

BOOK REVIEW

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Suresh Kumar Gurung, *Sikkim. Ethnicity and Political Dynamics. A Triadic Perspective*, Delhi: Kunal Books, 2011

Presentation of the book

Gurung's "Sikkim. Ethnicity and Political Dynamics" is the most recent study of political science on Sikkim. Its review of the literature touches on the notions of ethnicity, ethnic groups and their processes of formation, ethno-political mobilisation, nationalism, etc. from the point of view of two of the approaches to the concept of ethnicity in anthropology, primordialism and instrumentalism. The main aims of the book are "to understand the process of evolution of emergence of cultural-territorial or ethnic politics in Sikkim" and "address[...] the issue of interrelations between political process and emergence of cultural-ethnic politics directly" (p.13). Its central focus is identified as being ethnic mobilizations, which the author considers to be the common conceptualization of the various movements related to ethnicity, tribalism, nationalism, regionalism, etc. (*ibid.*).

In the context of Sikkim, a difference can be made between ethnic mobilizations before and after the emergence of political parties during the second half of the 20th century (p.16). Some of these political parties indeed "articulated interests of a particular community [*i.e.* ethnic group]" (*ibid.*). However, none of these movements rose explicitly to claim the interests of a particular community, but the political struggle expressed divergent political projects for Sikkim, *i.e.* monarchy or democracy. New political concepts and a modern legal system were introduced after Sikkim was "merged" with India in 1975. However, and paradoxically, ethnic consciousness has gradually taken a larger part in political life. This time, political parties expressed "community oriented claims and demands" and competition started for the "ethnic space" (*ibid.*). Political parties played a role in the legitimization of community-oriented claims.

The rise of ethnic mobilizations in Sikkim indeed “presents a problem of understanding” (p.19) with regard to both the absence of ethnic conflicts and strong inter-ethnic ties. Indeed, the introduction of parliamentary democracy and an individual-oriented legal system after the merger with India should have prevented such movements (*ibid.*). A more important role can be attributed to political parties—and the way they combine communities’ identity assertions and modern legal-political institutions is questioned—than to affirmative action. The role of ethnic elites in the distribution of government patronage is influential in “aggravating ethnic cleavages” (p.20). However, the resources provided by the state often become objects of struggles between communities. In brief, the state of Sikkim promoted traditional community orientation instead of democratic structure, while it should have been the opposite. Simultaneously, the democratisation process has been limited by ethnic mobilization.

In the presentation of the methodology (p.21), “ethnicity” is equated to “ethnic group,” which is defined based on literature from 1970 to the end of the 1990s. The main question addressed in the book is then formulated as, “why, how and under what circumstances ethnic-cultural identity and consciousness become instruments of political action” (p.22). The author refutes primordialist and instrumentalist approaches of ethnicity (p.23) and proposes instead a “triadic perspective” that takes into account the political context, a contextualisation of ethnic politics and a historical analytical method.

The second part of the book, “State of Sikkim: A Profile,” sketches “A brief political history of Sikkim” (p.43-46). The author resorts to Lepcha and Limbu legends in his presentation of the pre-monarchic history of Sikkim, then analyses the takeover by the Bhutia monarchy as, “Centuries old Lepcha polity based on non-hereditary kingship [being] replaced with a theocratic and hereditary monarchical system” (p.34). The main events of Sikkim’s Bhutia monarchical period are presented reign after reign, followed by the “British connexion,” which is the period of growing influence of British India colonial power over Sikkim, “Sikkim as a protectorate state” and “Sikkim after the merger with India.” The inconsistencies of the laws that framed the integration of Sikkim into India with the Indian Constitution, the defaults in the application of these laws in the decade that followed 1975, as well as the maintenance of former inequalities are underlined.

The next section describes the changes through time of the “politico-administrative structure” of Sikkim (p.46) from a simple

system to the current one. In the conclusion, the author argues that the reservation of seats in the legislative assembly (established in 1951 and maintained after 1975) led to “perpetual ethnic division, competition and confrontation among various communities” (p.59). This also led political parties to address and represent community interests.

The part on the economy of Sikkim presents the economic organization and resources of Sikkim in former times, and Gurung argues that the laws passed after 1975 did not sufficiently reform the old land revenue system. Drawing on official statistics, he then strives to demonstrate the inequalities between Bhutias-Lepchas and Nepalese in terms of distribution of land in favour of the former since 1975. Characteristics of agriculture, industry, tourism and employment in Sikkim are presented before an overview of demographic changes since the first censuses (p.74).

In the third part, concerning the “Major Ethnic Groups of Sikkim: their History and Identity,” the author argues that ethnic diversity is a source of tension since it entails a “divergent concept of belongingness” and a “sense of diverse origin” (p.91). The major ethnic groups of Sikkim are identified as being the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalese, who are then presented separately (p.95, 105 and 113). The appellation “Nepali” is discussed and the author argues in favour of its validity based on racial and historical criteria. Nepalese history in Sikkim is presented before coming to “other communities / groups” (Limbus, Sherpas, and Yolmo/Kagatey).

In the last section of the chapter, “The question of identity,” (p.140), the author goes further in his theorisation of conflicts as inherent to multi-ethnic societies, arguing that a multi-ethnic society is characterised by the presence of a dominant culture (the “Tibetan way of life” during the monarchy, and “Nepalese culture” since 1975). This situation led to movements of assertion of distinct identities to resist assimilation, and to conflicts. Additionally, due to the changing relations between groups, it has not been possible to create a common civil identity. The post-merger fears of the Bhutias are discussed, and connected to the larger context, including the reservation system, the electoral system, the land reforms, and to the Sikkim state itself. Gurung indeed argues that Bhutias view the Sikkim state as merely representing the interests of the Nepalese community. The political / identity issues of other groups (Lepchas, Sherpas and Nepalese) are also discussed.

In the fourth part, “State Policies, Political Parties and Ethnic Question Before 1975,” the argument of the tensions inherent to multi-ethnic societies is counterbalanced by the idea that the state can maintain or reinforce ethnic divides and competition through its actions. Gurung proposes to apply this approach to Sikkim by carrying out “a careful analysis of those different historical events as well as perceptions of different ethnic groups about the government” (p.156).

He here argues that, before “merger,” political power was in the hands of the minority Bhutia elite, Lepchas being accommodated as minor partners. Tensions arose between Bhutias and Nepalese newcomers at the end of the 19th century, and the latter also suffered various forms of discrimination. These were institutionalised in laws and institutions implemented during the first part of the 20th century (“Parity formula,” and Sikkim Subjects Regulation). Through these, “A vast majority of the Nepali population was excluded from the governing process and they were treated as merely producers of revenue without any right” (p.219). Consequently, Nepalese perceived democracy and merger with India “as the means for transforming such uneven distribution of power” (*ibid.*). Thus, political movements were also matters of ethnic mobilizations.

In the fifth part, entitled “Parliamentary System, New Modes of Mobilization and Ethnic Politics,” the author proposes to assess the role of legal-constitutional framework and party politics in “aggravating ethno-cultural tensions in Sikkim” (p.221). After providing details on the history and legal framework of the introduction of Sikkim into the Indian Union, he explains that community considerations continued to play an important role in party politics after “merger.” This framework (in particular the amendments to the Representation of the People Act, 1950 and 1951) led to the emergence of an opposition between “Sikkimese” (insiders) and “Plainsmen.” This opposition was strengthened during the mandate of Bhandari as Sikkim Chief Minister since 1979 (p.236-239). Thus, “in the parliamentary democracy the political mobilization of ethnic communities for electoral gain became the cause of social tensions” (p.235). In the 1990s, “Mongoloid consciousness” gained significance, which led to the separation of the “Mongoloids” from the other Nepalese (p.239) and to the emergence of the OBC¹/Mongoloid as a political force that entailed the “opportunity

¹ Other Backward Classes.

to reinvent nativist [indigenous?] identity for various sub-groups of the Nepalis” (p.248).

The next elected Chief Minister, Chamling—elected in 1994 with the support of the OBC—being a firm believer in democratic values, equalised the ethnic representation in the political system, and set as a priority the provision of safeguards to ethnic communities (p.250). But ethnicity continued to play a political role during his mandate. The author then examines the questions of citizenship and of persons who were “left out” from the various laws regarding Sikkim subject status, Indian citizenship, and Sikkim residency (p.255). Those laws are at the core of the antagonism between Sikkimese and outsiders. The “issue on seat reservation” (p.268) also catalysed ethnic tensions. The seat reservation policy “is so precariously designed that traditional bonds and networks play a pivotal role both in terms of electoral success and continuation of power” (p.302). The discussion on the application of the “reservation system” (or affirmative action) in Sikkim (p.288) is concluded by the argument that the ideals of justice and equality could not be applied in India due to the nature of Indian society, beset as it is with various forms of social grouping and discrimination. As to answer the main question of the chapter, it is stated that successive governments, through political parties, seek support from certain ethnic groups in favouring them, and thus create discontentment among others.

In the sixth part (“Political and Ethnic Organisations: the Issue of Ethnic Identity”) Gurung argues that the formation of political parties and organisations manifests social differences. He then presents the history of the pre-“merger” political organisations that gave birth to the first political party, the Sikkim State Congress. In response, The Sikkim National Party, also labelled “Chogyal’s party” (*i.e.* king’s party) was formed, representing mainly the interests of Bhutias and Lepchas. However, over time the exclusive nature of the Sikkim National Party in terms of ethnicity disappeared, since some of its leaders were Nepalese. This political struggle led to the integration of Sikkim into India.

As for the post “merger” period, the author argues that regional, rather than national, parties are in absolute control of the Sikkim state. He then relates the formation and history of 21 of the Sikkimese political parties (p.330-356) and “ethnic social organizations” (p.356-395). This historical review of the political parties enables discussion of the distinction made at the political level between Sikkimese and Indian

identities, and the divide and tensions between the OBC/Mongoloid and NBC²/Aryans (p.338). But Gurung argues that these tensions have now disappeared in Sikkim, “In the last [...] decade of the SDF [Sikkim Democratic Front, founded by the current Sikkim Chief Minister] rule there has been no ethnic disturbance in Sikkim which in itself is the most remarkable achievement of the party” (p.347). However, this party too “has a history of articulating and aggregating ascriptive elements” (p.355).

Regarding the ethnic organizations, the author argues that their creation reflects the desire of ethnic groups to assert their separate, distinct identities, while the fear of assimilation is inherent to multi-ethnic societies, and to a changing political scenario. In Sikkim, all the ethnic groups felt for different reasons endangered by the political and legal changes after the incorporation of Sikkim into the Indian state, and the various ethnic organisations were created in this context.

To conclude (p.409), before 1975, ethnic division was the consequence of discriminatory laws and policies, which excluded certain groups from the process of governance. This actually shows the inability for these groups to cope with cultural or linguistic standardization. The ethnic division was partly perpetuated after “merger” both by political parties that aggravated ethnic tensions and by the government of India that maintained some of the provisions that existed before 1975. Finally “It appears that ethnic consciousness and mobilization in Sikkim has evolved in close relation with state policies and party politics. It definitely establishes a close relation between the two in which politics shapes the process of definition and development of ethnic identity” (p.422).

Critique of the book

The author clearly explains aiming at a better understanding of ethnic movement and politics in Sikkim rather than participating to the theorization of ethnicity (p.23). However, his largely theory-based argument contains some important flaws. The first flaw is a lack of clear formulation of the main arguments and theoretical approach. The review of the literature presents an important number of concepts (relating to ethnic groups, nationalism, etc.), but fails to link them together. Additionally, the analysis revolves around two different

² Newar-Bahun-Chetri.

arguments presented in the introduction. One of these is not clearly presented as an argument, but turns out to be central in the first parts of the book: the way ethnic relations influence politics (p.7; see also p.11). The other argument presented later (p.13, see presentation of the book) is developed toward the end of the book. Two other broad, theoretical arguments are presented in the preface, and another argument is given at p.22: “why, how and under what circumstances ethnic-cultural identity and consciousness become instruments of political action.”

This review of the literature additionally contains misinterpretations such as in the summary of Fredrik Barth’s “Ethnic groups and boundaries” (1969). Here, the author states that Barth’s set of prescriptions and proscriptions were imposed by rulers to maintain control over a given society (p.3), whereas, according to Barth, they govern situations of contact between groups as well as structure inter-ethnic relations, and may or may not be agreed upon by people.

Finally, the author argues against primordialism and instrumentalism (p.23), but does not provide any alternatives (the book lacks any mention of the constructionist approach of ethnicity, for example). More problematical is his actual resorting to primordialism in various ways throughout the book, thus contradicting the final analysis presented in his general conclusion, where he states that politics and policies shape the process of definition and development of ethnic identity (p.422).

The first example of his resorting to primordialism is the labelling of Nepalese, Lepchas and Bhutias as “cultural-racial group” (p.15). While a cultural distinction between those groups could perhaps be argued, to state that they differ racially—leaving aside the very problematical, if not irrelevant, use of the idea of race in human sciences nowadays—is simply a mistake. The author again resorts to this idea of race to differentiate “Aryans” from “Mongoloids” amongst the Nepalese (p.156; see also p.114, 146, 157 and 240). However, the questions generated by the term “Nepali,” its various meanings, and the inner diversity of people labelled as such are clearly discussed (p.157). But the discussion is interwoven with the racist view, which is taken as such and not discussed as a colonial construct that was introduced in political language in Sikkim as in Nepal.

This stance determines the author’s understanding of ethnic identity. It is for instance stated regarding J.N. Kazi’s book (*Inside Sikkim – Against the Tide*, 1993), “This book is resourceful in terms of perception of the ethnic Bhutias on various issues of socio-political importance” (p.12). An analysis of this type of discourse, and of the

historical and political conditions that gave rise to it, would have been of great interest, while simply reproducing it also reproduces the colonial view of ethnic relations between Bhutias and Nepalese in terms of cultural incompatibility. Generalisation of behaviour according to ethnicity is expressed several times in the book (“nature loving and friendly Lepchas” p.105; see also p.59, and 110). The primordialist position is also probably the reason for the very surprising statement, “owing to their religious belief, the Bhutias and Lepchas were averse to digging for agriculture or mining purposes, and hence by tradition, they were not cultivators” (p.165). How would have any Sikkim inhabitant survived in the past, had he not practiced agriculture?

One of the implications of this position is political: most of these statements are politically sensitive in Sikkim. Indeed, whether or not Bhutias were cultivators in the past, the division of the Nepalese and the criteria that supports it, etc. have deep political implications. Results of human sciences often are used to substantiate political debates; academic findings may thus take side without wishing it. However, in one case, Gurung clearly resorts to a political reasoning, based on a primordialist approach. He indeed firstly states that Lepcha and Limbu are indigenous to Sikkim, secondly that they belong to the Nepalese group (p.32), thirdly that Nepalese are divided into two races: Mongoloid and Aryans, and fourthly that all Mongoloid are as early settlers in Sikkim as the Lepchas and Limbus (p.157). The early settlement of Lepchas and Limbus in Sikkim does not raise any doubt, but the early settlement of Magars, though stated by Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma (1908) and by Hooker (1854) is still matter of debate (see Mullard’s ongoing research). As for the question of Lepchas and Limbus being part of the Nepalese, this is now a political debate that is less and less positively answered in the political arena. History and anthropology cannot give a general answer to this question: there are no reasons to consider the Lepchas as Nepalese. As for the Limbus, there are various groups among them, each settling at a different time in Sikkim, from far back in the past until recently, and all the groups were all included into the Nepalese for political rather than historical reasons, at a later stage of history. Finally, it is also not possible to state that all the “Aryans” came to Sikkim at the end of the 19th century, and that all the “Mongoloid” arrived earlier. There are still many gaps in the history of ancient Sikkim, and more questions than conclusions can be raised.

The primordialist view also leads to the construction of an analysis of politics in Sikkim merely in terms of ethnicity, while ethnicity is

pictured as “natural,” self-explained, and thus, paradoxically, influencing politics but not changing in relation to politics (let us recall that this position is argued at the end of the book, but contradicts most of earlier analysis). The rise of ethnic mobilizations is indeed explained by the growth in caste/community consciousness (p.15), which is itself explained as a “natural” or “universal” resistance to assimilation. This almost circular reasoning explains ethnic mobilizations by the rise of ethnic consciousness or by the type of inter-ethnic relations. It is argued by the author since the very definition of “cultural-territorial identity and mobilization” as “changing nature of cultural identity, structure of identity, political-economic foundations ranging from relative deprivation to internal colonialism of such movements, symbols and patterns of mobilization etc.” (p.14). Besides being unclear, this “definition” of ethnic mobilization does not take into account interrelations with the state and political context.

This view is related to another theoretical approach that opposes tradition and modernity, as well as community and the individual. Gurung indeed understands the rise of ethnic mobilizations in Sikkim as a paradox since modern politics was introduced in Sikkim (p.19, and 21-22). We find again in the introduction of the third part this idea of tensions inherent to societies which are ethnically differentiated, while “undifferentiated societies,” that is centred on the individual, rarely experience tensions (p.91; see also p.140). This form of “modernist” approach resorts on the “claim to the liberation of individuals both from illegitimate domination and from unreasoning acceptance of mere tradition” (Calhoun 1993: 222) and to the idea that that community necessarily opposes nation (there are numerous criticisms of this approach; see among others Hastings 1997). It fails to take into account numerous examples of development of communalism in the frame of nationalist movements (see for example the work of C. Jaffrelot on Hindu nationalism), and of community-based claims for political rights and democracy like in Nepal (Hangen 2010). As for primordialism, it is deeply questioned, and almost no more developed today (see for example Brubaker 2004, Wimmer 2008).

An analysis (and not only a statement) in terms of mutual influence of politics and ethnicity would have enabled going beyond these views. Such a relationship is expressed in some of the theoretical developments, but not applied to the analysis of the Sikkim data. However, all the information is provided in the book to enable the reader to understand Sikkim politics not only as being determined by ethnicity, but as a organisation into which ethnic and political

affiliations are combined to form a political majority. Such a view enables taking into account the changes of ethnic alliances, thus to go beyond the Bhutia-Nepalese divide as analytical tool, to take into account the importance of political ideology, to understand the sudden rise and fall of political parties, and the failures of single-ethnic group ones rather than viewing them in terms of paradox. The author's thoughts obviously evolved for the best in the process of writing, but the book lacks the last "recasting" that would have given cohesion and coherence to the whole.

The book poses other problems. Firstly, some relevant and important information is lacking: no mention is made of the controversy regarding the conditions of integration of Sikkim within India, authors arguing that Sikkim was annexed in the aftermath of the Indo-Chinese war (for example Datta-Ray 1980), others that it was "merged" following the 1975 referendum (for example Das 1983). Gurung simply mentions the political struggle and referendum that led to the transformation of Sikkim into an Indian state, but no mention is made of the possibility of an Indian military intervention. The point here is not to suggest taking any side in the debate, but mentioning that the debate exists.

Secondly, some of the information presented in the book was never released earlier, and it is a pity that the sources—either oral or written—are often not mentioned. Much information is indeed given without any reference source to support it. For example, see the following: the first paragraph of the introduction (p.1); the first paragraph of the "brief political history of Sikkim" (p.31); p.35; in the section on state policies and ethnic divide during the monarchy (p.158-162) and so forth. Interesting information is for example given on p.167, which offers a new understanding of the much debated parity formula, but unfortunately in the absence of supporting source documentation: "The concept of Parity Formula was a true copy of the 1896 scheme agreed between Sayyid Mahmud, son of Sayyid Ahmed Khan of Allahabad, and Theodore Beck, son of Aligarh College. They drew on the scheme of 'Parity' representation between the Muslim minority and Hindu majority on behalf of the association called Muhammedan Anglo-oriental Defense Association founded by Sayyid Ahamed Khan in 1893. [...] Nari Rustomji who was a Persian Muslim and the Dewan of Sikkim was the man behind for adopting this communal scheme in Sikkim." This information seems very plausible, but would have necessitated at the minimum referencing documents regarding the mentioned 1896 scheme and Muslim association.

The text also presents surprising information, like the statement that the Tibetan lamas who migrated to Sikkim at the end of the 17th century (and enthroned the first Bhutia king of Sikkim) would have destroyed documentary evidences on the pre-monarchic political system. The source of this interesting information should have been provided (see also p.93; the explanation given in footnote 1, p.147 is insufficient). Another surprising statement appears on p.78: “The North district, which was prohibited for Nepali settlement, represents 59.56 per cent (4226 Sq. Km.) of the total area of Sikkim (7096 Sq. Km.) but due to inhospitable climate, rugged and perpetually snowcapped mountain ridges makes the place unsuitable for human habitation.”

Some of the above mentioned problems could be related to the problem of editing. Many typos, a page printed twice (p.158 and 162, and the page 164 starts in the middle of a sentence), incomplete book references (for example, references 11 and 23, pages 24-25), incomplete footnotes (for example, the footnotes 92 to 96 on p.88 mention “*op. cit.*” or “*ibid.*” but it is unclear to which previously mentioned text this refers to, and it cannot be to the last complete book reference, which is completely unrelated; the given numbers seem to refer to previous footnotes, but those footnotes often also mention *op. cit.* or *ibid.*; the footnotes problems are found in every chapter where most of the references state “*ibid.*” and “*op. cit.*”) are only part of the editing flaws to be found in the book. Flawed editing also most probably explains the lack of clarity of some sentences, as well as mistakes in the reproduction of the sources. For example, Markham’s figures for the population of Sikkim are changed in Gurung’s book: while the original source (Markham 1876: Xc, based on Dr Campbell) gives a total population of Sikkim in 1840 of 7000 persons, comprising 3000 Lepchas, 2000 Bhutanese, and 2000 Limbus, while referring to Markham’s figures Gurung (p.75), gives 3010 Lepchas, 1995 Limbus, and 1995 Bhutias without explaining this alteration. Finally, the book lacks a detailed table of contents.

Interest of the book

S. K. Gurung’s *Sikkim. Ethnicity and Political Dynamics* finally brings together information that was hitherto scattered in different books and unpublished documents, and also provides detailed historical data. As already mentioned, it also provides some new information. The discussion of the post 1940s events, for example, is partly based on primary sources (legal documents, administrative reports, etc.) and thus

brings those sources to public knowledge. Additionally, the introduction raises several interesting questions, such as concerning the failure of ethnic political parties (we have here to understand the failure of political parties representing a single-ethnic group) and the ineffectiveness of opposition parties in Sikkim. It also presents politically sensitive questions, which, though they should have been dealt with in a more scientifically rigorous way, nevertheless open the topics for further discussion in the academic sphere.

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