

Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History

by Saul Mullard.

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Reviewed by Luke Wagner

In this, the first monograph on the history of Sikkim, Saul Mullard painstakingly presents, analyses, and compares the available sources related to the foundations of the state. He introduces sources contemporary to its formation in the seventeenth century and compares these with the better-known historical narratives that emerged in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. In so doing, he presents a range of evidence that challenges what he refers to as the later 'orthodox' narrative and points to the conclusion that it was 'manufactured on the basis of serious political and religious concerns' (p. 5). In short, the evidence suggests that the state of Sikkim emerged over a longer period of time and with greater conflict than the orthodox account allows. This is not, however, an attempt to re-write the history of Sikkim, which is a task that he maintains requires further research. Instead, it is an effort to understand Sikkimese historiography by addressing its apparent contradictions (p. 4).

In the introduction, Mullard situates the book by surveying an impressive range of material, from the Tibetan antecedents of Sikkimese political theories and practices (pp. 2-12; 23-27), to the form and function of Sikkimese historiography (pp. 12-19), to scholarship on state formation and nationalism (pp. 19-24). Following Hayden White, he employs the term 'historical narrative' to describe Sikkimese historiography, distinguishing between *narration* ('the reporting of events and reality') and *narrativity* ('the imposition of the form of a story on those events and on reality itself') (p. 15). Mullard then offers a guide to the range of sources he uses, classifying them into three groups: religious literature; histories or quasi-histories; and legal documents (pp. 27-30).

Chapter two provides the orthodox historical narratives related to the origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese people and the formation of the state of Sikkim. These narratives are 'amalgamated' versions based

on three sources written between 1860 and 1908 (p. 33), relying most heavily on *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (BGR), which was written in 1908 and attributed to the king and queen of Sikkim. In brief, the first narrative traces the origins of the Tibeto-Sikkimese people to the eighth century Tibetan king, Khri srong lde bstan. One of his descendents, Gyad 'bum bsags, travels to Sikkim and befriends a Lepcha 'wizard/chief' (p. 40), Teg kong teg, marking the advent of the unity of the Tibetan and Lepcha peoples in Sikkim. Gyad 'bum bsags gradually extends his control over the territory and it is through his grandchildren that the four main clans and the first king of Sikkim descend (p. 36-43). The second narrative recounts the events that led to the coronation of Sikkim's first king. It is centred on the Tibetan lama, Lha btsun chen po, who receives a vision in 1644 and sets off for the hidden land (*sbas yul*) of Sikkim, where he meets two other Tibetan lamas who had simultaneously entered from other directions. In fulfilment of the prophecy revealed by Ratna gling pa, the three lamas find the layman destined to rule the hidden land, Phun thsogs rnam rgyal. With his coronation, the state of Sikkim is born (pp. 43-46).

In chapters three through six, Mullard presents sources contemporary to the period of state formation in Sikkim. Chapter three is dedicated to the earliest source, *La sogs du 'brel ba'i rgyal sab*, which is in line with the 'broad brush strokes' (p. 69) of the orthodox origin narrative, but diverges from the state formation narrative and suggests a much more gradual process, based on conflict and subjugation (p. 87). The narrative is further complicated by the text analysed in chapter four, *Mnga' bdag rgyal rabs*, which attributes the coronation of the king to Phun thsogs rig 'dzin (one of the three lamas assigned a minor role in the orthodox account) and makes no mention of the other two lamas (p. 109). Three texts from the collected works of Lha btsun chen po are analysed in chapter five. The texts not only suggest a different chronology and a more minor role for Lha btsun chen po in Sikkim's formation than the orthodox narrative, but also indicate that the coronation ritual took place several times, giving the impression that the legitimacy of Phun tshog rnam rgyal's reign was not immediately accepted (pp. 133-138). This impression is reinforced by a legal document presented in chapter six. The document, which was signed by representatives of the Tibeto-Sikkimese, Lepcha, and Limbu communities after some kind of war or rebellion, recognises

his authority, illustrating that it had previously been contested (pp. 140-146). An additional document analysed shows that these groups were incorporated into the structures of the state and subjected to its systems of stratification (pp. 153-158).

In chapter seven, Mullard seeks to account for the divergences between the earlier sources and the later orthodox narratives by placing Sikkimese historiography in the context of the War of Succession (c. 1699-1708) and the expansion of British influence in Sikkim. He argues that the War of Succession led to the expansion of the Lha btsun tradition in Sikkim, which explains the elevation of Lha btsun chen po's role in the orthodox account and the emphasis on the religious provenance of the state. Later, British expansion posed a material threat to Sikkim's sovereignty, which led to efforts to re-imagine Sikkimese history in 'an attempt to define Sikkim as a nation' (p. 186) and to portray the formation of the state 'as a peaceful and generally accepted transition, with the state being created, not for the usual political reasons, but for the benefit of Buddhism and by extension all sentient beings, in accordance with the prophecies of Guru Rinpoche' (p. 188).

In closing, Mullard reiterates that the orthodox narrative provides an overly simplistic account of the formation of the state and that the process was much more gradual and conflict-ridden. Here he is blunt, however, and argues it was not formed in accordance with religious prophecy or even by a rational decision to create a state, 'but by something more primitive, more human: the desire to control, establish and maintain power' (p. 191). Going further, he suggests that '(t)he creation of the state was primarily a political event born out of the political desire of Phun tshogs rnam rgyal to extend his personal power and wealth in a way akin to the writings of Charles Tilly' (p. 196). Religious traditions played 'little role' in the formation of the state, though they did perform a major role in its legitimisation (p. 196). This conclusion is somewhat perplexing, especially in light of all the tantalising evidence Mullard provides that could challenge (or at least amend) Tilly's approach, perhaps in the vein of Gorski's (2003) argument for the role of Calvinism in state formation in early modern Europe. Although it does seem clear that *realpolitik* was a large part of the story and that we can reject the notion that the formation of the state can be attributed to a single event, it is not clear why this means that we should so readily discount the religious worldviews

and technologies that may have motivated and facilitated the gradual expansion of the state.

This aside, *Opening the Hidden Land* is a resource rich in information and superbly detailed analyses. By shedding light on the foundations of the state of Sikkim, Mullard has opened several new lines of inquiry and has provided a tremendous service to the study of Himalayan politics and religion.

References

Gorski, Philip S. 2003. *The Disciplinary Revolution: Calvinism and the Rise of the State in Early Modern Europe*. University of Chicago Press: Chicago.