

Foundations of Power: Early political Structures in Pre-Monarchical Sikkim

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Abstract:

This paper examines the political and social foundations of pre-monarchical Sikkim, a period often obscured by the dominance of oral traditions and the absence of concrete historical records. Contrary to the assumption of isolation or underdevelopment, emerging evidence points to the existence of organized, egalitarian societies with decentralized governance rooted in kinship, communal ownership of land, and consensus-based decision-making. The indigenous Lepcha community, with its patrilineal structure and spiritual leadership, played a central role, while the Limboos and Bhutias contributed to the socio-economic diversity through agriculture, pastoralism, and trade. Archaeological findings and oral accounts suggest that Sikkim's early societies maintained vibrant cultural exchanges with neighboring regions, facilitated by trade routes and migratory waves, particularly those of the Tibeto-Burman linguistic group. The symbolic Blood Brotherhood Treaty at Kabi Lungchok, though historically debated, reflects early political diplomacy. The advent of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642 marked a shift from tribal autonomy to centralized theocratic rule under Tibetan Buddhist influence. Despite limited archival evidence, recent interdisciplinary research—archaeological, linguistic, and anthropological—is gradually reconstructing Sikkim's complex pre-monarchical past, highlighting it as a dynamic cultural and political space shaped by internal developments and external interactions.

Keywords: *Pre-monarchical Society, Lepchas, Limboos, Bhutias, Oral Traditions, Blood Brotherhood Treaty, Tibeto-Burman*

1. Introduction:

The early history of Sikkim presents a compelling puzzle for historians, as the region seems to enter recorded history with already-formed systems of governance and social organization. Unlike other regions where the evolution of political and cultural institutions is traceable through archaeological and textual sources, Sikkim's pre-monarchical past remains largely hidden in obscurity.

The pre-Monarchical Sikkimese society was a simple one, and a major chunk of the populations were engaged in agriculture with some exceptions of barter trade and commerce. The society was largely egalitarian with minimum social hierarchy. There was no caste distinction and the system of private land ownership was almost absent.

The land and its resources were communal properties.¹ The societies functioned through various forms of governance, social organization and economic systems. Leadership was decentralized and often based on kinship ties where the tribal elders played a crucial role in decision making. The governance was consensus driven with consuls handling disputes and community matters ties.

Animism and nature worship were prevalent and the spiritual leaders mediated between the humans and the supernatural. The economy was based on subsistence where hunting and gathering and shifting cultivation was the means of survival. Barter and local trade existed through earliest trade routes connecting them to the neighbouring regions enabling cultural exchange.

2. The Lepchas:

Amongst the *Lepchas*², division was made purely on the basis of birth and marriage. The *Lepcha* family was patrilocal or exogamous. The *putse/ptso*, in nature; believed to have been originated from some supernatural or legendary ancestors. The descent was traced through male member of the family. In a patriarchal set-up of Lepcha society, the father was considered as the head of the family and economically the family depended on him. The son had the right to the father's property while women despite having greater role in the family as well as in the field were denied of inheritance right. Women also engaged themselves in social and economic activities in addition to their integral role in religious sphere by taking the charge in the religious activities as a *Shaman* (Mun). Besides, monogamy and polygamy, widow remarriage was also prevalent in their society³.

The *Lepcha* tribe was organised in a common political engine with a type of Chieftdom-ship headed by a chief, although it could not evolve beyond a tribal polity. The polity was elementarily primitive and failed to reach its natural state of feudalism. It is believed that out of the ten *Panus*, the *Lepcha* king (petty tribal king or chief) *Tarvey Panu* ruled the land around 1420 AD, but of all these *Panu*'s, the most prominent *ThekungTek* was more a spiritual leader rather than a political one. The date mention for the Blood Brotherhood agreement of *Kabi-Lungchok* between *Thekung Tek* and *Khe-Bumsa*, is often recorded as 13th century (1275 AD). *Phuntsog Namgyal*, the first *Chogyal* of Sikkim was the sixth generation of *Khye-Bumsa*. In the absence of any historical evidence regarding the Blood Brotherhood Treaty of *Kabi-Lungchok* and the *Lepcha Panus* (Kings) it is very difficult to ascertain the date of the event and the reign of the *Lepcha Panus*.⁴

As per the account of Halfdan Sieger (1967) the Lepcha chieftainship of *Mayel Lyang* (present Sikkim) was ten in numbers, namely, *Thekong Adek* (7-8th Century), *Thup Athak* (9-10th Century) *Thekong Tek* (13th Century) *Rujo Panu/Athing* (1353-1410 AD), *Tarvey Panu* (1425-1451 AD), *Tarsong Panu* (1454-1481 AD), *Tar-eng Panu* (1564-1595 AD), *Tarjyi Panu* (1520-1564 AD), *Tar-eak Panu* (1564-1595 AD), and *Thekong Mun Solong Panu* (1595-1642 AD) the last *Panu* who witnessed the consecration of the first *Chogyal*⁵ of the *Namgyal* Dynasty.⁶

3. The Limboos:

The *Limboos*⁷ originally were the dwellers to the east of *Arun* River presently located in Nepal. The scantily populated *Lepchas* inter-married with the *Limboos*. However, the *Limboos* preferred to live in west Sikkim due to their contact with the *Limboos* of *Arun* River. With the passage of time the *Limboos* carved out their own principalities under their local chiefs.

The *Lepchas* and the *Limboos* practiced collective farming. The *Limboos* practiced the method of slash and burn cultivation. They burned the forests and believed that the ashes formed due to these fires would act as manures and prevent them from wild animals as the forest fires lasted for several days. The History of Sikkim written by *Maharaja* Thutob Namgyal and *Maharani* Yeshey Dolma too confirms the method of slash and burn cultivation.⁸

Besides agriculture the traditional occupation of the *Limboos* was pastoralism and animal husbandry. They led mostly semi-nomadic life and moved along with their cattle in search of greener pastures. They acquired their daily needs collectively and the techniques of cultivation were primitive and practiced shifting cultivation. They moved in a group and kept themselves protected from wild beasts by burning fires. They hunted wild animals and their killing was for food and not as an entertainment. They cultivated paddy, pulses (*dals*) like *tur*, *urad*, *masur*, *kalo-dal*, etc., moreover

they also produced finger millet for religious use. Several forest produce like roots and tubers were also included in addition to seasonal fruits and vegetables consumed by the *Limboos*.

4. The Bhutias:

The *Bhutias*⁹ were herdsmen than agriculturalist, even though they practised agriculture; pastoralism was the main stay of their economy and greatly depended on dairy farming. According to George Kotturan, the *Bhutias* were basically herdsmen who must have transcended the slopes of the country with their folks in search of pastures and must have made early contact with the *Lepchas*. Salt was the delicacy which they brought from Tibet for the *Lepchas* and traded it for rice. Inferences of such trade could be detected from the popular folktales of *Lepchas*. Possibly some *Lepchas* too ventured to go to Tibet to trade for salt.

Further he has also emphasized in his book 'The Himalayan Gateway' that during the seventh and eighth centuries, there existed a strong central government under which Tibet showed a remarkable outburst of energy. This was the time when Tibet was converted to Buddhism and the order of monks (lamas) was established in the country by Guru Rimpoche, who is also identified as Guru Padmasambhava. Accordingly he arrived in Tibet in 747 Circa and became Guru Rimpoche of the Tibetans. Subsequently the Guru as a part of his preaching is believed to have visited Sikkim and neighbouring Bhutan. There is no historical testimony to corroborate that confirms such visit. However, the legendary accounts in which the Guru with his divine powers subdued a whole series of demons in the country are far too numerous to be dismissed as sheer fabrication. It is probable that it was after him that the *Bhutias* settled in Sikkim in large numbers.

5. Conclusion:

Before the formal establishment of the monarchy in 1642, Sikkim's political landscape was shaped by various indigenous leaders, who maintained local autonomy while engaging in occasional interactions with external forces. The arrival of the Namgyal rulers, supported by Tibetan religious authorities, marked a significant shift in governance, as it introduced a centralized structure that integrated Buddhist theocratic elements with traditional leadership patterns. The influence of Tibetan Buddhism was instrumental in shaping Sikkim's later cultural and political identity, yet its earlier indigenous traditions remained deeply rooted within local communities.

The lack of extensive written records about pre-monarchical Sikkim has led to numerous speculations and debates among scholars. Some historians argue that Sikkim's early civilization may have had more complex governance structures than what is currently understood, but due to the absence of archival material, much of this history remains speculative. The reliance on oral traditions, while valuable, presents challenges in constructing a definitive narrative of early Sikkimese society.

Despite these challenges, modern historical and anthropological studies are gradually bringing forth new perspectives on the region's past. Archaeological findings, linguistic analyses, and comparative studies with neighboring Himalayan cultures are helping to piece together the puzzle of Sikkim's early history. While the full picture remains elusive, it is becoming increasingly clear that Sikkim's emergence in the historical record was not as sudden as it once seemed. Instead, it was the result of a long process of social and political evolution that preceded the formal establishment of monarchical rule.

References:

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- ¹¹ Grover, Geoffrey. “*Lepchas of Sikkim*” Gyan Publishing House: New Delhi (Reprint)1996.
- ²The Lepchas are the autochthones community of Sikkim, said to have been residing in Sikkim since ancient times. They are one of the indigenous communities of Sikkim along with the Limboo’s and the Bhutia’s.
- ³Stocks, C.De Beauvoir. “*Folk Lore and Customs of the Lap-Chas of Sikkim*” Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal. Vol.XXI,1925, No.4.
- ⁴Subba, JR . “*History, Culture Customs of Sikkim*”. Gyan Publishing House: New Delhi. 2007.
- ⁵ *Chogyal* means the Dharma Raja of Sikkim.
- ⁶Siiger, Halfdan “*The Lepchas.Culture and Religion of a Himalayan People*”. National Museum. Ethnographical Series, Vol. XI: I. Copenhagen.1967
- ⁷The Limboos are another indigenous community of Sikkim also known as *Tsongs*.
- ⁸*History of Sikkim (’Bras ljongs rgyal rabs)* compiled by Their Highness Maharaja Thutob Namgyal and Maharani Yeshe Dolma: 1908.
- ⁹ The Bhutias of Sikkim are an ethnic community with Tibetan origins, their arrival significantly shaped Sikkim’s socio-cultural and political landscape and even more particularly with the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty in the 17th century.

