



“We Shall Move North”: Sikkim in the Aftermath of the 1962 Sino-Indian Conflict

Speaker : Swati Chawla

Chair: Mr. Ashok K Kantha

Date: 28 June, 2017

Time: 3:00 pm

Seminar Room, ICS

The Seminar started with the opening remark by the Chair. A short introduction as how Chogyal in Sikkim sought to project its identity in the post 1962 and prior to 1975 was highlighted. Further, how Sikkim played assertive role to claim their identity that has evolved through their own distinct traditions and culture as per the law of the land picturing their differentness from India or China. Keeping this at the background, the speaker aimed to evaluate the different instances and events that came across during this time in Sikkim.

The speaker cited two popular events of 1967 that played a significant role in providing insight in the evaluation of the Sikkim’s policy in the 1960s. First, a political officer in Sikkim reported the presence of the portrait of Mao Zedong facing China at the Nathu La border which contributed to a suspicious atmosphere regarding security in the border area. It also provided a space for the Chinese and Indian troops to tighten their security in the border. The second remarkable event was the Sikkim’s preparation for the celebration of Mahatma Gandhi’s centenary, where the government of India sponsored the sculpture of Mahatma Gandhi which is now installed in Gangtok Bazaar. However, the Chogyal of Sikkim was not ready to come under the sovereignty of India. This entire explanation was also further fueled later when Hope Cooke, the second wife of Palden Thondup Namgyal, wrote an article based on the sovereignty of Sikkim as their right.

The speaker gave the account of report given by the political officer present in Gangtok, 1968. She argued, the slogan “We shall move North”, depicted a move towards Tibet as they draw more affinity with the Tibetans than with that of India. The demonstration in Sikkim which was encouraged by the Chogyal (dharma king) was declared to be a treasonous act countering the advancement of the Indian influence in Sikkim post-Independence. The demonstration was further understood as an act reflecting the frustration of the intellectual elites in Sikkim. No act was to be taken against the Chinese as they had no aggressive tendency towards them, but the Indian troops being stationed in the border posed a big threat for Sikkim.

The tensions between India and China even after the conflict did not cease. For India, maintaining Sikkim as its part for strategic importance can be understood against the historical backdrop of the 14th Dalai Lama escape; the geographic importance of Himalayan range to India; maintaining the connections stable between the Darjeeling and Tibet; and its claim that Buddhism in Sikkim has the roots with that of India. So the outlook and the treatment of the Indian government towards Sikkim in the post-Independence were particularly sympathetic. Jawaharlal Nehru was one who felt for Sikkim. A proof of this was his death which was seen as a huge loss. India was also concerned about the rights of the Indian Marwari and Nepali community in Sikkim which explains the growing apprehensions India had towards the Nepali community being politicized through China’s design of spreading communism in Asia.

The speaker further explains that there is also a long controversy over the use of the term Maharaja and Maharani to address the royalty in Sikkim. The Chogyal resisted it on the ground that it is an attempt to Indianise Sikkim and lower the status and privileges of royalty in Sikkim. Talking about the transfer of power, the last Chogyal of Sikkim, Palden Thondup Namgyal (1963 to 1975) asserts that taking Buddhist faith into account in the process is necessary. This would explain their distinct feature, and his reign shows the effort to carve out a national identity of their own. Lord Mountbatten while negotiating with the princely states says that Sikkim is a special case and should not be clubbed with the other princely states for it is a land with the distinct feature all together, bordering three territories. This assertion created the idea of Sikkimese as more closely related to the Tibetan in the north. Taking into account different theories and understandings formulated by different scholars, the traditions encountered today in Sikkim are actually invented and traceable through certain dating. They defined the invented traditions as a set of practices or rituals of symbolic nature

that seek to inculcate the certain norms of behavior ensuring the continuity of the past tradition which is vastly artificial. So what we encounter in Sikkim is more of posturing of the Sikkim novelty. The speaker in this regard also cited a saying, “Novelty is known as novel for being able to dress up as antiquity”.

The entire talk on the seminar largely stressed on how the land of Sikkim came under the clutch of a democratic India and the People’s Republic of China during the mounting years of 1950s and 1960s. Nonetheless, there was constant assertion from the Chogyal of Sikkim to attain the right to determination in the realm of the definition of a modern nation-state. The articulations of nationalistic identity for Sikkim in opposition to India were recognised and it got tied up with the acceleration of the press and the media making a way for popular support in Sikkim.

Report prepared by Disunga Fedilis H, Research Intern, Institute of Chinese Studies.

About the Speaker

Swati Chawla is a PhD candidate in South Asian History and a Praxis Fellow in Digital Humanities at the University of Virginia. Her research is focused on migration across the Himalayas in the second half of the twentieth century, and she is broadly interested in issues of statelessness, exile, and citizenship in postcolonial South Asia. She was formerly an Assistant Professor of English at the University of Delhi, and holds an M.Phil. in English from the University of Delhi.

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