

B S Das

The
Sikkim
Saga

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Sikkim became the twenty-second state of India by the Thirty-eighth Amendment Act of the Indian Constitution in April 1975.

Was merger necessary? Was there a popular uprising against the Chogyal in 1973? Could not the provisions of the 1950 Treaty have been used to protect India's vital interests? What was Delhi's role in it? Did the May 8 Agreement not adequately meet the requirements of a democratic set-up? Finally, what has India gained in the ultimate analysis?

The Sikkim Saga, a first-hand report of the period of turmoil in Sikkim from 1973 till its merger with India in 1975, answers the above questions. It is also the story of three ladies—Indira Gandhi, Hope Cooke and Elisa Maria. A political assessment of the future in north-east India has also been attempted, while the author's faithful portrayal of the Chogyal is admirable.

This book, with appendices, will serve as a good reference work for students of history and politics and will interest general readers as well.

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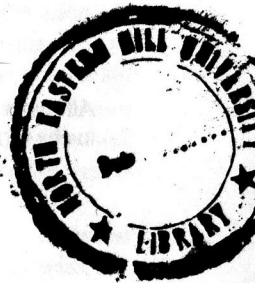
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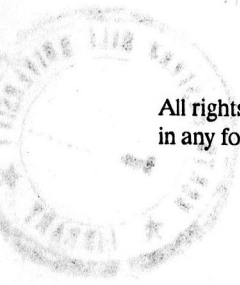
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Preface

It is relevant to quote the Governor of Sikkim, Mr. B. B. Lal, from a speech he made on January 26, 1979.

"I am sure we all realise fully by now, that time and history only know how to move forward and that it is not possible for the clock of history to move backwards. Anyone who thinks in terms of history going backwards, obviously suffers from defective vision and has not taken any lesson from the past history of the world stretching over thousands of years."

Obviously the reference was to the Chogyal and some other elements in Sikkim who still believed that status quo ante was a distinct possibility under certain circumstances. Sikkim's merger with India is a historical fact and India's disintegration alone can restore the pre-1973 status. The issue is secondary to the text of this book and if at all history is reversed, someone else will give the facts then.

Having been one of the prime actors in the merger drama, I owe it to the students of history to leave behind a record of events for reference as a primary source of information. I am not a historian but all those who attempt to reconstruct the history of Sikkim will not be in a position to isolate themselves from the subjective interpretation of facts and events contained in this book.

In 1971, when I was India's Ambassador to Bhutan, Shenkar Bajpai, the Political Officer of Sikkim, had come to stay with us. Like all his predecessors after mid-fifties, he felt concerned at the erosion of India's responsibilities in Sikkim under the Treaty of 1950. There was a lack of clear vision in our approach over the years which would one day affect India's vital security interests in the Himalayan region. The Chogyal's rule had a feudalistic approach, leaving the vast majority of his people dissatisfied. These people were reaching a stage of revolt against the prevailing corruption and economic disparities. It was time that Delhi realised the gravity of the situation and took decisive action to ensure stability

in such a sensitive region. I could not agree more seeing how the Chinese were reacting on the Bhutanese borders. The Himalayan kingdoms were too sensitively placed to be ignored to the detriment of India's security. I mention this incident in the context of the 1973 uprising when I was asked by the Prime Minister to take over the charge of the administration of Sikkim. Delhi's decisive action then prevented a dangerous situation developing in this region.

During my tenure in Sikkim and subsequently, I was exposed to the critical analysis of the events both by the press, Indian and international, and many an institutional platform. I was never shy of defending the ultimate goal though I was hesitant on the methods used. As the subsequent pages of this book will show, merger became inevitable and it was in India's interests to take the steps which she did. It could have been avoided if the Chogyal had played his cards well. But, he was too clever with himself and played into the hands of the elements who had been waiting for years for such mistakes to be committed.

It is said that the Sikkim Saga is the story of three women—dominant, proud and unbending. Undoubtedly, Indira Gandhi, the Prime Minister of India; Hope Cooke, the American wife of the Chogyal; and Elisa Maria, the Belgian wife of the Kazi were all alike and played a key role in the drama. But for the influence of Hope and Elisa on their husbands, which partly moulded their thinking, things may have been different. Had the Chogyal not taken the goodwill of Mrs. Gandhi for granted and had seen through her snubs which she administered as warnings from 1970, Bajpai's leverages would have been difficult to use. Had both Hope Cooke and Elisa Maria not aspired to be the first ladies of the realm and had confined themselves to their lure of the Mongoloid husbands and their wealth, the direction to the movement of 1973 by Elisa as Kazi's wife would not have been there. If Hope Cooke had not deserted her husband during the agitation, the Chogyal could probably have mellowed down and adjusted to the new situation. Or, if her dreams of being the American Queen of this Shangrila had been confined only to the royal court, not extending outside the Palace, many a misunderstanding with Delhi could have been avoided.

The victor was ultimately Mrs. Gandhi who, with her determined mind, outclassed everyone else. She had waited too long to close

the chapter and struck at the first opportunity when it came and decisively too. No history of Sikkim of recent times can ignore the role of the "three ladies". That itself could form the subject of a most interesting book if we also included the roles of other ladies at the court who played a substantive role behind the scenes in various ways.

My only regret is that Sikkim's beauty and culture are being eroded with the implementation of the so-called development schemes and ideas applicable to other states of India. The changes would have come about in any case but should have been gradual enabling the Sikkimese to settle down to a new system of governance and culture. In one of my addresses to the young probationers, of National Academy of Administration in 1975, I had cautioned against too rapid a process of Indianisation. My apprehensions proved correct when soon after the merger, large inputs of aid and implementation of new schemes within a short period created many ethnic, political and economic problems which the new Government under Kazi Lhendup Dorji was incapable of facing. Nor was the local bureaucracy adequate to handle the situation. Kazi's total defeat in the 1979 assembly elections was a sequel to this. Kazi had fought against feudalism and corruption for over two decades. When he finally succeeded and came into power, he failed to satisfy the aspirations of his people. Though personally honest, neither his policies nor the people around him inspired a clean image. The electorate threw his party out as they did to the Chogyal. He will have to start afresh.

I owe an apology to the late Chogyal, Palden Thondup Namgyal, for some of my criticism of his personality and reactions. In fairness to each other, both made the point that we served our political interests. This prevented a lasting ill-will. We were good friends and had mutual regard for each other. Perhaps this was my most spectacular achievement.

B.S. DAS

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As Delhi Saw It

“Mr. Das, Sikkim is not Goa that the Government of India has sent you to take over as the Chief Administrator. We have our separate identity and Indo-Sikkimese relations are governed by a Treaty. The so-called ‘popular leaders’ are nothing but a bunch of scoundrels propped up by outside forces. If my Police had not been disarmed and dishonoured by the Indian Army, I would have exposed each and every one of them. I shall never forgive the Indian Army for this.”

And the Chogyal was an honorary Major General of the Indian Army!

This was my first meeting with the Chogyal on April 11, 1973, after taking over Sikkim’s administration a day earlier. His oracles had considered it inauspicious to receive me on the day of my arrival. It was understandable.

The previous day when I landed at Gangtok, it was a different scene. Kazi, the leader of the agitation, and all his colleagues had lined up at the helipad to receive me besides all the senior officials of the Government of Sikkim and the Political Officers’ representative, Sudhir Devere. Much against my wishes, I was conducted in a procession through the town with cheering crowds shouting anti-Chogyal slogans. Without meaning it to be so, I had thus come to be associated with the anti-Chogyal forces except that the welcome was arranged to greet India’s representative who had come to resolve all the problems.

Events had moved fast. On Chogyal’s birthday, April 4, 1973, agitated mobs had surrounded his Palace under Kazi’s leadership demanding political reforms. The Police panicked and fired. The news spread rapidly to the outlying areas and mobs had taken to the streets led mostly by the students. Administration in three of

the four districts collapsed with the Chogyal's writ confined to the Palace. It was under these circumstances that the Chogyal had requested the Government of India, through the Political Officer, to post a senior officer from India to head Sikkim's administration.

The Foreign Secretary rang me up on April 8 to convey the Government's decision to post me as the Chief Administrator. I was to take over my assignment on April 10. The two days that I had were spent in the Foreign Office for a briefing. Never had I seen the Foreign Secretary's office converted into an operations room. Long messages on situation reports were pouring in every half an hour with the Foreign Secretary, Kewal Singh, dictating replies after replies to a team of stenographers. The desk officers dealing with Sikkim were walking in and out, seeking and taking instructions every hour. Kewal Singh looked as cool and composed as ever in his immaculate dress.

The basic issues were only two: to what extent Delhi's support was to be given to the democratic forces and what were its ultimate objectives in Sikkim. I found the Foreign Secretary's mind clear on both. All support was to be given to the anti-Chogyal movement. The political leaders were to be assured of Delhi's determination to set up a popular elected government. If the Chogyal did not concede their demands, Delhi was prepared for a show-down. Even Sikkim's take-over as a centrally administered territory of India with a Lieutenant Governor ultimately heading it was not precluded. The Chogyal was to be reduced to a constitutional head during the intervening period. My immediate task was to obtain a political settlement, restore law and order quickly, hold the general elections at the earliest and set up an elected government. Indian interests were to be fully protected with Delhi having an overriding say in Sikkim's administration. My role in this would be critical. The time had come for a show-down with the Chogyal.

In between the briefings, Avtar Singh,¹ a Senior Secretary in the Foreign Office, returned from Gangtok after a spot study of the situation. His assessment was that the agitation could not be sustained at that pace unless Delhi increased its support. The Chogyal, though demoralised, was still adamant against making major concessions. The time was ripe to teach him a lesson for his anti-people

¹Avtar Singh, a career diplomat, had held charge of the Political Officer's post in the early sixties.

postures. His advice to me was "Do not allow the Chogyal to get on top again. We will never get a second opportunity like this. 1949 should not be repeated."

When I asked the Foreign Secretary about the possible international reaction and particularly the Chinese response, he said the Foreign Office would take care of this aspect. I was, however, to ensure that all my actions had the support of the political leaders; thus giving a legitimacy to all our moves. The feudal character of the existing system and the people's revolt against it, were to be highlighted constantly. Since the Government of India had special responsibility under the Treaty of 1950 towards Sikkim's good administration and which involved India's own security, its intervention was obligatory in circumstances where law and order had broken down and a vacuum had been created by the collapse of the Chogyal's authority. India, wedded to democratic ideals and consequent obligation devolving on her to lend support to forces fighting against tyranny in spheres of her responsibility, had a moral obligation towards the people of Sikkim. These were incontrovertible arguments. The Foreign Secretary stated: "If I and Bajpai² enunciated these principles effectively, there would be no problems."

When I narrated my brief to Shenkar Bajpai, within minutes of my landing in Gangtok on April 10, he literally pulled his hair of which none too many were left in any case. Being the man on the spot, why had he not been told of this in such clear and concise terms, he asked. If he had known this earlier, the matter would have been resolved to Delhi's satisfaction on the fourth itself. All these days he was only told to go on building support for the agitation and maintain its tempo. One could sustain an agitation of this nature only if the political parties were closely knit and well organised. As it was, the people who had joined the agitation from the villages, were tired and wanted to go back to their farms. How was he to maintain the tempo to the level Delhi wanted, he bemoaned. He made me repeat my instructions from Delhi several times. Only then could I tear the small page of my diary which carried my brief. Bajpai did not appreciate then Delhi's strategy to stretch the tempo of the anti-Chogyal agitation over a longer period to justify her intervention and partly meet the international criticism of Sikkim's take over.

We settled down to discuss the prevailing situation. The morale

²K. S. Bajpai was the Political Officer in Sikkim.

of the agitators was at a low ebb. Decades of suppression by the Sikkimese rulers had made the people docile and subservient. People joined the movement in the hope of a quick response to their demands. Aware of Delhi's support, they expected the Chogyal to give in easily. But, all these days they were just demonstrating without any tangible results. Something had to be done quickly to raise their spirits. The political leaders were aware of the 1949 happenings when Delhi rescued the Chogyal under somewhat similar circumstances. But Delhi had a different approach then.

My arrival had boosted the morale of the leaders. Bajpai and I chalked out our plan of action on the lines indicated by the Foreign Secretary. Before any of these plans could be implemented, a message came that the Foreign Secretary was arriving at Gangtok. And, this happened only within four days of my arrival. It surprised us but we sensed that something had happened in Delhi to necessitate Kewal Singh's visit. Our suspicions were confirmed when he briefed us soon after his arrival.

My appointment had hit the headlines in the press. Many described it as a "take over". Even the foreign press had flashed the news as one of significance. It was a stick to beat India with as was in the case of Goa when Indian troops marched in there. The Chogyal had used the same argument. I may have become a celebrity overnight but all this caused serious embarrassment to Delhi. Perhaps, this accounted for Kewal Singh's hurried visit and subsequent low key posture in handling the situation without giving up the ultimate objectives. Delhi also did not anticipate that the agitation would peter out so soon despite her massive support. Aggressiveness, therefore, changed to conciliation which immediately put the critics of India and the Chogyal on the defensive.