification (No.: 5063/F) in 1948, prohibited the Nepalese people from acquiring land especially in North Sikkim (Chakrabarti 2010:24).

SOCIOECONOMIC AND POLITICO-CULTURAL OUTCOMES OF MONARCHIC AND *DE FACTO* BRITISH RULE

There were no denying facts that the bulk of tenants were immigrant Nepalese and were subjected to all kinds of exploitative devices that existed between the landlords and tenants, sub-tenants and finally landless labourers. Second, the general notion that the Nepalese were solely brought by the British from Nepal was partially correct because the *Limbus* (a tribe belonging to the Nepalese community), as mentioned earlier, did have a presence in Sikkim from a very ancient period. However, the majority of the Nepalese did not have any land rights and they were either landless agricultural labourers or tenants. Third, there were no reasons to believe that all Nepalese were placed at the bottom of the society in terms of their economic condition. A section of the Nepalese belong to the *Newar* community or the trading community, who migrated from Nepal in the middle of the eighteenth century and settled in Darjeeling, and by the middle of the last century monopolised the copper mines and minting industry. By the end of the nineteenth century, they elevated to the status of *kazis*. As Chie Nakane observed, the Nepalese within a short span of time improved their economic position that was comparable with that of the wealthy *Bhutias* and *Lepchas*. Following a way of life with 'low consumption and high productivity' helped the Nepalese to achieve this status (Nakane 1966). Although the commoners among the *Lepchas* were better cultivators (practicing shifting cultivation) in comparison to the *Bhutias* who specialised in pastoral activities and marginal trading, the Nepalese were much ahead in their agricultural skill. Therefore, the *Lepchas* were pushed back by the Nepalese in agricultural activities and by the *Bhutias* in trading activities.

The *Newars* who elevated at the economic hierarchy of Sikkim also helped the British and the *Chogyal* to meet their demands for various kinds of services bringing in service castes such as the Brahmins and barbers and artisan castes such as smiths (*kami*), tailors (*damai*) and shoe makers (*sarki*), porters and labourers. The *Bhutia kazi* families were not only benefited by landlordism but they had also accumulated wealth through trade with Tibet and they used immigrant Nepalese as unpaid labourers and were also supported by the ruler and by the British. The *Lepcha* aristocracies had neither the trading skill nor did they have a friendly access to Tibet like the *Bhutias*.

After the establishment of British residency in 1888, traders from India especially the *Marwaris* and the *Biharis* started trickling in and they gradually occupied a sizeable portion of trade and commerce in Sikkim. Social and economic stratification in Sikkim got prominent. At the apex, there were *Bhutia-Lepcha*-landed aristocracy who occupied administration and huge amounts of land and absolute minority in numbers. They were followed by Newars and segments of enterprising Nepalese and Marwaris who established control over mining, minting, trade and commercial activities. Even the selling rights of cardamom grown by the *Lepchas* outside Sikkim was monopolised by the *Marwaris*. At the bottom, there were large numbers of Nepalese primarily associated with agricultural and allied activities with no viable land rights. They also acted as the largest constituents of a semi-skilled labour force along with a small number of economically, socially and religiously pushed back *Lepchas* and high-altitude pastoralists from the *Bhutia* communities.

The conflicting scenario so emerged had various dimensions. As Nakane pointed out, Sikkim was always portrayed as the flag bearer of Tibetan culture; however, growing assertion of the majority of the Nepalese who were mostly Hindu by religion was causing considerable tension between the Nepalese and the *Bhutia–Lepcha* group. Thus, the cultural and social gap widened and assimilation among them was far from reality (*ibid*.). In the initial phase, following the departure of the British in 1947, the protectorate status accorded to the territory was carried over through the 'standstill agreement' reached with the Government of India in 1948. The majority of the Nepalese who had no land rights and on the face of feudal tyranny were getting increasingly impatient against the monarchy. Various political demonstrations were carried out against the *Chogyal*. A three-fold demand was raised: 1) abolition of landlordism, 2) establishment of a responsible government and 3) accession of Sikkim to India. After some time, a 'no-rent campaign' was started. The 1974 Act enabled the Government of India to carve a niche in the Constitution of India in order to give a

place for Sikkim. As a result of the referendum, which was held to decide the question of merger of Sikkim with India, Sikkim became the twenty-second State of the Indian Union on the 16 April 1975. In the process, monarchy paved way for democracy, and Nepalese by virtue of being a majority community captured the centre of power became the guiding force in shaping the economy of post state-hood Sikkim. But, how far the feudal elements were removed, how far the aspirations of the landless class were fulfilled, and to what extent the original inhabitants of Sikkim, the *Lepcha*s, were economically and politically marginalised under democratic set up needs further probing and can become future research agenda.

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