

Roots and the Route of Secularism in Sikkim

At the height of the Rathongchu hydroelectric project controversy during 1993-97, the lamas of Sikkim challenged the authority of the state government since the development project purportedly defiled their sacred landscape. While acknowledging the vacuity of the concept of secularism, this paper stresses that Sikkimese polity neither has secular roots in the past nor does its current route indicate any movement in that direction. Does contemporary Sikkim, reflect the successful transformation of a feudal theocracy into a democratic polity? Can religious nationalism engender separatism or secessionism and fuel ethnic conflict between the Nepali Hindu migrant majority and the Lepcha-Bhutia Buddhist indigenous minority of Sikkim? These are the questions this paper seeks answers to.

by Vibha Arora

On May 16, 1975, the former Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim was incorporated as the 22nd state of India with the 36th constitutional amendment act; while the words “socialist secular” were inserted into the Indian Constitution (the 42nd amendment) in 1976 on the recommendation of the Swaran Singh committee [Jain 2000: 753]. These two dates 1975 and 1976 mark turning points in the democratic political history of India and the former kingdom of Sikkim. Does contemporary Sikkim represent a democratic state that successfully balances the aspirations of its 22 Indo-Aryan and Tibeto-Burman ethnic groups? Does contemporary Sikkim reflect the successful transformation of a feudal theocracy into a democratic polity? Or perhaps Sikkim represents the ambiguities of a secular democratic polity since the Sikkim government constantly needs to acquire moral legitimacy in sacred sites as the earlier feudal-theocratic polity. Or perhaps Sikkim is a paradoxical case where ethnic-religious nationalism persists as an inner layer beneath the professed political nationalism of being an Indian state. While dealing with these questions, I am directing attention towards the vocabularies and the practices of the secularist politics of the Indian nation state and the pragmatic usage of the concept of secularism.

This essay begins by explaining the meaning(s) and ambiguities around “secularism” and the debates on being secular in the Indian context in order to foreground this essay’s discussion of the Sikkimese context. The second section describes Sikkim’s ethnic profile and political history in order to understand ethnic competition in contemporary Sikkim. This section discusses the special provisions enshrined in the Indian Constitution that safeguard the rights and privileges of the Lepchas and the Bhutias and the Buddhist sangha and the debates on them in the Indian Supreme Court. The third section discusses the historical and religious perception of Sikkim and the ongoing promotion of pilgrimage tourism in Sikkim by the state government. By discussing the cultural revival of Buddhist rituals and the extension of state patronage to them in the context of tourism, I highlight the ethnic-nationalist sentiments materially represented by these sacred sites and their associated rituals in this section. The creative manner in which the state government has “morally” legitimised its rule is evident in the revival of state patronage to select rituals of the former kingdom of Sikkim. Can the revival of such ethnonationalist rituals engender secessionist tendencies in Sikkim? The brief discussion on the Rathongchu hydel project controversies (1993-97) in the subsequent section highlight how the cultural politics of sacred landscapes can transform ethnic fissures into faultlines of Sikkim.¹ Indeed, the religious conversion of Buddhist sites into sites associated with Guru Nanak during the 1980s and the

religious conflicts around Ayodhya within India directed the government of Sikkim into documenting and listing the historic and religious sites within Sikkim.

I Sacred and the Secular

Dams are the temples of modern India – J L Nehru, *Bhakra Nangal Canal Inauguration*, 1954.

Indian-ness is usually defined by the Nehruvian ideal of unity in diversity. Secularism is perceived as being essential to the viability of the Indian state given its multi-ethnic and multireligious diversity. As a secular state, India does not have any state religion but neither is it opposed to religion altogether: it is neither irreligious nor anti-religious. It is often asserted that the most distinctive property of Indian secularism is its firm neutrality towards religion and its opposition to communalism. Nehru's call to worship dams because they are just like temples is a good example of instrumentally using the moral authority of religion in the political and development domain. In contrast, Gandhi believed that the separation of religion and politics was neither possible nor desirable, and this was indicated in the stress on 'sarva dharma sambhav'. In many ways in India, secularism itself is defined as a religion. Although, the Constitution itself does not conceptually define secularism and there is considerable ambiguity around its meaning and usage. The court's definition of secularism is actuated by practical necessities [Jain 2000:757].²

The bitter experiences of the partition of India underlined the need to give secular roots to the Indian nation in order to balance its cultural plurality. Only secularism can counter the divisiveness of ascriptive allegiances such as caste, religion and language and lay the basis of a modern liberal citizenship. Secularism does not imply the negation of religious beliefs or inculcation of religious scepticism among the Indian citizens. It implies state impartiality between all religions and neutrality towards religion. It was construed in terms of religion being excluded from the political domain and largely the private concern of individuals and social groups.

In the debates of the Indian constituent assembly, the arguments used to justify the secular constitution of the Indian state were almost invariably about secularism as evidence of a representative state and as evidence of a distinctive modernity [Bajpai 1999]. As a fundamental principle of the Indian Constitution, secularism is reflected in Articles 25-26, 29-30, 44, 51-A and 14-16 prohibit the establishment of a theocratic state. Article 14 guarantees equality before law to every person. Article 15 prohibits discrimination inter alia on grounds of religion. Article 16 guarantees equality of opportunity in matters of public employment irrespective of the religion of a person. The Constitution of India also recognises the religious freedom of individuals and groups. The cultural and educational rights of religious minorities are enshrined as justiciable fundamental rights in the form of both individual rights as well as minority group rights. These rights enable the state to protect and preserve cultural pluralism. Not only does each individual have the freedom to profess, practice and propagate his religion (Article 25),³ every religious group or denomination has the right to establish and maintain institutions for religious and charitable purposes, to manage its own affairs in matters of religion, to own and acquire movable and immovable property and to administer such property in accordance with law (Article 26). Further, any section of citizens of India that has a distinct language, script or culture has the right to conserve the same (Article 29.1). All minorities, whether based on religion or language, have the right to establish and administer educational institutions of their choice (Article 30.1). Nevertheless, religion is not relevant in the matter of fundamental rights, since if there is any conflict of interest between religion and the public order, then it is argued that religion has to yield.

The Indian Constitution does not reflect a single definition of secularism hence the Supreme Court's readings of it become critical. Cossman and Kapur's argument is quite relevant: "We see law neither as an instrument of liberation nor one of oppression; but rather as a complex and

contradictory site...the courts can guard against any further legal erosion of the principles of toleration and the rights of the minorities” (1999: 94-96). Based on an in-depth analysis of Indian Supreme Court judgments on secularism Padhy (2004) concluded, “judicial pronouncements on secular issues have thus been marked by contradictions. While in cases it has promoted majority interests, eroding the rights of minority groups, in others, it has privileged minority groups.” The Supreme Court judgment of 1993 on Sikkim in this paper establishes that context takes centre stage in judicial decision-making. The pragmatic definition of secularism cannot be ignored. The failure to distinguish between the religious and the irreligious prompted Beteille (1994: 559) to suggest that “we should, in the interest of intellectual clarity, stop using the term altogether”.⁴ In sharp contrast, some Indian scholars argue that secularism is “a gift of Christianity”, which should not be imposed upon Indian society [Madan 1987: 754, 1991, see also Nandy 1998]. The separation of the church and the state originates in Protestant doctrine and western societies,⁵ which cannot be prescribed for non-western societies such as India where the separation between political and religious spheres has been impossible. Nandy and Madan emphasise the need to define secularism in terms of inter-religious understanding. P Chatterjee (1994) argues for a reconfiguration of the “problem of secularism” to one of toleration and recognition of minority rights while Bhargava (1998) emphasises the need of “contextual secularism”, which does not require strict non-interference or equi-distance, but rather a policy of principled distance. Other scholars stress the need to replace the vacuous concept of secularism with an alternative theory of cultural pluralism [de Roover 2002]. Whatever may be the argument, a divorce between religion and politics is impossible in the Indian situation. As Hansen emphasises “communal consciousness and stereotypes are...integrated parts of the social and political imaginary in many parts of India” (1999: 215). Certain demographic, political and historical factors make Sikkim unique nevertheless this state furthers our comparative understanding of the interpenetration of religion and politics and the functioning of “secularism” within India and other south Asian contexts such as Bhutan and Sri Lanka that have large immigrant populations of a different religious faith. For instance, Sikkim’s neighbouring kingdom of Bhutan has effectively preserved its Buddhist culture and the privileges of the indigenous Dzongkhas, while it is consciously implementing a policy of ethnic cleansing that explains the current Lhotsampa refugee crises.⁶ Bhutan continues to be a protectorate of India while Sikkim was incorporated into India.

II Uniquely Sikkim

Ethnic Roots and Route of a Buddhist Kingdom into Statehood

Demographically in contemporary Sikkim, the Buddhists comprise a large minority of 27 per cent while 68 per cent of its total population are Hindus and 3 per cent are “converted” Christians with some Muslims who settled recently [Census 2001]. The majority of the Hindus of Sikkim have ethnic-national origins in neighbouring Nepal and considered to be migrants by the indigenous Lepchas-Bhutias (20.6 per cent) who define themselves as the Sikkimese. Ethnically Sikkim’s population is categorised into three groups: the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Nepalis. There are cultural, religious, and linguistic differences between the Lepcha-Bhutia and the Nepalis⁷ that provide the objective basis for the ethnic boundaries between them. These broad categorisations underplay the competing definitions, the internal variations, and the intersections between the diverse ethnic groups in Sikkim. I follow Barth (1969: 9-38) in emphasising that it is the boundaries between these groups that transform them into ethnic groups. The main ethnic boundary is between the Lepchas and the Bhutias who are united in their opposition towards ethnic groups categorised as Nepali and termed as migrants by them.⁸ The Lepcha-Bhutia ethnic alliance has a historical, politico-economic, religious, and cultural basis although both communities have their distinctive cultures and languages. Historically, the Lepchas and the Bhutias were the ruling groups in the kingdom of Sikkim although the Lepchas were and are a subordinate partner in this alliance. On the one hand, the Lepchas and the Bhutias instrumentally use the idiom of sacred landscapes to challenge and contest the belonging of Nepali groups in

contemporary Sikkim, then on the other hand, the Nepalis cite their contribution towards developing Sikkim's economy in the last 150 years to assert their claims over the land and "belonging" in the landscape. The Nepalis continue to be blamed for causing civil unrest that culminated in Sikkim's incorporation into India in 1975. Ethnic relations are neither harmonious nor have ethnic tensions escalated into any secessionist demands or led to an insurgency.⁹ Clearly, conflict, negotiations, and integration occupy centre-stage as ethnic groups compete for scarce resources, demand reservation in government jobs, educational institutions and preferential opportunities in development. The links between symbolic identity, livelihood, and ethnicity cannot be ignored in this multi-ethnic context.¹⁰ Identity politics and conflict over resource-entitlements establish the contours of faultlines in this Himalayan borderland.

To understand the political contours, ethnic-fissures, and cultural politics over resources in the present, I need to highlight the past since it continually casts a contemporary shadow. Hence, I will briefly recapitulate Sikkim's political history that led to its incorporation into India. Sikkim became a *de jure* and *de facto* protectorate of British India after the Younghusband mission of 1904 wherein the British raj defeated Tibet.¹¹ The Government of India Act of 1935 recognised Sikkim to be a state of India and it was allocated a seat in the council of Indian states. However in 1947 Sikkim chose not to merge into India although the king permitted India to station a political officer within Sikkim. On December 5, 1950, the Indo-Sikkim treaty was signed that confirmed Sikkim's protectorate status that conferred external affairs, defence, law and order and communication responsibilities on the government of India while the king of Sikkim retained autonomy in internal affairs. There is a large body of literature on whether Sikkim was merged into India or was annexed by India in 1975.¹² At the very outset, I will reiterate that this paper steers clear of this debate while recognising that event to be the watershed of Sikkim's modern polity and admitting that effacing of Sikkimese national identity will take time.¹³ The Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1959, the Sino-Indian war on Sikkim's border in 1962-63, the democratic aspirations of the population agitating against the oppressive rule of Sikkim's feudal oligarchy, and the breakdown of internal law and order are cited as reasons for holding the 1975 referendum, which culminated in the inclusion of Sikkim in India in 1975. Special provisions were inserted into the Indian Constitution under Article 371F to meet the special needs and circumstances of the state. According to Article 371F(f) the Parliament may, for the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of the different sections of the population of Sikkim make provisions for the number of seats in the legislative assembly of the state of Sikkim which may be filled by candidates belonging to such sections and for the delimitation of the assembly constituencies from which candidates belonging to such sections alone may stand for election to the legislative assembly of the state of Sikkim [cf Jain 2000: 989].

Sikkim's democratic polity does not have secular roots and some continuity with the theocratic rule of the Namgyal dynasty has been provided for in the Indian Constitution under Article 371F along with certain political safeguards that constitute representation to the Buddhist monasteries in its legislative assembly in the form of the *sangha* seat¹⁴ even as it ensures the continued administration of monasteries and their preservation by the ecclesiastical department of the state government. In 1978, the Lepchas and the Bhutias were recognised as scheduled tribes and 12 seats have been reserved in the legislative assembly to safeguard their political interests; quotas too were reserved for them in government employment and educational institutions.¹⁵ These safeguards were justified in order to protect the interests of the Lepchas and the Bhutias who were rendered a political minority with the incorporation of Sikkim into India. A few Nepali politicians (especially R C Poudyal) regarded these special provisions as being discriminatory and unconstitutional. They filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India in the early 1980s where it was hotly debated for more than a decade. Even in 1984, justice Bhagwati stated that under Article 371F(f) reservation of seats for the Bhutias-Lepchas and the *sangha* in the Sikkim assembly were justified [cf Kazi 1993: 128-31].¹⁶ Therefore, the matter was kept pending until the Supreme Court (in a 3:2 decision by a five-member bench) made a landmark judgment on February 10, 1993 upholding the reservation of the Bhutia-Lepcha seats and one seat for the

sangha in the legislative assembly. This decisive judgment upheld the validity of the 36th Constitution (Amendment) Act 1975 which provided special status to ethnic and religious groups in Sikkim. Justice Venkatachaliah argued that “historical considerations justified a differential treatment” [cf Kazi 1993: 337]. The Supreme Court judgment of 1993 explicitly acknowledged that these provisions were necessitated since a nation was being incorporated into a state:

It is true that the reservation of seats of the kind and the extent brought about by the impugned versions may not, if applied to the existing States of the Union, pass the Constitutional muster.

But in relation to a new territory admitted to a Union, the terms and conditions are not such as to fall outside the permissible constitutional limits. Historical considerations and compulsions do justify inequality and special treatment. We are of the view that the impugned provisions have been found in the wisdom of Parliament [that were] necessary in the admission of [a] strategic border state into the Union. The departures are not such as to negate the principles of democracy [cf Kazi 1993: 338, emphasis added].

These special provisions were intended to overcome disruptions by ensuring a smoother integration of Sikkim into India while continuities with its theocratic heritage were maintained.¹⁷ Nonetheless the Supreme Court judgment of 1993 emphasised the transitional character of these provisions:

The provisions of clause (f) of Article 371F(f) and the consequent changes in the electoral laws were intended to recognise and accommodate the pace of the growth of the political institutions of Sikkim and to make the transition gradual and peaceful and to prevent the dominance of one section of the population over another on the basis of ethnic loyalties and identities. These adjustments reflect the political expediencies for the maintenance of social equilibrium. The political and social maturity and of economic development might in course of time enable the people of Sikkim to transcend and submerge these ethnic apprehensions and imbalances and might in future – one hopes sooner – usher in a more egalitarian dispensation [cf Kazi 1993: 337-38].

Is democratic Sikkim getting secularised? Is Sikkim’s political landscape influenced by egalitarianism among its groups? Are the ethnic fissures widening as identity politics and cultural rights over resources coalesce? The recent inclusion of the Limbu and the Tamang in the scheduled tribe category in 2002 has evoked bitter opposition from the Lepchas and the Bhutias who resent the dilution of their indigeneity and are not prepared to share their entitlements with other groups. This provides the context for debating these special provisions and revisiting them. The Limbus and Tamangs are demanding political reservation similar to what is provisioned for the Lepchas and the Bhutias in the Constitution. Currently, the Sikkim government has proposed to the central government that the strength of the state legislative assembly be increased from 32 to 40 seats in order to give the Limbus and the Tamangs the benefit of their tribal status. In the census of 2001, the Limbus and the Tamangs were enumerated as part of the Nepali population. Currently, these groups are demanding a fresh census enumeration which acknowledges their categorisation as scheduled tribes in order to assert and ascertain their exact numerical strength and thereby legitimise their demand for a proportionate share in reserved seats for their political representatives, jobs in government employment, and seats in educational institutions.¹⁸ The Lepchas are demanding “primitive tribe” status while some other Nepali groups such as the Khambu Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sunwar, Thami, Dewan and Bhujel are pressurising the state government and the National Commission of Backward Classes to include them in the list of scheduled tribes.¹⁹ What these contestations clearly establish, is that indigeneity is intrinsically neither a sign of subalterneity nor resistance but an assertive political statement.

Sikkim is the only state of secular democratic India (with the exception of Maharashtra with its 1 per cent Buddhist population) that acknowledges the minority rights of the Buddhists. Admittedly democratic governance and universal adult suffrage since 1975 has undermined the influence of the lamas and monasteries and other religious functionaries including the shamans,²⁰ nevertheless these have not completely displaced their political influence. We cannot ignore the historic fact concerning Sikkim in that Buddhism was neither merely a matter of religious

practice nor separate from its politics and self-presentation.²¹ Even the Supreme Court judgment of 1993 acknowledged the sangha to be historically a political and social institution and not merely a religious institution [cf Kazi 1993: 341]. In fact, Buddhist nationalism defined Sikkim's political identity as a kingdom in the past. Kapferer (1988) has argued that nationalist ideologies use religious metaphors to make themselves sacred. His argument made in the context of Sri Lanka can be extended to Sikkim, "the Buddhism of Sinhalese nationalism is a Buddhism of nationalist practice and interpretation, a Buddhism reconstituted in the religion of nationalism" [Kapferer 1988: 6].

Sikkim was regarded the seat of Nyingmapa²² nationalism and the kingdom of Sikkim was founded in 1642 by three Nyingma lamas, namely, Lhatsun Chenpo, Ndag Senpo Chenpo and Kartok Khuntu Zangpo who following the ascendancy of the Gelugpa sect²³ fled Tibet. As per a prophecy, they installed Phuntsog Namgyal²⁴ as the first 'Chos-rgyal'²⁵ at Yoksum in west Sikkim. Religious and political nationalisms were fused in the institution of the Chos-rgyal. Until 1975, the Chos-rgyal had administered Sikkim with the help of the monasteries (the 'lhadey' as they were termed in Bhutia language).

The political representation of the Buddhist monasteries in the sangha seat implies not merely the protection of minority rights but entitlements that are unparalleled within India. A section of the Nepali groups, such as the Gurung, Tamang, and Newar are Buddhists, therefore this sangha seat does represent them as well. The only comparable instance of the sangha seat is the reservation of a seat for a representative of the Anglo-Indian community in the Parliament under Article 333.

I would like to compare the Sikkimese situation with Ladakh that is now a part of Jammu and Kashmir. Religious radicalism is not exogenous to either Sikkim or Ladakh. The former kingdom of Ladakh was annexed by the Dogra rulers of Jammu and Kashmir in 1834 [Srinivas 1998: 22] and incorporated into India in 1947. Ladakh comprises the largest territory within Indian administered Jammu and Kashmir (about 58 per cent area with 2.31 per cent of its population). The population of Ladakh region is mainly Buddhist (50.88 per cent in 1981) and Muslim (46.05 per cent in 1981) with a small Hindu minority.²⁶ Interestingly, the Ladakhis perceive the Kashmiris as colonisers while the Kashmiri secessionists regard India to be an oppressive coloniser. Both the Ladakhis and the Kashmiri militants have secessionist demands and communalisation of identities have played an important role in mobilising the people and pressurising the central government. Following a period of prolonged agitation by the Ladakh Buddhist Association, in October 1989 the central government conferred scheduled tribe status to eight ethnic tribes while the Leh region of Ladakh was granted an Autonomous District Council status in May 1993 [Srinivas 1998:28]. Today, Ladakh has one representative in the Indian Parliament and four seats in the Jammu and Kashmir state assembly. If the Sikkim model of democratic governance works then the Ladakhi's demand for union territory status are legitimate.²⁷ Or perhaps the Ladakhi Gonpa Association can be given a sangha seat like their Sikkimese counterparts.

III Reconstructing Sikkim through Pilgrim Tourism

The present chief minister of Sikkim, Pawan K Chamling has repeatedly remarked: "tourism and hydroelectric power are the only two viable sources of revenue for Sikkim."²⁸ This section and the next section analyses precisely how hydroelectricity and pilgrimage tourism can impact the tranquillity of this multi-ethnic state. The connection between hydroelectricity and pilgrim tourism is not random since the trajectory of the Rathongchu hydroelectric project and the active marketing of Sikkim as a Buddhist pilgrimage centre are interconnected. Democratisation and secularisation were perceived as complementary processes that would lead to the integration of Sikkim into India. Paradoxically, pilgrimage tourism and its proactive marketing by the current government of Sikkim, is encouraging a religious perception of the Sikkimese landscape. Will not the development of pilgrimage tourism further communalise ethnic identities? Will the

government be able to maintain an ethnic balance between its Hindu majority that are perceived as migrants from Nepal and the Buddhist minority that are considered indigenous?

I am cognisant of the special status Sikkim enjoys as a place of Buddhist pilgrimage, a land blessed by the great Buddhist saint Padmasambhava,²⁹ and significantly with the Rumtek monastery, that is the seat of the Karmapa³⁰ who is the spiritual heir to the Dalai Lama, Tenzin Gyatso. These religious perceptions about Sikkim exist and persist not only in the oral tradition or as revelations but are inscribed in sacred scriptures such as the pilgrimage guide to Sikkim and advanced by texts such as the *History of Sikkim*.³¹ That Sikkim is a holy Buddhist land is indisputable and beyond any debate. However, the contemporary self-reflexive (re)presentation of Sikkim as a place of Buddhist pilgrimage is unprecedented and taking place at various levels – the state government, tourism (national and international), community, and academic scholarship.

Today the state government is proactively marketing pilgrimage tourism and encouraging a religious perception of the landscape. The government is not merely drawing on Sikkim's Buddhist heritage, but in fact (re)constructing Sikkim as a divine abode by constructing and consecrating the tallest statue of Padmasambhava (135 feet) in 2005,³² constructing pilgrim religious centres at Solophok in south Sikkim³³ and Indrakeel dham³⁴ at Rangpo in east Sikkim, funding construction of a religious statues of Shiva (108 feet), and planting Sikkim firmly in the Buddhist pilgrim circuit (Lhasa-Rumtek-Bodh Gaya-Dharamsala) and as a stop-over for Hindu pilgrims taking the Kailash-Mansarovar pilgrimage. Both sets of Buddhist and Hindu pilgrims will use the Nathu La once it opens in 2006. Revenue earnings from pilgrimage tourism guide the government in all these endeavours. On the one hand, this reconstruction epitomises the commodification of religion especially Buddhism in the global context.³⁵ On the other hand, in reviving and continuing to patronise rituals having nationalist associations such as 'dpang lha gsol' (that was regarded the national day of the former Sikkimese kingdom) celebrations at Gangtok and the sacred masked dances at Pemagayantse monastery,³⁶ the masked dances at Rumtek, the 'bumchu'³⁷ ritual at Tashiding monastery, 'Kamsel'³⁸ at Tholung temple in north Sikkim, the religious celebrations of 'saga dawa' and the 'lhabab deuchen', the state government has consciously transformed them into cultural festivals while acquiring a moral legitimacy for its rule. Can the state government successfully efface the historic ethnic nationalist sentiments embodied by these monasteries and transform them into centres of Buddhist pilgrimage?³⁹ The restitution of these rituals and rediscovery of Sikkim's Buddhist heritage indicates a certain confidence in democratic politics and a shrewd policy of encasing its "Shangri-la" image. However, the ethnic nationalist basis of these rituals has neither been erased nor silenced in the collective memory of all Sikkimese whether of Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu or Nepali origin; Sikkim lost its nationhood about 30 years ago.⁴⁰

Recent papers emphasise the religious nationalism embodied by Sikkim's various monasteries and the critical function many Buddhist rituals, monasteries, and the lamas historically played in legitimising divine kingship and administering Sikkim. The ritual calendar affirmed the "sacred" political boundaries of the former kingdom and inculcated ethnic-nationalist feelings amongst its constituents. This explains why in the early 1990s, many of Sikkim's nationalist Buddhist rituals were revived by politically conscious Bhutias in order to assert their indigeneity, affirm their symbolic connections with Sikkim's landscape, and politically stake a claim over its resources as the "sons of the soil" to oppose the ascendancy of the numerically and politically Nepali majority.

The monasteries, the spiritual treasures, the sacred sites, and their rituals are the only thing left to the Lhopos (Bhutias) which confer on them a sense of identity and a focus on their past history. In this context, Buddhist rituals in honour of territorial deities have undergone a certain revival among politically conscious Lhopo lamas [Balicki-Denjongpa 2002: 34, emphasis added].

The past is not a random selection since events are registered and defined by their significance for structuring collective memory [Hastrup 1992: 7-9]. The past is selectively used or forgotten

in order to account for the present, to justify it, to understand it, and to criticise it [Tonkin et al 1989: 5]. The resurgence of academic interest in Sikkim's history and Buddhist heritage is part of ethnic-cultural revivalism and like any other ethnic group and religious minority of India, the Lepchas, the Bhutias, the Buddhists and other groups have a right to history. Many sacred books including the pilgrimage guide to Sikkim are being translated and circulated. A very important document in this regard is the *History of Sikkim* written by the scholarly queen Yeshay Dolma and the king of Sikkim Thutob Namgyal in 1908. This *History of Sikkim* contains rich descriptions of places of historical importance, the monasteries and sacred sites of Sikkim that are associated with eminent shamans and Buddhist saints and the role of the Namgyal dynasty in maintaining the sanctity of the kingdom.

At this point I would take up for discussion two symbols of Sikkimese nationalism and sovereignty: the national anthem and the flag. According to Sonam Gyatso Dokhampa (a research officer in the ecclesiastical department), who translated the Sikkimese national anthem for the author, it mentions the important persons, holy sites and historically significant places of Sikkim. It is a very popular prayer and source of identity for the Sikkimese. During my fieldwork in Sikkim in 2001-02, I noted the conversion of the former Sikkimese national anthem into a religious prayer that is popularly sung in Sikkim's schools alongside the Indian national anthem while the former Sikkimese flag has become a religious icon⁴¹ that is sometimes placed in the family shrine. These transformations of nationalist icons into religious ones does not necessarily imply the erosion of ethnic-nationalism but highlights the layering of nationalist sentiments and assertion of regional identities.⁴² I concur with Kapstein who follows Hobsbawm (1992) in distinguishing between national identity, i.e., the identification of oneself as belonging to a particular national group, and nationalism, the conviction that the national group ought to be politically embodied in a unique nation state must be carefully distinguished. The former may not necessarily entail the latter and this explains contemporary Sikkim.

It is too early to comment on whether this differential layering of political and ethnic nationalist sentiments can encourage separatist tendencies or engender ethnic conflict. Although the people who experienced life as citizens of Sikkim as a sovereign nation are dwindling while the present generation has directly experienced the development benefits of being a democratic state. Significantly, almost 60 per cent of Sikkim's population is less than 24 years of age [Lama 2001: 1]. There has been a generational shift. The majority want democracy and are satisfied with the modern administration and development of Sikkim. The development benefits accrued by Sikkim since 1975 are sharply outlined in the *Sikkim Human Development Report 2001*.

IV Secularism and Ethnic-Nationalism

The trope of Sikkim being a sacred landscape can be traced to Lepcha-Bhutia cosmologies, the historical myths about the founding of the Buddhist kingdom of Sikkim, sacred Buddhist texts, and the Rathongchu project movement of the 1990.⁴³ The extract given below is cited from the memorandum that the Buddhist monastic order submitted to the chief minister of Sikkim (July 29, 1995). This memorandum provides an evocative image of the lamas, who are forced to rise up in protest and threaten to burn their sacred texts on the perceived defilement of their sacred landscape. This image significantly influenced the public perception of the Rathongchu hydel project, served to depict public protest, and organised dissent with the state government. The Buddhist sangha of Sikkim wrote:

We, the monks of Sikkim, hereby demand that the Rathongchu hydroelectric project located at Yoksum be stopped immediately. We oppose the project because it will have severe negative consequences for the most sacred area of Sikkim...The 'gnas bsol' text is to the Sikkimese Buddhists what the Ramayana is to the Hindus, the Koran to the Muslims, and the Bible to the Christians. If the Rathongchu hydroelectric project is not stopped and abandoned, we, the lamas of Sikkim are ready to burn our gnas bsol texts as its meaning and purpose will be lost...

The idea of a defiled sacred landscape was the chief argument used by the Lepchas, Bhutias and Buddhist activists protesting against the implementation of Rathongchu hydroelectric project in west Sikkim during 1993-97. The project was implemented in Yoksum area of west Sikkim, which was identified as being a biodiversity hotspot by the WWF in 1992-93. Nevertheless this project was given environmental clearance by the ministry of environment and forests in 1992 while specifying some conditions under the Forest Conservation Act of 1980 and Sikkim's Forests, Water Courses and Road Reserve (Preservation and Protection) Act 1988. The project was widely accepted as being ecologically viable since it did not entail any large-scale displacement of people or any submergence of land. The activists argued that the project infringed their indigenous rights vested in land and violated Article 371F of the Indian Constitution under which the kingdom of Sikkim was incorporated into India in 1975.⁴⁴ The battles between the Lepcha-Bhutia activists and the state over the implementation of the Rathongchu project divided Sikkimese society and spilled initially into the high court of Sikkim and then the Supreme Court of India where they were concluded in November 2002.⁴⁵ In sharp contrast to the Supreme Court judgment of 1993, the high court judgment of 1995 on the Rathongchu project gave a different perspective of minority rights. The high court judgment of 1995 argued:

...no doubt the region is of value to the Sikkimese of Buddhist faith of this area. No doubt that the area is covered with religious monuments and their ruins. No doubt that the observance of religious faith will be affected. But on the overall it is a viable project. Tolerance for the benefit of all expected should culminate in maximum benefit to the maximum people... (M Sengupta and Bhargava 1995: 21).

The high court of Sikkim dismissed the petition filed by the activists who approached the Supreme Court of India where the case was fought on their behalf by the eminent lawyer, Rajeev Dhawan. The Supreme Court was hearing this case when the political decision to close the project was taken in 1997, and the matter was accordingly closed on November 15, 2002.

The chief minister of Sikkim Pawan Kumar Chamling, was forced to shelve this ecologically viable and economically profitable project in August 1997 in order to avert an ethnic imbroglio within Sikkim. The main reasons cited by the Sikkim government for the closure of the project were escalating ethnic tensions, preserving Yoksum as a sacred landscape and respecting the religious sentiments of the Buddhists, checking environmental destruction caused in the area by frequent landslides, the escalating costs of construction, and gaining favourable public opinion before the general elections scheduled for Sikkim in 1998.

In contemporary Sikkim, sacred landscapes reflect and materially represent the politicisation of culture and ethnic identity, indicate the processes of conflict and integration between groups, and constitute the locus of ethnic-competition over resource-use in the context of state-directed development. Articulation of Lepcha (and Bhutia) identity and indigeneity in the landscape did not begin with the battles around the Rathongchu hydel project nor have they ended with its cancellation in 1997. These are evident in the controversies around the sacred rock at Chungthang and Guru Dongmar Lake in north Sikkim that are revered by all Buddhists. Chungthang displays Padmasambhava's miraculous powers. In the place where he sat on the rock (which bears his footprint now) a spring is believed to have emerged from the rock. Furthermore, it is believed that Padmasambhava threw a handful of rice grains after eating some rice, and since then paddy has grown in the field adjacent to this rock. The field is a permanent testimony of Padmasambhava's miraculous powers as at an altitude of 5,600 feet, this paddy field defies all normal conditions for its growth. The sacred lake of Guru Dongmar is termed a place of pilgrimage and wish fulfilment. Religious scriptures identify it to be the place of Padmasambhava's next rebirth [Acharya 1998: 13-15]. The Indian army caused immense tension during the 1980s by converting both sites into Sikh shrines. The Sikh army men cite Guru Nanak's biography that mentions his visit to Sikkim. They argue, "Guru Rinpoche (Padmasambhava) is none other than Guru Nanak". There is a Sikh temple adjacent to the sacred rock at Chungthang and the shrine at the Guru Dongmar is termed a sacred site for all religions.

During my fieldwork in these sites in June-July 2002, the local residents voiced their resentment at the conversion of both these sites. The conversion of these two Buddhist sites into Sikh shrines signifies army oppression, colonisation by India, and serves a grim reminder of the violation of their cultural and human rights.

The rising number of controversies around sacred sites has impressed on the government about the need to document all religious sites and shrines of Sikkim. It was believed that such a listing would enable them to maintain the status quo and prevent any religious conversions in the future. Hence, the home department of the government of Sikkim issued a notification in November 1998 “prohibiting the conversion of sites, the defilement of sacred lakes and the scaling of sacred peaks such as of Mt Kanchenjunga” (No 59/Home/98 published in the Sikkim Gazette). The notification conforms to the legislation issued by the national government on Places of Worship (Special Provisions) Act 1991 that prohibits the conversion of any place of worship and instructs the administration to maintain the status quo. Hence, the state government declared: “no conversion or alteration or new construction or any developmental activity shall be undertaken at the site or in the close vicinity of any place of worship or religious institution or sacred lakes or of sacred peaks”. A comprehensive list of sacred peaks, sacred caves, sacred rocks, sacred lakes, stupas, and hot springs was included in this notification. The ecclesiastical department was given the responsibility of identifying and preparing a comprehensive report, which appeared in 2001 while I was undertaking fieldwork in Sikkim [Committee 2000]. For preparing the report the researchers used both *gnas yig* and the *History of Sikkim*.⁴⁶ The report also certifies their status as historically significant sites that have existed in Sikkim for the last hundred years. However, there are gaps between intentions and realities as the recent controversies around the wish-fulfilling Lake Kacheopalri (associated with Padmasambhava) gain momentum.⁴⁷ The photographs of this sacred lake taken by me in 2002 document the placing of Hindu idols of Shiva alongside Buddhist icons; the recent construction of a Hindu temple near the precinct has evoked sharp hostility from the Buddhists.

This section of the essay focused on a situation that is regionally limited in space and time but the issues have wider significance. For instance in Imphal, the capital city of Manipur in north-east India, the state government is building a huge state capital complex in an area that includes a natural reservoir known as ‘kairang khong’ (also known as ‘chingmeirong manning lampak’) that is considered sacred and central to the identity of the Meitei, the indigenous people of Manipur. Many NGOs and ethnic organisations are opposing the state capital project. Sikkim can become an exemplar here.

Conclusion

The different conceptions of Indian secularism emerge as a legitimating vocabulary of political discourse, as highlighted by this essay. Depending on the meaning attributed to “being secular”, the relationship between religion and politics can be imagined in terms of separation or intimacy, exclusion or inclusion. If Article 371F of the Indian Constitution that enshrines special provisions for the integration of a theocratic Sikkim and heralded its transformation into a democratic state reveals the pragmatic definition of secularism, then the active reconstruction of Sikkim as a sacred landscape in the contemporary context of state-directed development and the state governments efforts to transform Sikkim into a centre of pilgrimage indicates both the commodification of religion and the reconstitution of its secular agendas. During the Rathongchu hydel project agitation the lamas protesting against the perceived defilement of their sacred landscape, had transformed these sacred Buddhist sites into faultlines. However, the continued state patronage of Buddhist rituals instituted to engender ethnic-nationalist by the Namgyal dynasty in the former kingdom bestows a certain moral legitimacy for the democratic polity of Sikkim. Its impossible to understand Sikkim by divorcing religion from the polity, as politics and culture interpenetrate each other in almost all realms of social, cultural and the ideological.

Sikkimese polity did not have a secular roots in the past and neither does its current route indicate any movement in that direction.

Notes

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1. According to recent debates in anthropology, the landscape mediates between the cultural and the political processes by becoming their material expression and the locus of social actions [Bender 1993, Hirsch and O'Hanlon 1995, Stewart and Strathern 2003].
2. Some constitutional experts emphasise that there is no need to define "secular" as the concept of secularism clearly flows from various articles of the [Jain 2000: 757].
3. For details on the right to propagate religion, refer to Rakshit (2000).
4. de Roover (2002) raises an important question: "How to explain the persistence of the idea of secularism, while this idea is not intelligible in the first place?"
5. "We have come to equate secularity, the disengagement and differentiation of the public sphere from religion, with modernity. In fact, the emergence and form of the western secular nation state have everything do with Christianity, and Protestantism in particular" [Friedland 1999: 315].
6. For further details on the Lhotsampa refugee issue refer to Hutt (2003). Currently, Bhutan is in the process of circulating and formulating a constitution that will ensure the transition of this monarchy into a democracy in the near future.
7. The category includes groups that migrated from east Nepal such as the Limbu, the Rai, the Magar, the Yakha, the Khumbu, and the Mechi, which have clear migration histories to Sikkim. The other Nepali groups such as the Gorkha, the Newar, the Bahun, the Kshetri, the Gurung, the Sunwar, and the Tamang migrated from other parts of Nepal. The fragmentation of the Nepali category into four groups, namely, the other backward classes (Gurung, Rai, Magar, Sunwar, Newar groups), scheduled castes (Kami, Damai, Lohar, Majhi, Sarki groups), scheduled tribes (Limbu and Tamang groups) and a general category (Bahun and Kshetri groups) challenges all imaginings of a unitary Nepali category [for details refer to Arora 2004b: 56-58, 2006a].
8. The unity of the diverse ethnic groups within the Nepali category is sustained by their collective memories and experiences of exploitation under colonial rule and Sikkim's feudal monarchy [Arora 2006a].
9. These ethnic tensions have historic roots in colonial policies that encouraged the settlement of Nepali migrants in the 19th century. This policy was driven by the British desire to balance the pro-Tibetan leanings of the Lepchas-Bhutias. By 1891, the Nepali in Sikkim outnumbered the Lepchas and the Bhutias [Risley 1894: xxi].
10. Ethnic identity is analysed by including both the political and symbolic dimensions and their cultural expression in rituals and contests (over natural and development) resources, as emphasised by the theoretical contributions of Abner (1974), Anthony Cohen (1982) in this.
11. The British entered the region as mediators in order to settle the boundary disputes between Sikkim and Nepal and this was formalised as the Treaty of Titalia in 1817. In 1835, the British gained control of Darjeeling and annexed it from the kingdom of Sikkim [Singh 1988, Wangyal 2002]. In 1889, Jean Claude White was appointed as the first political officer of Sikkim and subsequently the 'chos-rgyal' lost effective political control.
12. For instance refer to Sinha (1975), Rao (1978), Cooke (1980), Das (1983), Datta-Ray (1984), Rustomji (1987), Kazi (1993) and Bajpai (1999). Cooke, Datta-Ray, Rustomji and Kazi argue are critical of the inclusion of Sikkim into India while Rao, Sinha, Das and Bajpai argue in favour of the merger of Sikkim into India.
13. Depending on the class and ethnic background the event of 1975 was termed as an unforgettable trauma or to be the victory of democratic politics over theocratic rule.
14. The sangha seat was institutionalised in 1958 when the chos-rgyal gave the Buddhist monasteries a seat in his executive council.
15. These seats do not reflect their demographic strength but are a continuation of the parity formula that was enforced in 1950-1 by the chos-rgyal. According to this principle the Nepali groups comprising 75 per cent of

- Sikkim's population were equated with the Lepchas-Bhutias who constituted about 20 per cent of Sikkim's population [Sinha 1975: 28] and this was enforced until 1979.
16. In 1984, the judge concurred that that the matter was not for the courts to decide as it was of a political nature and they were wary of an Assam like situation developing in Sikkim. So the issue was kept pending until 1993.
 17. A historian of Sikkim terms these as lingering remnants from its former semi-independent Buddhist identity [Hiltz 2003: 67].
 18. 'PM Lends an Ear to Sikkim', *Statesman*, Gangtok, December 4, 2005,
 19. *Backward commission to study demand for tribal status in Sikkim*, Gangtok, December 16, 2005. <http://news.webindia123.com/news/showdetails.asp?id=193299&cat=India>.
 20. Chapter 6 of my thesis stresses the critical role played by Lepcha shamans in legitimating the rule of the Namgyal dynasty and ensuring Lepcha loyalty.
 21. The similarities between Sikkim and Tibet are strong. The Tibetans saw their religion as a symbol of their country's identity and the superiority of their civilisation. Prior to the annexation of Tibet roughly half the government officials were monks and lamas. Refer to Arora (2006b) for an explanation on the relation between Sikkimese and Tibetan identities.
 22. The Nyingmapa sect traces its origin to the teachings of Padmasambhava or Guru Rinpoche. It is regarded the oldest sect of Buddhism and the non-monastic tradition of Tantric Buddhism [Waddell 1899].
 23. The Gelugpa sect is the most widely known Buddhist sect and associated with the lineage of the Dalai Lama. It is also referred to as the "yellowhat" sect and associated with Buddhist monasticism.
 24. Phuntsog Namgyal is the fifth generation descendant of the Tibetan prince Khye Bumsa of the Minyak dynasty of Kham in east Tibet who enacted the sacred covenant with the Lepcha shaman Tekong Tek at Kabi during the 14th century thereby legitimising the settlement of the Bhutias in Sikkim [for details refer to Arora 2004b: 146-92].
 25. A Tibetan word meaning the divine king who will rule according to moral precepts. The word 'dhàramarâj' in Sanskrit is the equivalent of this idea.
 26. The 1991 Census was not conducted in Jammu and Kashmir and therefore I am using the 1981 Census figures [cf Srinivas 1998: 16] and the 2001 Census is incomplete since it could not be conducted in the entire state of Jammu and Kashmir.
 27. In 2002 the Ladakh Buddhist Association welcomed support from the Vishwa Hindu Parishad and Rashtriya Swayamsevak Singh's support [van Beek nd]
 28. 'Hydroelectricity and Tourism as Two Viable Industries for Economic Prosperity', *Sikkim Reporter*, 1995.
 29. Padmasambhava (8th century) is credited with spreading Buddhism in Tibet.
 30. It is associated with the Karma Kargyu school of Mahayana Buddhism that was founded in the 12th century by Dagpo Lharje Gampopa based on the teachings of Naropa and Milarepa. There is much controversy around the Karmapa legacy. The Dalai Lama recognises the Karmapa claimant the 17th Gyalwa Karmapa Orgyen Drodul Trinley Dorje. However, the government of India is not permitting him to enter Sikkim.
 31. The pilgrimage guide to Sikkim is regarded a sacred text that was composed by Padmasambhava and passed to his disciples followers in order to guide his followers regarding the route to enter the hidden valley of Sikkim, describe the location of the various treasures he had hidden in the land, and instructions about propitiating the protective deities and secure their blessings. *Brasmo ljongs gnas yig* or the guidebook to the sacred places by Lhatsun Jigmed Pawo (1682-1717) is the most commonly referred version and is available as a block print text at the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim.
 32. The construction of this statue was entrusted to the Dodrul Rinpoche the head of the Nyingmapa sect and who in turn delegated it to his disciple Sonam Paljor Denjongpa who led the protests against the Rathongchu project and even undertook a fast for 28 days to stop the construction work of the Rathongchu hydel project as it defiled their sacred sites in west Sikkim.
 33. 'Sikkim to Build Buddhist Pilgrim Centre', *Statesman*, Gangtok, February 4, 2005.
 34. 'Sikkim Finds Faith in Tourism', *Statesman*, Gangtok, June 12, 2005.
 35. Tourism affects not only the ways in which ethnic identities are asserted but also the selection of ethnic markers that symbolise groups and their culture.
 36. For details of this ritual, its cultural and national significance and changes since 1975 refer to Nebesky-Wojokowitz (1956), Arora (2003, 2004b: 95-101, 146-149, 165-174), Balicki-Denjongpa (2002) and Vandenhelsken [2003].
 37. 'Bumchu' is a ritual of water divination that takes place at Tashiding monastery in west Sikkim on the 15th day of the first month in the Tibetan calendar [Dokhampa 2003, Arora 2003, 2004b, 2005b].
 38. 'Kamsel' ceremony refers to the ritual that takes place every three years involving the display of the sacred objects, Buddhist scriptures, religious paintings, personal effects of Sikkim's patron saint Lhatsun Chenpo that are preserved and kept in the safety of the remote inaccessible Tholung monastery in the Lepcha reserve in north Sikkim [Arora 2006c].
 39. The revival of the monastic community in Tibet after the Cultural Revolution culminated in religico-political confrontation during the late 1980s.

40. Until 2003, China maintained the position that Sikkim was an independent kingdom that was annexed by India and it was only recently during the 2005 visit that the Chinese premier gave Manmohan Singh an official map acknowledging Sikkim to be part of India.
41. This is a banner of white with a crimson border and a yellow eight-spoked chakra in the centre representing righteousness. This explains its significance as a symbolism of righteous politics and the interpenetration of the religious and the political symbolised by the sangha order in Sikkim.
42. In contemporary Tibet, it is difficult to divorce the revival of Buddhism and monasticism from the struggle over the political status of Tibet vis-a-vis China.
43. Details of these can be found in my doctoral thesis [Arora 2004b].
44. As the opening remarks of an article in *Himal* stated: "For the first time in recent Sikkim's democratic history, the Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepcha have come forward to *defend what remains of their original homeland*" [Shaefer 1995: 77, emphasis added].
45. For detailed analysis of the Rathongchu movement refer to Arora (2003, 2004b, 2006d).
46. Sonam Gyatso and N Dorjee of the Ecclesiastical Department, Government of Sikkim during an interview in April 2002 in Gangtok.
47. Refer to a recent news report, 'Alleged Defilement of Holy Lake Resented', *Statesman*, August 10, 2005.

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