

INSIDE SIKKIM

**AGAINST
THE TIDE**

Jigme N. Kazi

Ever since Sikkim's takeover in 1975 by its protecting power, the former Himalayan Kingdom has largely been ruled by one man—Nar Bahadur Bhandari. How Bhandari became Chief Minister in 1979 promising to restore Sikkim to the Sikkimese but remained in power through a volte-face is the story of this book.

Bhandari's 14-year misrule in Sikkim saw the tiny Himalayan State gradually degenerate into a state where people have totally lost faith in democracy and democratic values. Instead of enjoying the fruits of democracy after merging with the world's largest democracy, the Sikkimese people, after the 'merger', had a taste of dictatorship in a democratic set-up.

Under the Bhandari regime, all democratic institutions, including the Press, have been silenced and forced to acknowledge the supremacy of 'one-man rule and one-party' system. This book reveals how and why all forms of dissent are being suppressed in Sikkim and a 'one-man rule' being perpetuated.

Jigme N. Kazi's book also brings into focus how the system in Sikkim functioned in the last one and half decades leaving the people of the strategic Himalayan border State completely defenceless, insecure and exploited. The struggle of the people to live in a free and democratic atmosphere, where the right to live with respect and dignity and to preserve the unique and distinct identity of Sikkim, within the Union, has been well articulated in this book.

Jigme N. Kazi is the Editor of the *Sikkim Observer* and the Sikkim Correspondent of *The Statesman*. In the last ten years, he has reported for numerous national dailies and journals, including *The Telegraph* and *Sunday*. He has also reported for Kathmandu's *The Independent* from Sikkim.

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(India)

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FOREWORD

"Inside Sikkim: Against The Tide" is a journalist's record of a heroic attempt to keep the flag of the Fourth Estate flying in a remote and difficult part of the country. Jigme N. Kazi's trials, tribulations and occasional triumphs afford a remarkable test case for the "Freedom of the Press" in a natural environment setting rather than in the hothouses of the metropolises. At the same time, it brings into focus the carrot and stick mechanism to which media practitioners find themselves subjected to in any developing democracy.

Democracy is a big word in Sikkim – in many ways bigger than in any other state of the Indian Union. For it was in the name of democracy that a protectorate monarchy was abolished and Sikkim absorbed with so much fanfare in 1975. But did the merger actually bring democracy to Sikkim? If it did, it could not have come in any guise better than the travesty which passes for that great ideal in India. In the event, every ill that plagues the polity of the mother country is somehow exaggerated in Sikkim as if in some burlesque.

Take corruption. Bureaucrats and politicians may get away with greased palms everywhere but what happens in Sikkim has to be seen to be believed. And if that government governs best which governs least, Sikkim must be the worst governed of places. For its outsized government overshadows everything, Big Brotherlike, in a tiny State of some 400,000 souls – comparable to many small towns. In their anxiety to make Sikkim India's 22nd State, the architects of the merger foisted entire ministries, secretariats, departments, a High Court and every possible trapping of *paan-stained babudom* on the unlikely setting of serene snow-capped peaks. Naturally, much of the Central funding meant for development was swallowed up by the monster of an unproductive govern-

ment. As people sought sinecures, native skills such as in woodcrafting, weaving and horticulture died out making dependence on the jealous and unforgiving monster complete.

With little incentive to be productive the government, instead of being a catalyst for development, became a mere distributor of Central largesse – either as salaries and benefits to suppliant employees or through contracts to the favoured. It did not take long then for Sikkim to turn into the breeding ground par excellence for that pernicious sort of vested interest that both feeds and feed on tyranny.

A case so bad that the Assembly elections of November 1989 could be brazenly rigged to grab each and every one of the seats and the results claimed as a sign of the popularity of leadership entering its third straight term. A lid was put on public protest and representatives of the National Press, who witnessed the farce, such as myself, told to leave in no uncertain terms. Jigme's attempts to keep his highly credible *Sikkim Observer* going in the months after such enormity must have been like the battle between the elephant and the ant.

"*Inside Sikkim: Against The Tide*" then is much more than a journalist's log. It is a status report on politics in Sikkim half a generation into the merger for those interested. And they ought to include those crusty old Indian civil servants who, long after the departure of the British, got their chance to do a Colonel Blimp on a helpless little principality complete with the bullying, obfuscation and "fair-play." The mess they left behind is visible enough in the multi-storeyed buildings that crowd each other off the Gangtok hillsides as the excrescence of diverted funds. And in the abject misery of the people the funds were diverted from -- presenting Indian-style 'development' at its best.

The book appears at a critical juncture in the history of the Indian Union and in the shorter history of Sikkim as a member. At a time when serious questions are being raised on Kashmir's legally-correct accession to India, the annexation of Sikkim does not even have a fig leaf. China is yet to accord

recognition for the merger of this strategic strip of high ridges with which it has a border as also has two other countries. More pressingly Sikkim has been touted as a natural homeland for millions of uncategorised Nepalese-speaking people spread unwelcome across the North Indian terai into Bhutan and the Assam valley playing havoc with the electorate. What such a large floating group can do to tiny Sikkim with its minuscule population does not require any great feat of imagination.

Internally, Sikkim is in political turmoil whether or not the National Press has the time or space to report it. With Assembly elections only a year away opposition groups are once again braving political repression and custodial atrocities to take their popular protests into the streets – even violently. And after New Delhi's tame acquiescence to the outrageous rigging in the November 1989 Assembly polls, they have been left to their own devices – mostly grassroots support for what that is worth amidst such unabashed perfidy.

But forgotten in the games that are being played out on the far Himalayan slopes are the interests of the indigenous Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus, Rais and genuine Sikkimese Nepalese, who are now clamouring for what was promised them on merger – protection from being submerged. More than anything else, *"Inside Sikkim: Against The Tide"* is the articulation of that clamour.

Ranjit Devraj

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PREFACE

In his column, *Mediawatch*, published by *Sunday* magazine of Calcutta, eminent journalist and recently-elected President of the Press Club of India, S. Nihal Singh observes : "...the fighters of press freedom are not those who declaim the virtues of the freedom of the press at great gatherings, useful as such exercises are as reminders of principles. They are the small-town journalists who spurn temptations of political patronage and personal monetary gain to do their jobs honestly".

Singh then goes on to add: "The fourth estate has a growing responsibility in pinpointing the evils because it is often the only pillar of democracy to be found in these areas". He finally comments: "But newspapers need to do more to support lone journalists fighting against great odds... It is, therefore, the duty of the national press to highlight the sacrifices of little-known men and women fighting at the real frontiers of press freedom...The old battle against Indira Gandhi's Emergency was fought and won in the capital and other metropolitan centres. The new battles are now raging elsewhere. Let us salute those who are fighting them."

Singh's words describe the Press in Sikkim perfectly. The non-existence of an effective opposition and the absence of a democratic atmosphere in the former Himalayan Kingdom of Sikkim has resulted in the local Press shouldering greater responsibilities than it was meant to, often taking calculated risks to life and property.

Independent newspapers such as the *Sikkim Observer* have over the years gone through enormous hardships in maintaining their independent existence and not submitting to the diktats of those in power. Some of us have had to live under constant pressure and often have been unjustifiably penalised. For instance, the *Eastern Express* and *Sikkim Observer* printing presses, two credible and independent newspaper establishments in Sikkim, were completely ransacked following

electoral 'victories' of the Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari's Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) in the Assembly elections in 1985 and 1989. Assaults, threats, intimidations and pressure exerted on the local Press in Sikkim in the past one and half decades has completely and systematically silenced it. The printing of the *Sikkim Observer* had to be undertaken in another State (West Bengal) after 1989. Still, the paper was forced to suspend publication many times.

After May 1993, the *Sikkim Observer* ceased publication. Efforts are now on to bring the paper out even further away than West Bengal as the law and order situation and the political process steadily deteriorates. Bhandari's stranglehold on the State Legislative Assembly has been somewhat spoilt by one legislator, Pawan Kumar Chamling, deciding to break away and forming a one-man opposition under the banner of the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF).

In spite of its supporters and leaders having been arrested and tortured in police custody, the SDF has become hugely popular of late and may just succeed in its objective of putting an end to a "reign of terror". The Press naturally welcomes this bestirring of the opposition because for too long it has offered the sole resistance to the regime. Our job as journalists and newspaper-owners is to give a balanced view of events and issues. It is for the people to initiate change for which the Press can only act as catalyst.

The *Hindustan Times*, during the 'merger' period, warned that India would not be able to convince the world that Sikkim's inclusion within the Union represented the will of its people. "Elsewhere protectorates are graduating to independence and colonies are marching to freedom. In Sikkim, a protectorate is moving to freedom within India," it commented. Today, the people of Sikkim are questioning whether "moving to freedom within India" has benefitted them socially, culturally, economically and politically. Or whether they were better off being a Protectorate rather than a part of the Indian Union. Acknowledging that he did not approve of the manner in which

Sikkim was merged with India, the former Indian Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, in 1979 said while the 'merger' was a 'fait accompli', he hoped that the people of Sikkim would benefit from it.

Whether the merger has benefitted the people or not can be best gauged from the fact that the Sikkimese people continue to be deprived of their basic fundamental human rights and freedoms despite having been a part of the world's largest democracy for almost two decades. The former Chief Minister and the chief architect of the 'merger', Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa, has stated on more than one occasion that New Delhi has failed to honour its word and abide by the 'terms of the merger'. Kazi has declared that the 'merger' was conditional and the Government of India was morally and constitutionally bound to respect the terms and conditions under which Sikkim became the 22nd State of the Union and protect the 'rights and interests' of the Sikkimese people and thereby preserve the distinct identity of Sikkim within the Union.

The constant betrayal of the people's trust by political leadership in Gangtok and New Delhi and the poor economic condition of the people speak volumes of how the 'hopes and aspirations' of the Sikkimese people have been sacrificed in order to secure peace in this strategic border State and satisfy the growing greed and ambitions of power-hungry politicians and bureaucrats. What New Delhi fails to admit and realise is that the peaceful atmosphere that is prevalent in Sikkim today is nothing other than the 'peace of the grave'. For under the peaceful facade, the undercurrents are high and tension is mounting day by day.

Not many people believed that the demand for 'closer ties with India' and 'full-fledged democracy', made prior to the 'merger', would lead to Sikkim becoming a part and parcel of India. Similarly, no one this time can predict where the present anti-Bhandari wave and the pro-democracy, pro-Sikkim movement for 'freedom and democracy' will eventually lead to.

“We fought for democracy and freedom. What we have in Sikkim today is dictatorship of the worst type”, stated Kazi and the former Chief Minister, Bhim Bahadur Gurung’s letter to the Prime Minister, P. V. Narasimha Rao, in 1992. A public interest petition relating to corruption in the State administration filed in the Supreme Court by Kazi earlier this year against Bhandari and others is likely to come to a final end shortly. The CBI (Criminal Bureau of Investigation), on the insistence of the Supreme Court, has recently submitted its report to the Supreme Court on the issue. The report of the CBI, which has been investigating corruption charges against Bhandari and others, including the former Sikkim Chief Secretary, P.K.Pradhan, and the former Rajya Sabha MP from Sikkim, Karma Topden (now a member of the Bhandari Cabinet after having retired from the Rajya Sabha in October this year), provides enough evidence to hold them guilty of corrupt practices.

Even if the Centre is unwilling to go against Bhandari, the views of the Court and the present anti-Bhandari wave in Sikkim, spearheaded by Chamling’s SDF, is likely to dampen Bhandari’s prospects of a fourth consecutive victory in the Assembly elections slated for 1994-end. Corruption in high places is one thing; but using money made through corruption to remain perpetually in power is quite another.

While the content of this book will hopefully be a valuable document for those interested in the state of Sikkim after the Indian takeover in 1975, this book is essentially written for myself, and perhaps for those few who saw what I was doing but didn’t really know how I went about my job. This is my tenth year as a full-time journalist in Sikkim and besides recording my views on important events and issues of Sikkim, I want to record everything for posterity to take note of how things were and how some of us have been living all these years — all alone and against the tide.

CHAPTER 1

Press Under Pressure

"News is what somebody somewhere wants to suppress – everything else is advertisement".

"The freedom of the Press illustrates the commonplace that if we are to live progressively, we must live dangerously".

The Hutchins Report on Freedom
of the Press in the U.S.A.

After the *Sikkim Observer* resumed publication from Sikkim in November 1990, I was able to bring out the weekly paper regularly every Saturday from the Prenar printing press located some way down the Gangtok hills. At times, due to various reasons, the paper hit the news-stand only on Mondays and sometimes even on Tuesdays.

As I was not able to get the matter ready for printing on Saturday (October 26, 1991), I planned to bring out the paper two days later on Monday (October 28, 1991). But there were other problems, too.

With the arrest of several prominent opposition leaders in the State, allegedly involved in the publication of a scandalous pamphlet alleging that the Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, was suffering from AIDS, the political situation in the State in the month of October 1991 was tense. The visit of Central leaders to the State during the same period also en-

couraged the State unit of the Congress (I), Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee-I (SPCC-I), led by its President, Ashok Kumar Subba, to get organised and face up to the challenges of the day. The visit of Central Government or Congress party functionaries – a rare occasion in the State – always unsettled Bhandari. While the Chief Minister managed to keep his party and his legislators together, there were rumblings amidst the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) MLAs (Members of the Legislative Assembly) which could surface given the right political direction. So much depended on the Centre's views on Sikkim and on the region. It seemed to me and a few other observers that the Centre was indeed "interested" in what was happening in Sikkim.

As a journalist and as an owner of a paper which commanded high regard in the State where people give more credence to newspaper reports than what politicians say, I was quite aware of my responsibilities. Sensing the seriousness of the situation and being familiar with Bhandari's style of functioning in a given situation, I knew I had to take great care in what I published in the paper and also what I filed for newspapers and other publications outside the State.

What concerned me most in this particular issue of the *Observer* was the front page story on the CPI(M) (Communist Party of India - Marxist). It was based on the party's reaction to the arrest of Duk Nath Nepal, the State Secretariate Member of the CPI(M) in Sikkim, who was allegedly involved with the pamphlet which was by now the main subject of discussion in political circles and *bazaar* gossip all over the State and particularly in Gangtok. The allegation that Duk Nath was involved in the publication of the pamphlet came from the ruling party. The State unit of the CPI(M) was, however, completely unaware of what was happening and who were responsible for the pamphlet.

However, when I handed over the four-page lay-out of the *Observer* to the manager of the Prenar Press, Sundar Sharma, on Monday (October 28, 1991) morning, he did not

raise any objection. Perhaps he was unable to grasp the content of the news-item at first glance. I left the lay-out material there at the press hoping that it would be printed.

As had been done in the past, I went to collect the paper from the press in the evening. I was surprised to find out that the paper had not been printed. I felt terribly disappointed and quite angry, too. No reason was given for it and the press appeared to be functioning normally. Nothing had gone wrong with the printing machine and all the workers were also present. Only Sundar was not there at the press. The workers felt quite awkward telling me that the paper had not been printed. They said that I should see D.P. Sharma, the owner of the press, who lived near the Paljor Namgyal Girls' School, located at the other end of the town.

Naturally I was disappointed – more so when they failed to inform me about their inability to get the paper printed. This issue, which was supposed to have come out on Saturday (October 26, 1991), could not hit the stands even on Monday. This was a big failure on my part although I alone could not be held responsible for the delay.

I have always insisted on bringing out the paper on Saturdays as scheduled. In fact, on several occasions in the past, we made efforts to have the paper on the stands on Saturday morning instead of in the evening. This meant that the lay-out should be ready for the press on Friday morning instead of on Saturday. If this system was followed then the paper would hit the news-stands on Saturday morning instead of in the evening. It also meant that those in the districts and readers outside the State would get the paper on Saturday afternoon or evening through bus services. At times when printing of the paper was delayed on Saturday, the paper was out in the market only on Sunday. Unfortunately, we weren't very successful in bringing out the paper on Saturday mornings. We could function effectively and efficiently only if we had our own off-set printing establishment.

It then struck me that the main reason for withholding the

paper from being printed could be the CPI(M) piece placed on the front page demanding medical examination of Bhandari's health. On our way back from the press, Jigga, my brother-in-law, suggested that we should see Sharma and talk things over with him. My own immediate reaction was to go down to Siliguri and get the paper printed there as had been done in the past. However, I accepted Jigga's suggestion and decided to see Sharma.

I met Sharma at his residence at 5.30 p.m. I asked Jigga not to accompany me as I wanted to meet the printer personally. When I got to his place, Sharma was in his sitting room with A.K. Upadhyya, a local Nepalese lawyer who was close to the State Government. I was at once quite suspicious of him. Upadhyya was not only close to some ruling party members but he always seemed to me to be a suspicious character. I was also under the impression that he might be up to something. It was also possible that he had a hand in stopping the paper from being printed. However, I could have been wrong, too. I came to know later on that Upadhyya, who had come to Sikkim from Assam in 1983, was also known to Anjan Upadhyya, the man in-charge of the CPI(M) in Sikkim.

"I'd like to talk to you personally", I told Sharma who at once took me to another room where we chatted for about five minutes. He was very frank and polite and without any hesitation came to the point straightaway and advised me to drop the CPI(M) story. "If you can do that I'll print the paper", he said.

I had known Sharma, originally from Darjeeling, for quite sometime and we got along well. He was not only my printer but was like an older brother to me. He was also closely related to some of my school friends in Darjeeling. I was quite agreeable to his suggestion but told him that I would have to think it over. By then, I had already decided to kill the CPI(M) story and replace it with the SSP women's wing story which was also connected to the matter reported in the pamphlet.

I handed over the revised lay-out to the press on Tuesday

morning and the paper was out by evening. It sold like hot cakes! The CPI(M) story was scrapped and was replaced by another news-item captioned: "SSP women's wing seeks justice". It carried the women wing's reaction to the pamphlet. They had not only condemned the pamphlet but also put up quite a good show in registering their protest over the content of the pamphlet which also placed the Sikkim Lok Sabha MP and wife of the Chief Minister, Dil Kumari Bhandari, in a poor light.

What made me accept Sharma's suggestion? First of all, I felt that since the situation in Gangtok was quite tense it was OK if the CPI(M) story was dropped. The contents of the Press statement issued by Anjan were quite controversial and might have created unnecessary problems for Sharma and myself. Anjan had in a letter to the then President, R. Venkataraman, and Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, asked for a high-level medical enquiry into the Chief Minister's health to check whether he had AIDS or not. Bhandari certainly would have gone wild if this piece had been published.

To compensate for our losses in the *Observer* we sent similar stories to the *Statesman* and *The Times of India*. My wife, Tshering, and I are correspondents for these two papers in the State and we felt it was our duty to report on the CPI(M)'s reaction, irrespective of what may happen to us if Bhandari chose to react. Unfortunately, I did not see the story in these two papers. They may have come out in other editions but not in the ones that came to Sikkim. Later, we filed another report on the same issue from a slightly different angle and both the national dailies carried the report. The *Statesman* report which was placed on the front page almost got me into serious trouble.

Another reason for killing the CPI(M) story in the *Observer* was the realisation that if I, or for that matter anyone, wanted to bring out newspapers to inform people about politically controversial subjects, it could not be done without taking extra precautions. At times, we have to either com-

pletely do away with sensitive stories or carry them without making them look too controversial while getting the message through.

At any rate, I had to adopt such a policy for this particular issue, not only for the survival of the paper but also for the safety of the printer, my wife and myself. While I was the editor of the paper, my wife was its printer and publisher. Our names and the name of our printing press, Hill Media Publications, appeared on the printline instead of Sharma's press. He didn't want to take any risk by having his establishment's name on the printline as our printer. This arrangement was legally not permissible but with the situation being what it was in Sikkim this was the only practical solution. Otherwise we would have no printers and the paper would not come out at all. As far as I was concerned I had to bring out the paper anyhow – come what may.

It may be noted here that the lead story in this issue (Monday, October 28, 1991) was on the arrest of four opposition leaders -- Hem Lall Bhandari, Convenor, Citizens For Democracy (CFD), James Basnet, Joint Secretary, SPCC(I), Tashi Wangdi Fonpo, General Secretary, Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC) and Duk Nath Nepal (CPI-M) – in connection with the pamphlet. The report was a simple one with photos of all the four arrested under the caption – "Arrested". It was quite effective, particularly when we were the first ones to break the story in this way.

The publication of the next issue of the *Observer* was naturally delayed due to late publication of the previous issue. I again decided to bring out the paper on Monday (Nov 4) instead of on Saturday (Nov 2). The delay was also due to the two-day SAARC seminar on Development of Housing Plan in Hilly Areas which was inaugurated by the Union Minister for Urban Development, Mrs. Sheila Kaul, in Gangtok on November 2.

On several occasions, the press had to delay publication of the paper to accommodate important events and develop-

ments which took place during the weekend. This was done in the interest of our readers who expected the *Observer* to carry all important events of the week in the paper. However, only on rare occasions were we forced to resort to this arrangement and most of the time the paper came out every Saturday.

I was quite positive that nothing would go wrong with the November 4 issue. As usual, the four-page lay-out was handed over to the press on Monday morning. When I went to collect the printed matter at around 4.30 p.m. in the evening I was told that the paper had not been printed. The workers at the press told me that the negatives of pages 2, 3 and 4 were made but nothing had been done about the first page. According to them, at about 2 p.m. Sundar had taken the page one lay-out to Sharma for his approval and had not returned.

I was furious this time – really mad. There was now no question of going to Sharma for consultation. It was his duty as the printer to let me know in time what had been decided on the paper. Submitting to censorship in this manner once again meant that the authorities, or ruling party functionaries, would resort to the same tactics in future. This was unacceptable.

When I went down to the press at 9 a.m. the next day Sundar was standing on the lawn talking to someone. He told me that the paper could not be printed due to the CPI(M) story on page 3. I didn't quite believe him. By now I was quite angry and told him that it was highly irresponsible on their part to keep me in the dark all the while and not inform me about their decision not to print the paper. I told him that by keeping the lay-out matter with them for 24 hours and not getting it printed nor informing me about it they were aiding those who were trying to sabotage the publication of the *Observer*. Delay in publication was bad enough; withholding the paper from being printed at this late stage was totally unacceptable.

"Mr. Sharma tried to contact you through phone but failed to get through to you", said Sundar apologetically. He told me that he himself wanted to come up to my place, situated about a kilometre above the press, on Tuesday to in-

form me but I had arrived just then. Whatever the reasons may have been they had failed to contact me on time. It was sheer irresponsibility and negligence on their part to take up such important matters so lightly. The publication of the paper had already been re-scheduled and further delay would be very damaging for the paper in all respects. My own credibility was at stake, particularly when people expected so much from the *Observer* on the present developments.

While Sharma insisted that the reason for not printing the paper was the CPI(M) story, I personally felt that the real objection was a news-item on page one and not the CPI(M) story which appeared on page three. The fact that negatives of the other three pages were made and that the positive of the front page was taken to Sharma for his approval justified my doubts.

I had highlighted the statement given by the Industries and Information and Public Relations Minister, Pawan Kumar Chamling, on the front page. Chamling, one of the most controversial and popular men in the Bhandari Cabinet, had denied reports that he was involved in a "conspiracy" to overthrow Bhandari. This news-item captioned: "No move to oust Bhandari, says Chamling" was prominently placed in the middle of the front page along with Chamling's photograph.

The report was based on Chamling's statement given to the Press at a Press conference held in Hotel Mayur in Gangtok on October 31, 1991 where he stated that the news-item carried in the *North Bengal Citizen*, a sister-publication of the Siliguri-based Hindi daily, *Janpath Samachar*, alleging that he was making moves to topple Bhandari, was "false and baseless".

Chamling alleged that the editor of the paper, Rajendra Baid, was trying to create "misunderstanding" between him and the Chief Minister, whom he considered the "undisputed leader" of the people. While Chamling's statement regarding his activities was quite clear, I doubted his motives. The public statement on a sensitive issue given at a time when many Central leaders were visiting the State would certainly raise

eyebrows. It was to me a shrewd move to become the centre of attraction. And Chamling needed this more than anything else at that time. There had been during that period strong rumours that Chamling had at least 12 of the 32 MLAs with him and it would be possible even to topple the government and form a Congress (I)-backed government headed by Chamling if the Centre gave the green signal.

At the Press conference, Chamling also threatened to take legal action against Baid if he failed to tender an apology within 48 hours from the time of receipt of the notice which would be sent to him. This was all reported on the front page of the *Observer* which would automatically draw the readers' attention more than any other report on the same page which had the SAARC seminar as its lead story. During the Press conference, Chamling called for R.B. Subba, a practising Sikkimese lawyer who was also in-charge of the SSP's legal cell, and asked him to immediately issue a notice to Baid.

The CPI(M) item on page three, which was politically of lesser significance than Chamling's story, was based on the Press statement given by Anjan, who alleged that Duk Nath was arrested on "false charges" and "severely beaten up" by the Sikkim police at Gangtok's Sadar Thana where he was being detained along with the others arrested. The CPI(M) had also appealed to all "democratic people and parties, and human rights organisations" in the country and to the Union Government to raise their voice against what they perceived as a "barbaric and fascist rule" in Sikkim.

This item appeared on the top right hand side of the paper on page three under the headline: "CPI(M) appeals to democratic, human rights organisations" and had Anjan's photograph along with it. While the stand adopted by the CPI(M), as reflected in Anjan's statement, was quite strong, it was devoid of any personal attack on the Chief Minister. I felt that it was quite safe to publish the story though I had some reservations. It was important for the people of Sikkim to know the stand taken by the CPI(M) on the present crisis.

This time I was determined not to submit to censorship. I left the press in a huff and decided to go straight to Siliguri and get the paper printed there. Siliguri, across the State border in the plains of West Bengal, offered an ideal base for independent publishing. But even Siliguri was not safe enough as I was to discover. I withdrew some money from the bank and left for Siliguri at 11 a.m. Gachung Bhutia, the young boy from Bixthang in west Sikkim who was working for my uncle and staying just above our house in Deorali, accompanied me. As usual, I was at the wheel. Fortunately, my jeep was in good condition and we reached Siliguri at around 3 p.m.

I went straight to the residence of M. Choudhary, editor of *Bharat Darpan*, a Hindi daily in Siliguri, which is located beside the national highway at 2nd mile near Siliguri. For four months in 1990 after the curious elections, which returned Bhandari's SSP to power with all the Assembly seats captured, I brought the paper out at Choudhary's press at 2nd mile. Apart from heavy political interference, my own press had been pillaged by unknown persons one night. After that, no local printer was willing to undertake printing of the *Observer* for fear of harassment by the authorities in Sikkim.

The Choudharys were not only very helpful and cooperative in matters regarding printing of the paper but were also very good to us and made us feel at home whenever we were at their place. "You can stay here at our place instead of going to the hotel", Choudhary used to tell me often. I was very grateful to them for allowing me to print my paper at their press and didn't want to bother them too much. Their helpful nature made things a lot easier for us who were going through a tough time in all respects.

Luckily for me, all of them were there when I reached Siliguri, including Choudhary himself and his eldest son, Sandeep, who practically looked after their printing establishment which was well set up in their own residence although the editorial section and the office were located in the main town. After briefing them on the purpose of my visit I got to the point

and asked them whether they would print the paper. They had a quick look at the positives which I had carried with me and although they said they didn't find anything objectionable, they were quite hesitant and didn't make any commitment at that point. "The CPM article is a bit anti-Bhandari", said Sandeep browsing through the lay-out. I was, to be honest with myself, quite surprised at their reaction but had no option but to hope for the best.

They were willing to print Chamling's piece as it was against their rival – Baid. "Although we are not pro-Bhandari, we are anti-Baid", said Choudhary bluntly. This was quite understandable as the two daily Hindi papers from Siliguri, located at the same place at Seth Srilal Market, belonged to these two families who didn't seem to get along well with each other.

Choudhary finally asked me to see him in the evening at 7 p.m. at his office in the town. While I was quite positive about their final decision I was also quite apprehensive and was not certain how they would finally react.

After this I went straight to see my friend, Chulthim Denzongpa, who was then the Deputy Commissioner of the Income-Tax Department in Siliguri. I met him at his residence in Pradhan Nagar. I often visited his place whenever I went down to Siliguri. Chulthim has been a good friend of mine and has always shown a keen interest in my work. We also shared similar views on important political and social issues of Sikkim. Both of us wanted to see a lot of things happen in Sikkim but somehow the politicians were not up to the mark. Chulthim was quite positive that Choudhary would print the paper and we decided to meet at the *Bharat Darpan* office at 7 p.m. in the evening. His presence would have helped.

The next person I wanted to contact was Anup Deb, a senior advocate and former Advocate General of Sikkim, who lived in Collegepara in Siliguri, which is slightly away from the main *bazaar*. He is not only one of my few well-wishers but he also turned out to be a very helpful and reliable person. We

worked together on many occasions, including the State's Assembly seat reservation case in the Supreme Court. Unfortunately, he was out of station.

My next stop was at Anjan's residence near Deb's place. This was my first visit to his place and it took quite a while before I could locate his residence. After waiting for about half an hour at his place Anjan arrived and I at once briefed him about the problems that I was facing and the political situation in Sikkim.

I came to know Anjan in Gangtok during the Lok Sabha elections in Sikkim held in May-June 1991. Although originally from Assam, he was then in charge of the party's State Committee in Sikkim and normally resided in Siliguri. Unlike other members of the party, I found Anjan to be fairly reasonable, sober and balanced in his outlook. His views on Sikkim politics and his party's role in the State made some sense although the party still had a long way to go in Sikkim before the people could feel its presence. The CPI(M), including Anjan himself, got a lot of coverage in the *Observer*, *Statesman* and other local and national papers during the Lok Sabha elections in mid-1991.

As usual, Anjan seemed very interested and listened attentively to what I had to say. However, leaving aside his personal feeling, I was quite doubtful of the CPI(M)'s attitude towards what was going on in Sikkim. Its leader, Duk Nath, who was the party's candidate for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim, had been arrested and locked up at the Sadar Thana but surprisingly there was no reaction from the party at the national level. This was indeed very damaging and discouraging for the party's morale in Sikkim. During the Lok Sabha polls, Duk Nath had become quite popular and a section of the opposition even projected him as an opposition candidate against the ruling party's D.K. Bhandari, who eventually got elected with an overwhelming majority.

There were also strong rumours that Duk Nath and Hem Lall, who was also arrested in connection with the publication

of the pamphlet, were severely beaten up and tortured by the police. So far, the CPI(M)'s only reaction was to issue a mild Press statement from Siliguri through Anjan, who himself failed to come to Gangtok, where his presence was very much needed.

There were so many things that the party might have done but didn't. Could it be that the party leaders at the national level were with Bhandari? Irrespective of whichever party they may belong, most people in Sikkim never trusted Central leaders. I, too, shared the same view and had my own reservations on many Delhi-based national leaders.

The CPI(M)'s inaction was explained by Anjan himself who told me that his party could not react as it was not quite sure of Duk Nath's non-involvement in the publication of the pamphlet. Anjan also told me that he had made contacts with Duk Nath at the *thana* through someone and found out that he had not been beaten up as reported. However, my sources said he was beaten up badly. Later on, I came to know that I was correct. How could a national party like the CPI(M) make such blunders – I wondered.

Anjan also informed me that he strongly suspected Hem Lall to be involved with the publication of the pamphlet which he said was very damaging for both the CM and his wife. This also puzzled me as I was under the impression that Hem Lall was not at all involved. I felt that he was being framed by the police, who had wanted to get at him on many occasions earlier but failed. Anjan also said his party was making arrangements with their lawyer for Duk Nath's release the next day. The CPI(M) could formally react only after getting the real picture from Duk Nath himself. Anjan felt that even if the content of the pamphlet was correct, the foul language and the manner in which the allegations were made would not be acceptable to the party.

Unfortunately, Duk Nath, a post-graduate in Nepali from NBU (North Bengal University), who was arrested from his residence at Kanchen View Hotel complex in Deorali on the

night of October 24 by the Sikkim police, was released only on November 11 after facing much torture and humiliation. Surprisingly, even after his release there was no reaction from his party. Duk Nath himself told me just after his release that he would call for a Press conference and reveal everything.

He, however, left Deorali and shifted to some other place. He soon disappeared from the political scene altogether. And with that the brief challenge of the CPI(M), a party so powerful in neighbouring West Bengal but helpless in Bhandari's Sikkim, came to an abrupt end.

Both Duk Nath and Hem Lall, my friend and college-mate from the Government Law College in Bombay and a practising lawyer in Bombay High Court, were handcuffed and publicly paraded through the town when they were taken from the *thana* to the District Court by the police in connection with their bail application. This was one of the methods adopted by the authorities to harass and humiliate 'anti-government' forces in Sikkim.

Anjan and I decided to meet again the next day at the CPI(M) leader and former MP, Ananda Pathak's residence, which was near the SNT (Sikkim Nationalised Transport) office in Siliguri. As planned, I went to the *Bharat Darpan* office in the evening to meet Choudhary.

It was Diwali night and the whole of Siliguri town was in a festive mood. The town was colourfully decorated with the usual crackers bursting from every corner of the streets. It was both very noisy and somewhat frightening. This was our first experience with Diwali celebrations in a major town in the plains and it was indeed a spectacular sight, particularly for Gachung, who had been living in the village all the while. The sights and sounds and the rush in the town fascinated him and he enjoyed every moment of it.

The festivities were lost on me however, and I was in no mood to enjoy and appreciate what was going on. Because of our eagerness to get things done and to get them done on time and in the proper way, we journalists lose a lot of fun and

laughter that life offers us. But this is a part of our profession and we have to learn to live with it.

After a brief chat, Choudhary asked me to come to his place in the morning. Because of the noise of crackers just outside the office and the general Diwali atmosphere, it certainly wasn't the ideal place to discuss serious matters. So we decided to meet at his residence the next day to talk things over. To my great surprise, Chulthim never turned up. Perhaps he was busy or perhaps he didn't want to get involved. I thought he might contact me at the hotel but he didn't. I made no efforts to contact him either.

Anjan turned up 45 minutes late the next day, but by 9 a.m. we were at Pathak's place. This was my first encounter with the veteran Marxist leader. I had heard of him and read much about him in the papers but here I was meeting him face to face. Pathak is perhaps the only well-known CPI(M) leader in the hills of Darjeeling. However, he was a total stranger in Sikkim. The question of the *Observer* being printed at the CPI(M) press in Calcutta, which figured during my talk with Anjan the previous night, did not come up. I did not initiate any talk on the subject either. We had a cup of tea in the small, simple sitting room and left after a short while. Our next move was to get in touch with the DYFI (Democratic Youth Federation of India) Secretary, Tulsi Bhattarai, to explore the possibility of the paper being printed in Siliguri.

The meeting with the DYFI Secretary was inconclusive. Finally, we decided to get at least this issue of the paper printed either in Calcutta or in a nearby town in Nepal, which was not very far away. But firstly, I would try Choudhary's press. The final arrangement made was that if the Choudharys refused to go ahead with the printing, then I would leave the negatives of the paper with Anjan and he would make arrangements to get the paper printed somewhere. I appreciated his concern and cooperation and then left him.

Apart from *Bbarat Darpan*, the only place where I could get the paper printed was at Baid's press. The rest of the print-

ing presses in Siliguri, excepting one, were all letter presses and they would be of no use to me since my paper had to be printed on an off-set press. I knew Baid well enough to make a request to get my paper printed at his press. However, I had earlier decided not to get in touch with him for various reasons but mainly because of the fact that the front page article on Chamling was against him and he would certainly not oblige me. I was also told that Baid was away in Bhutan for some work and there was no point in going to his place to try him. Choudhary had told me earlier that the *Uttarbanga* press, where the daily Bengali paper was printed, would not take up the printing of the *Observer* as they were quite close to Bhandari. In any case, they had to get permission from the owner who was away in Calcutta.

When I got to Choudhary's place the next day I was told that Baid had been picked up in the early hours of the morning and the situation was quite tense. Choudhary, who was obviously in touch with what was happening, said he had been informed that a Sikkim journalist had visited Baid the previous evening. He asked me whether I had met Baid. I said I didn't. Apparently, the Sikkim police had been keeping an eye on Baid's residence at Seth Srilal Market, where his Press office was also located. The police may have thought that I had met Baid the previous night when I went there to see Choudhary at his office, which is less than ten yards away from Baid's residence.

I was told earlier that Baid had been away in Bhutan but came to know only afterwards that he had returned home the day I arrived in Siliguri. It is possible that he wanted to be back for the Diwali celebrations. He was picked up illegally by the Sikkim police acting outside its jurisdiction around 6 a.m. on November 6 while on his morning walk.

I wasn't exactly sure why he was arrested. I never asked anybody, including Choudhary, who, realising the gravity of the situation, advised me not to get the paper printed. "It will unnecessarily lead to all sorts of problems", he said. He,

however, said he would carry Chamling's story in his own paper as it was against Baid. After discussing publication of this particular piece in *Bbarat Darpan* with Sandeep, I decided to go to the town and get them a zeroxed copy of the front page.

I left their residence in a hurry and headed for Siliguri to get the photocopy of the front page. And then my instincts came into play. I had this sudden impulse to leave everything and get back to Sikkim straightaway. I cancelled my earlier plans and decided not to give Chamling's story to Sandeep or the negatives of the paper to Anjan for publication.

Half way through to Siliguri, I turned my vehicle and headed home. It was an instant decision based purely on instinct. It was 11 a.m. I didn't even stop at Choudhary's place on my way back but drove straight home. I was apprehensive of trouble on the way but luckily nothing happened. If the authorities had kept an eye on me they would certainly have become very suspicious. I had the printing materials carefully tucked away somewhere in the jeep to avoid being apprehended on the way back.

Instead of going straight to Gangtok, I took the diversion to Kalimpong, had lunch with the former Sikkim chief minister, Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa, at the Chakung House, and reached home on the same day late in the evening. I was happy that I had done my best as a journalist to get the paper out. But things were far beyond my control.

CHAPTER 2

Fear Is The Key

"We've got some difficult days ahead. But it really doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop... And I've looked over, and I've seen the Promised Land. I may not get there with you, but I want you to know tonight that we as a people will get to the Promised Land. So I'm happy tonight. I'm not fearing any man..."

Martin Luther King, April 3, 1968

"Dictatorship – a fetish worship of one man – is a passing phase. A state of society where men may not speak their minds, where children denounce their parents to the police... such a state of society cannot endure".

Winston Churchill

During the brief but eventful stay in New Delhi in the month of January 1991, Kazi, the chief architect of Sikkim's merger, in a Press statement warned of a "new thinking" in Sikkim if the Centre continued to neglect the former Himalayan Kingdom and failed to honour the terms of the merger.

He said Sikkim's entry into the Union was conditional and the Centre was morally and constitutionally bound to respect the historical agreements made between the Government of

India and the people of Sikkim prior to Sikkim becoming the 22nd State of the Indian Union in 1975. These terms, reflected in Article 371F of the Indian Constitution relating to Sikkim, made special provisions for the State that guaranteed preservation of the distinct identity of Sikkim within the Union.

For years, and particularly after the rout of the opposition in the 1989 Assembly elections, which saw the curious spectacle of the ruling party 'capturing' all the 32 seats in the Assembly, the people of Sikkim have been looking towards the Centre for deliverance from a "reign of terror" in the State, where the "peaceful atmosphere" was best described as the "peace of the grave". Beneath the placid surface, the undercurrents were strong. Tension and discontentment have been building up over the years.

Kazi did not spell out what he meant by "new thinking" but his warning was enough indication to his masters in New Delhi with whom he kept in constant touch, that something was drastically wrong in Sikkim. Events that followed later in the year were indications that the Centre had responded to Kazi's warning. For the first time since Sikkim's takeover, a host of Central leaders visited Sikkim during the year and acquainted themselves with various problems of the State. This interaction eventually resulted in the reorganisation of the State unit of the Congress (I), which was then in a moribund state.

Much hope was placed on Ashok Kumar Subba, a stocky middle-aged businessman-turned-politician from west Sikkim, when he took charge of the Congress (I) as its Convenor in June 1990. He was later elected as the SPCC(I) President in January 1992. The Rising Sun Party (RSP), led by a former minister in the Kazi Government, Ram Chandra Poudyal, soon disappeared from the political scene after its humiliating defeat in the 1989 Assembly polls with Poudyal choosing to stay in Delhi instead of looking after his party in Sikkim. This left the Congress as the only visible opposition party in the State, where many people looked at politicians and political parties, includ-

ing the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP), with increasing mistrust and indifference.

However, there was still a section of the people who looked to the Congress with much hope and expectation. Subba, once the President of the State unit of the Janata Party, who replaced Madan Kumar Chhetri – a former IPS officer who resigned from service to try his luck in politics – as the SPCC(I) President, was no ordinary politician. He was a very rich man and didn't have to hunt for a sponsor, unlike his predecessors, to build up the Congress party in the State. Additionally, with his contacts in Delhi – a factor which is increasingly becoming vital in Indian politics – Subba appeared to be an ideal choice to head the party in the State.

His choice as the SPCC(I) chief was welcomed by many Congressmen in the State, who blamed that lack of funds as being chiefly responsible for the disorganised state of the party in Sikkim. With his money-spinning lottery business in Delhi, many people felt that there would now be no problem with financing the party in the State. Another essential quality of the new leader was that he not only had some experience in State politics but also belonged to the Limbu community, which forms a sizeable section of the population in the State.

Subba at once swung into action to prove his credentials. With his connections in Delhi and the North-Eastern region from where he obtained his lottery business, he managed to convince the party high command at the Centre to hold the "extraordinary meeting" of the North Eastern Congress Coordination Committee-I (NECCC-I) in Sikkim. A galaxy of Congress leaders, including several Union ministers and chief ministers of the North-East region, attended the one-day conference of the NECCC(I) held in Gangtok on September 26, 1991.

The meeting was not only a big success in terms of attendance by influential Congress leaders from outside the State, it also boosted Subba's own image among his partymen and in the State, where he had been virtually condemned and rejected by a large section of the people for his failure to con-

front the ruling party and contest the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim in May 1991. Subba chose to abide by the directions of his party high command not to contest the polls rather than respond to the sentiments of the people and his party colleagues, who wanted him to contest the elections as a candidate of a "united opposition". Realising how he had let the people down at the last moment during the Lok Sabha polls, Subba was acutely aware of how badly he needed this face-saving device to enable him to face the people and return to Sikkim from Delhi, where he had been residing.

Much to the SPCC(I)'s delight, the visiting Congress leaders put up a good show. The Union Minister and NECCC(I) Chairman, Purno A. Sangma, who had visited Sikkim on several occasions earlier, was well-briefed when he declared at a crowded Press conference after the meeting that from henceforth the Congress would seriously organise itself in the State unlike in past years when confusing signals from the Centre hampered party organisation in the State.

Bhandari's dual policy of projecting himself as a Congressman at the Centre while attacking the Congress unit in the State had for long succeeded in confusing many people, including Central leaders. "In the past, we were not very clear on what we were supposed to do in Sikkim", said Sangma, clearly hinting at the party high command's undefined understanding with Bhandari, and then added, "From now on, the Congress will organise itself in the State in a big way". Sangma then said what most Congressmen wanted to hear: "We have had enough of Bhandari. We will organise the party without him".

He even went to the extent of stating that the Congress should be prepared to "replace" the government at any time if the need arose. This was a powerful and electrifying signal to the entire opposition camp, which was eagerly waiting to find out what the Centre had in mind.

The message conveyed at the meeting was clear and precise – the Centre was not only unhappy with Bhandari but was also looking for an alternative. Sangma was well aware of

how Bhandari had made a fool of the Congress (I) when he, after getting the party's support for his wife's election to the Lok Sabha, repudiated the understanding reached between the two parties after Rajiv Gandhi's death. The understanding was that the Congress (I) would not field any other candidate other than Mrs. Bhandari. The SSP was expected to support her.

That the Congress (I) was on the offensive can also be gauged by the Press statement of the Union Minister, Margaret Alva, who told reporters in Gangtok during the meeting that the appointment of P.K. Pradhan as the State's Chief Secretary was "illegal" and did not have the prior approval of the Home Ministry. This was a stunning blow to Bhandari on his home-ground and particularly when Pradhan was perhaps his closest confidant in the bureaucracy. Pradhan's appointment as the Chief Secretary of the State in July 1991 raised much controversy and Alva was once again stoking the fire and keeping the issue alive. Because of his closeness to the Chief Minister and the enormous power that he wielded, many referred to Pradhan as the "deputy chief minister". Bhandari had taken a great risk in by-passing Tulsi P. Sharma, the seniormost Sikkimese officer, and appointing Pradhan as the Chief Secretary. Pradhan was not only a controversial figure in the State but also had corruption charges levelled against him by the CBI (Criminal Bureau of Investigation).

The Kazi, a veteran Congressman and the grand-old-man of Sikkim, even at 89 was in a fighting mood and threw a challenge to the Central leaders who had assembled in Gangtok: "The time is ripe for a people's movement in Sikkim and if the Centre is no longer interested here, the people themselves have to come forward and start mass agitation".

In a Press statement carried in the *Observer* during the meeting, Kazi reiterated his earlier statement: "I have brought democracy to Sikkim and I want the people to enjoy the fruits of democracy".

"I do not want to hold any official post for myself", he said, but if things do not improve and if the democratic aspira-

tions of the people are suppressed by a handful of politicians, bureaucrats, and businessmen, then, "I will do *lock-cham* (a return dance)", clearly indicating that he would, once again, come out in the open and begin a people's movement for restoration of democracy and democratic values in Sikkim.

Once a staunch opponent of the Chogyal, Kazi, during the meeting, said the political situation in the State was worse than during the Chogyal regime, a fact that has time and again been acknowledged by many Sikkimese and other Sikkim watchers. He said the people had lost the sense of freedom and they were living in constant fear. The Kazi, unlike before when he was very much regarded as New Delhi's No. 1 man in Sikkim, squarely blamed the Centre for the tragic state of affairs in Sikkim.

Among those who attended the much-publicised meeting were the Assam and Mizoram chief ministers, Hiteswar Saikia and Lalthanhawla, the former Manipur chief minister, Rishang Keishing, and the former Union Minister and Planning Commission Deputy Chairman, Pranab Mukherjee. The two Union ministers and Congress (I) stalwarts, Arjun Singh and Sharad Pawar, also visited the State during the same period on different occasions.

While the President, R. Venkataraman, visited the State in the last week of October, there were reports that the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, was also planning to visit Sikkim. Suddenly, Sikkim seemed to be attracting a lot of attention and this was indeed a negative signal for Bhandari. Venkataraman, while laying the foundation stone of the Central Referral Hospital in Gangtok, said he would urge the Union Government to meet the "problems" faced by the people of Sikkim. He did not quite specify the "problems" the people were facing.

It may be noted here that the Centre had earlier flatly rejected two basic demands of the State raised by the SSP; firstly, the restoration of Assembly seat reservation of the Sikkimese Nepalese, and secondly, the inclusion of the Nepali language in the eighth schedule of the Constitution. Rejection of

Bhandari's demand on Assembly seat reservation came during the short-lived Chandra Shekhar Government at the Centre.

In a letter to the State Chief Minister dated March 8, 1991, the former Union Minister of State for Home, Subodh Kant Sahay, said the Nepalese, who constituted "an overwhelming majority of the population of the State," did not require seats to be reserved for them in the Assembly. Sahay asked Bhandari not to press for the demand anymore. Copies of the letter were widely circulated to the Press and the public by the Congress (I) in August 1991.

The demand for constitutional recognition of the Nepali language was also rejected by the Narasimha Rao Government in August 1991. Declaring this in the Parliament on August 29, 1991, the Minister of State for Home, M.M. Jacob, said there was no move to include Nepali in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution as demanded by the SSP. He said fulfilment of such demands would invite "reactions and repercussions" from different parts of the country.

While addressing a Congress public meeting in Singtam in east Sikkim in the first week of November 1991, the Union Minister for Urban Development, Sheila Kaul, said she was aware of the suppression of democratic aspirations of the people by the ruling party in the State and assured all help from the Central party leadership. The Congress (I) even managed to stage a small rally at the Singtam meeting.

In a significant move, the SPCC(I) during the meeting, raised the demand for declaring Sikkim a "tribal state". States in the North-East region, where tribals are in the majority, were considered as 'tribal states' and the Congress (I) wanted Sikkim to belong to such a category of states even though the term 'tribal state' was not mentioned anywhere in the Constitution. Subba wanted all 'Sikkim subjects', meaning all those who were genuine Sikkimese holding genuine Sikkim Subject certificates issued during the Chogyal-era, to be declared 'Scheduled Tribes'. This was viewed by many Sikkimese as an ideal device to check the growing influx of "outsiders" and to

keep the three ethnic communities – Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese – intact. Attempts to protect and unite all Sikkimese had been made by various parties in the past but their efforts proved futile.

The minority Bhutia-Lepchas (BLs), who are considered to be the original inhabitants of the State, were declared Scheduled Tribes in 1978 and if the majority of Sikkimese Nepalese were also granted ST status, then the majority of those living in the State, who were genuine local Sikkimese, would become tribals and the State would then be regarded as a 'tribal state'. Perhaps in this way, special economic incentives and other facilities and protections made available to the Scheduled Tribes in other parts of the country, would also be extended to all Sikkimese. In this way, constitutional safeguards could also be provided to protect the 'rights and interests' of all Sikkimese, including reservation of seats in the State Legislative Assembly for the Sikkimese Nepalese.

"The new-found belligerence of the Congress is best illustrated by the manner in which its volunteers had fastened their own flags on lamposts alongside permanent signboards featuring Mr. Bhandari and the SSP on Gangtok's busy M.G. Marg", said a report in *The Times of India* during that period, which rightly described the mood of optimism within the Congress circle. The report was not sent by us, but by Debashis Munshi, the *Time's* North-East correspondent, who had come to Gangtok to cover the NE Cong-I meet.

The SPCC(I), during the President's visit, not only reiterated their demand for "tribal state" status for Sikkim, stating that Sikkim's regional identity would best be preserved if this demand was met, but in a memorandum submitted to the President, the party also demanded the recall of the Governor, R.H. Tahiliani, and the immediate dismissal of the Bhandari Government and prosecution of the Chief Minister for his "corrupt", "communal" and "anti-national" activities.

For the Congress, and particularly for Subba, there were no soft options left in the State, where people were becoming

increasingly restive and frustrated with the way the ruling party and opposition parties were functioning. The Parliamentary elections for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim held in the third week of May 1991 provided an opportune moment for the Congress to rally all anti-Bhandari opposition forces to project its unity and solidarity against the ruling party and to defeat its candidate. Unfortunately, the showdown never took place and Bhandari was once again the victor. The Congress (I) was chiefly responsible for this tragic mistake and the people never forgave the party for it. Even Rajiv's death had very little impact on the people, many of whom felt that he had betrayed the innocent and simple-minded people of Sikkim for petty considerations of the party, which had "sold" Sikkim under the pretext of ushering in "full-fledged democracy".

While the SPCC(I) wanted to field its own candidate for the Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim, the party high command at the Centre, without consulting its State unit, made a "mid-night pact" with Bhandari, enabling the two parties to field one candidate, Dil Kumari Bhandari, who was then in Congress (I). Most Congressmen in the State did not approve of this arrangement and opposed it. Till the very last moment, the Congress (I) and other opposition parties projected Subba as its "joint candidate". Finally, after much hesitation and dithering, the SPCC(I) had to bow down to the "orders of the high command" and Subba quit the race at the very last hour, leaving the entire opposition in a state of disarray.

The last-minute "betrayal" of the Congress not only frustrated its own supporters, but was seen as a great let down for the entire opposition. Because of the confusion and lack of time, the opposition parties could not put up their candidates although they, more or less, had decided to field a "consensus candidate" to oppose Dil Kumari if Subba was not given the party ticket. The Kazi's frantic effort to contest the elections after Subba's decision not to contest made no headway. Surprisingly, he was not even permitted to file his nomination papers as his name had already been struck off from the

voters' list. In the eyes of the public, Subba was a total failure and his incompetence at such a crucial moment proved beyond any shadow of doubt, that he, as apprehended by many, was more a businessman than a politician. Most people were then fully convinced that Subba's first priority was his lottery business and that he was using his position for his business interests. That he chose to stay in Delhi most of the time even after he was formally elected as the PCC(I) President in January 1992, instead of being in the State, where his party needed him the most, justified this allegation.

As anticipated, Dil Kumari never became a Congress member in the Lok Sabha. In fact, she left the Congress and rejoined the SSP soon after her return to the Parliament. Bhandari himself declared after the poll that the pact with the Congress (I) was no longer valid. He said the understanding reached for the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim was only with Rajiv Gandhi, and after his death (Rajiv was killed in a bomb blast in south India on May 21, 1991), the pact no longer existed. Bhandari told reporters at a Press conference in Gangtok at the end of May 1991, that the understanding reached between him and Rajiv on March 23, 1991 for the Lok Sabha poll was not "between two parties but between two individuals". This put a final end to the "SSP-Cong pact", which aroused so much controversy and confusion.

The failure of the Congress leadership to capture the imagination of the people and face up to the challenge made several prominent political figures in the State seriously think on the long-awaited formation of a new regional party in the State, which was under process, but had temporarily been shelved due to the North-East Congress meet. Many of those who wanted a new party in the State were in the Congress (I) and included people like the former Congress (I) MP, Pahalman Subba, and Athup Lepcha, a former minister in the Bhandari Government (1979-1984).

Influential members of the Citizens for Democracy (CFD), including Hem Lall Bhandari, leaders of the Denzong People's

Chogpa (DPC), the Rising Sun Party (RSP) and other ethnic groups also wanted formation of a "united front" in Sikkim as a viable alternative to the ruling party. Even Kazi showed a keen interest in the new party, which, had it been formed, would have been a "genuine regional party" having a national outlook. The party's basic policy was to safeguard the regional identity of Sikkim, within the framework of the Constitution, while respecting the country's strategic interest in the region.

The delay in forming the new party had its own reasons. And one main reason was the holding of the NECCC(I) meeting, which aroused much hope but eventually turned out to be a lot of noise without achieving anything concrete. Opposition leaders and a section of the Cong(I) leadership in the State, who were in favour of the new party, wanted to adopt a "wait and watch" strategy to first find out what was really in the minds of the Central leaders before embarking on the formation of a new party. Could it be that the Congress, despite its earlier set-back and its inherent drawbacks, would seriously consider gearing up its party unit in the State and lead a united fight against Bhandari? This was a big question that needed a prompt answer.

"If the new party is formed prior to the Congress meeting, then Bhandari may allege that we are backing him to oppose the meeting", said Pahalman Subba, a staunch anti-Bhandari Congressman, who was voted to the Lok Sabha in 1979 on the Sikkim Janata Parishad (SJP) ticket in the first Parliamentary polls in Sikkim after its absorption into the Union. Said another opposition leader, "We don't want to jeopardise anybody's chances to oppose the ruling party in the State during the Congress (I) meet". Prior to the NECCC(I) meeting, there were strong rumours that the ruling party would "sabotage" the holding of the meeting.

Pahalman Subba, who unsuccessfully contested the last Assembly elections from Soreong constituency in west Sikkim, is perhaps one of the few Congress leaders who refused to submit to pressures and lures of the ruling party. Many of his col-

leagues, including the former PCC(I) President, Madan K. Chhetri, and PCC(I) General Secretary, R.B. Subba, succumbed to it and joined the SSP after the party's defeat in the Assembly polls in November 1989.

My own observations carried in the March 20, 1991 issue of the *Observer* clearly indicated the likely formation of the new party: "The unstable political situation in the country and the emergence of many socio-political organisations in the State are factors which may shape the formation of a bigger and more coherent political organisation in the State". My analysis was that "the present confusion within the Congress party in the State", due to the SSP-Cong pact for the Lok Sabha polls, "may well act as a catalyst to this new development".

While the leadership of the new party during that period was still in question, most opposition leaders were in favour of the new party being headed by someone from the OBC (other backward classes) community, which was in the majority among the Nepalese in Sikkim. Selection of an 'OBC candidate' to lead the new party had its own justifications.

The Mandal Commission Report on Sikkim listed Rais, Limbus, Mangars, Tamangs, Gurungs and Bhujels, who form the bulk of the State's population, as OBCs, and excluded the minority Nepalese such as the Brahmins and Kashtriyas (Bahun-Chettris as they are known locally) and the Newars. This naturally led to further "division" among the Nepalese between the 'backward class' (traditionally known as the *mat-walts*, meaning consumers of alcohol), and the 'advanced class', who were comparatively quite well-off in the State.

This division had its inherent racial overtones with the OBCs forming the 'Mongoloid' group and the other Nepalese being bracketed in the 'Aryan' fold, though the Newars, who virtually controlled the State administration, were originally from the Kathmandu valley in Nepal and belonged predominantly to the Mongoloid stock. There were others who wanted further regrouping on racial lines between the Mongoloids, which include the OBCs, the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals,

and the Newars as against the Aryan Bahun-Chettris, who were originally from the plains of northern India in Rajasthan.

Considering the fact that at least 80% of the State's population are of Mongoloid stock, this move had dangerous implications. The immediate aim of the Mongoloids was Bhandari's overthrow but the long-term strategy was the establishment of a full-fledged democracy, which actually meant "rule of the majority". And in Sikkim, the Mongoloid group was in the majority and shared many things in common, including race, religion and language.

Bhandari, a Chettri, was sharp enough to see the polarisation of political forces in Sikkim and at once reacted against this dangerous trend and immediately rejected the implementation of the Mandal report in Sikkim. The State Government's rejection of the implementation of the Commission's recommendation, which wanted 27% reservation of jobs for the backward classes in Central Government and its undertakings, naturally infuriated the OBCs, who at once made their resentment known to the authorities.

For instance, the Akhil Sikkim Kirati Limbu Chumlung, representing the Limbus in the State, accused Bhandari, of "high-handedness" and demanded a "review" of the State Government's decision on the Mandal issue. It said the government's decision deprived the "majority" Sikkimese Nepalese of their share in "social and economic benefits" just to appease a "very small" section of the Nepalese community. The Rais, who are the largest section among the Nepalese population in the State and perhaps the most deprived lot, held indoor meetings, formed associations, and this eventually led to the formation of the Mandal Coordination Committee headed by a veteran politician and retired civil servant, C.D. Rai, who also edited the *Himali Bela*, a Nepali weekly published from Gangtok.

But the main person who was in the minds of most *matwalis* was Pawan Kumar Chamling, a Cabinet Minister and a popular figure in the ruling party, who belonged to the Rai

community, which is in the majority in south district of the State. Beside OBC leaders, other organisations, including the Congress (I), kept an open line with Chamling, who was being perceived as the next man to occupy Mintokgang (official residence of the chief minister). In fact, during the NECCC(I) meeting, there were hectic behind-the-scene manoeuvres to propose Chamling as an alternative to Bhandari, a proposition that favoured the Congress party, which was then going all-out to oust Bhandari. Attempts were made to bring Ashok Subba and Chamling to the negotiating table to chalk out strategies to topple Bhandari and form a Congress-backed government in Sikkim.

Chamling's supporters claimed that he had the support of at least 12 MLAs. If Chamla Tshering, an influential tribal Minister, could rope in at least 6 of the 13 tribal MLAs, Bhandari would be ousted from power anytime. This was the plan floated among the inner circles and the strategy was to get the backing of the Congress (I). Chamling even went to the extent of telling some of his close associates that he would support a "BL candidate as CM" if the need arose. The frequent visits of Central leaders to the State during this crucial period under one pretext or another, and the vocal stand adopted by the PCC(I) created an entirely different political scenario in the State. Beneath Bhandari's somewhat cool and confident exterior, he was a worried man inside.

Bhandari chose to keep silent all the while. But he knew he had to act, and act fast. And then one fine day, he reacted. The first to get the axe was the tribal leader, Tashi Wangdi Fonpo, an ex-major of the Indian army, who alone created enough problems for Bhandari. Fonpo was arrested on October 21, the day President, R. Venkataraman, arrived in Gangtok for a State visit, and put behind bars. It was reported that the Chief Minister himself went to the *bazaar* and supervised Fonpo's arrest.

Next came the arrest of other opposition leaders – CPI(M)'s Duk Nath Nepal, Cong(I)'s James Basnet, and Hem

Lall Bhandari of the Citizens for Democracy (CFD). Within a week, five persons, including Fonpo's father, Nedup Bhutia, an active member of the Congress (I), were arrested and detained at the Sadar Thana in Gangtok in pitiable conditions. Reports of police torture on those arrested created fear and panic everywhere even as rumours of further arrests were making the rounds in Gangtok.

The sudden crackdown followed publication of a scandalous pamphlet in Nepali, alleging that Bhandari had AIDS and his wife, Dill Kumari Bhandari, MP, was having extra-marital affairs in Delhi, where she had been residing after her somewhat suspicious breakaway from her husband. While Fonpo was allegedly involved in circulation of the pamphlet, Duk Nath and Hem Lall were blamed for being involved in publication of the 3-page pamphlet, which was by now the talk-of-the-town.

Realising the gravity of the situation, I took extra precautions while performing my duty as a journalist. Experience proved that reporting in such a volatile situation would evoke sharp reactions from the authorities. Sometimes, even simple reports were treated as 'anti-government' propaganda. Despite the risk involved, the news regarding the arrest of the opposition leaders was carried in the front page of the *Observer* as its lead story. We also sent reports to the *Statesman* and the *Times of India* on similar lines. My own report, captioned "Leaflet runs down Sikkim CM and wife", appeared on the front page of the Calcutta edition of the *Statesman* on October 24, 1991.

The *Statesman* report was simple but factual. While it reported that the pamphlet alleged "sexual escapades" of Mr. and Mrs. Bhandari, it mentioned the identity of those arrested and the reaction of the Congress (I), which said the arrest of opposition leaders clearly proved that "there was no democracy in the State where freedom of expression and thought were being curtailed".

Apprehensive of trouble, I approached the police for

protection. In a letter to the Director-General of Police, H.D. Pillai, on October 28, 1991, I made a request for "adequate security" arrangements for myself and my family in view of the tense political situation following the crackdown on opposition leaders. There was no response from the police. I knew my request had been turned down as before. Nevertheless, I went about performing my duties as a newsman, being fully conscious of the fact that the profession that I had chosen ten years ago, was risky and hazardous all the way.

I only learnt later on that Bhandari was furious with my October 24 report in the *Statesman* and wanted to sue me and the paper. He was of the opinion that the report was malicious and defamatory. However, good sense prevailed and some senior bureaucrats opposed the move, stating that there was nothing defamatory in the report. I also came to know later on from those arrested and others that the police had planned to frame me in the pamphlet controversy and get me arrested. If those arrested yielded to police pressures at the *tbana* to falsely link my name with the pamphlet, I would also have been arrested and put behind bars. Perhaps I was not so lucky or else I would have become a hero like Rajendra Baid. The ruling party's master-plan may have been to link up all anti-Bhandari forces, including some members of the Press, and then get them arrested and frame all sorts of charges against them. This was the quickest and easiest way of silencing dissent in the State.

About a week later, Rajendra Baid, editor of *Janpath Samachar*, was "kidnapped" by the Sikkim police in Siliguri on November 6, and brought to Gangtok and detained at the Sadar Thana police station. Subsequently, because of police torture, Baid had to be hospitalised at the Sir Thutob Namgyal Memorial Hospital (STNM), a government-run hospital in Gangtok. Apprehensive that his father may be killed if he was detained in Sikkim, Baid's son, Vivek Baid, in a *babeas corpus* petition filed in the Supreme Court in Delhi, asked for production of his father in the apex court. The petitioner alleged that

his father had been whisked away by the Sikkim police from Siliguri as he had been publishing a series of "bold" articles exposing the "corrupt practices" of the Sikkim Chief Minister. Sale of the *Janpath Samachar* had been banned in Sikkim during that period even as bundles of copies of the paper carrying exposes of the Bhandari Government were being smuggled into Sikkim every week.

The Supreme Court, at a special sitting on November 8, issued a notice to the State Government to produce Baid in the apex court for hearing on November 16. This was a great blow to Bhandari, who wanted Baid to be detained in the State for further enquiry, and possibly for further harassment, too. As a result of the court's direction on November 16, Baid, who then was shifted to Delhi's high security Tihar jail, was admitted to the All India Institute of Medical Sciences (AIIMS) in New Delhi as he was in need of medical attention.

Baid, in an interview to *The Illustrated Weekly of India* carried in the November 23-29, 1991 issue of the paper, admitted: "Were it not for the help and cooperation of the journalistic fraternity and the timely action taken by the Supreme Court I may not have been alive today".

The three-judge bench headed by Mr. Justice L.M. Sharma, which took up Baid's case on November 16, observed that even if the editor had anything to do with the publication of the pamphlet as had been alleged by the State's Advocate General, Vepa P. Sarathy, he would be tried for defamation and not sedition, which was one of the charges made against Baid. The allegation that Baid was involved in a criminal conspiracy to overthrow the government through the pamphlet was unacceptable to the court. Baid was finally released on November 27 after at least three weeks of a nerve-wracking experience.

The national media came down heavily on Bhandari and condemned Baid's arrest in the sternest terms. The All India Small Newspapers Association (AISNA), while strongly condemning the arrest, urged the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha

Rao, to intervene and secure the editor's immediate release. The Indian Newspapers Society (INS) said the arrest of the editor by the Sikkim police was a breach of freedom of the Press. In a statement, it said, "It is time authorities both at the Centre and at the State realise the seriousness of the situation. Law and order protectors cannot become assaulters".

In a statement, the All India Newspapers Editors' Conference (AINEC) President, Vishwa Bandhu Gupta, said Baid's arrest proved that the authorities felt that they had a "free hand in harshly dealing with any activity or expression not to their liking". It urged the Home Ministry to take the sternest measures to curb "this administrative exuberance which violated all norms of democratic and constitutional conduct".

The Delhi Union of Working Journalists (DUWJ) was more forthright in its condemnation of Baid's arrest. In a statement, its General Secretary, Anil Shukla, said Baid's arrest and his subsequent torture in Gangtok showed the extent to which Bhandari would go to throttle the Press just to "conceal the misdoings of his corrupt regime". The DUWJ expressed concern over the "reign of terror unleashed in Sikkim, stifling of the local Press and the diverting of crores of Central Government development funds to build private fortunes and influence key Central Government officials".

Unfortunately and quite understandably, there were no reactions from the local Press at Gangtok. Because of unhealthy developments within the local Press, I had earlier resigned from the Sikkim Press Association (SPA). Subsequently, many other members also resigned from the SPA, till recently the only recognised and existing Press body in the State, rendering the organisation ineffective and non-functional.

My own paper, the *Sikkim Observer*, was forced to close down after it carried reports on the arrest of opposition leaders. Printing presses in Sikkim as well as in Siliguri refused to undertake printing of the paper. The last issue of the *Observer* was dated October 28, 1991. I was able to take out the paper after a gap of seven months in May 1992 and that,

too, only for a brief while.

I felt sorry and concerned for Baid, who was all alone in the *thana* and subsequently in the hospital. Despite the risk involved, I went up to see him at the hospital and managed to smuggle in a few photocopies of Press cuttings, which had reports of his arrest and reactions of the national media. I felt that the knowledge that he, despite whatever differences or perceptions we may have of him, was not alone in his darkest moments, and the fact that he had the support and sympathy of the journalistic fraternity, both at the local and national level, would make him feel better.

Though the sudden crackdown on his opponents and critics backfired and Bhandari's image outside the State, particularly in the national media, was tarnished beyond repair, it did have a tremendous negative psychological affect on the people as a whole. The people were now fully convinced that the Chief Minister would go to any limit to stay in power. No one dared to oppose him now. His critics kept mum and the activities of the opposition came to an abrupt end. Ashok Subba soon disappeared and stayed in Delhi, depriving his party of the much-needed direction and leadership. Even Chamling had been cowed down and kept shut. At a hurriedly-called Press conference in Gangtok in the third week of November, Chamling denied Press reports that he was leading a rebel group of MLAs against Bhandari.

The hope and enthusiasm that was evident in the month of October gradually faded away, and as winter approached, dark clouds of frustration and hopelessness set in. It was back to square one once again and fear was in the breath of every life.

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CHAPTER 3

Hail Mount Hermon!

"He seemed to me to be one of the few Christians who walked in the fear of the Lord, and, therefore, feared no man".

Mahatma Gandhi on Bishop Frederick Bohn Fisher

"I will study and get ready, and perhaps my chance will come".

Abraham Lincoln

"Each one of us, who has had a part in Mount Hermon, has a responsibility placed upon us to continue to promote not only education but peace and goodwill everywhere".

Halsey E. Dewey

I had just entered the huge school building when someone put his hands around me and asked, "Do you like this school?" Though I did not know much English, I understood what he was saying and promptly replied, "Yes, sir". The gentleman who so warmly welcomed me to Mt. Hermon School thirty years back in 1963 must have been either our Principal, Rev. David. G. Stewart, or the Senior Master, Graemie A. Murray.

My association with Mount Hermon School (MHS – most of us refer to our school as simply 'MH') in Darjeeling started in early 1963 and ended seventeen years later in 1979. I not only liked the school but fell in love with it, and the love affair lasted for sixteen short years. I think I established some sort of a record by graduating from the school, going through the two-year teacher's training college of the school, and finally becoming a teacher in the same school. Finally in 1979, I said my last goodbye to the school which had been my home for nearly two decades.

I was almost eight when I joined MH in class 2 in 1963. Before this, I was in Tashi Namgyal Academy (TNA) in Gangtok for a year. I must have been four or five when I first went to my village school in Lachen in north Sikkim. Due to several deaths in our family, I had to move down to south Sikkim in Yangang in 1959-60, where my father's family members resided, and I spent a year there. I have many happy and vivid memories of my school days in both Lachen and Yangang.

My admission into MH was sheer luck. It was a fine Sunday in Gangtok in early 1963 when I made up my mind to quit TNA and go for studies in Darjeeling. Sunday was a shopping day, and I accompanied my uncle, Legpal Lachenpa, to the *bazaar* that day. Normally, my elder brother, Tenzing Danen, accompanied him for shopping on Sundays, but somehow it was different that day, and instead of my brother, I went along with my uncle and my brother stayed back. We were day-scholars staying at my uncle's place beside the India Press building near Baluakhani in Gangtok.

While we were at the Lall Bazaar, we met the Lachen *Pipon* (village headman of Lachen), *Cbo* Ngopon, an elderly gentleman, who was related to me. He told my uncle that the Sikkim Government was providing scholarships for two students from Lachen and Lachung for studies in an "English school" in Darjeeling. He wanted to know whether I would be willing to go as a candidate from Lachen.

"The government is providing a scholarship for a student

from Lachen to study in Darjeeling. Would you like to go?", my uncle asked me after talking to the *Pipon*. "It is up to you to decide and you have to give your decision right now", he added. My parents were in Lachen at that time and it was impossible to contact them for advice and consultation. For us in those days, Darjeeling seemed a far off place and going there for studies was like going to the end of the world! But something in me gave me the courage to make a bold decision and I accepted the offer on the spot. "Yes, I want to go", I told him. And then the ball got rolling and I was all set to leave TNA for Darjeeling.

Apart from my brother, I was the only Lachenpa studying in Gangtok and I guess it was proper for the *Pipon* to give me the first preference. Being quite studious and more competent in studies, I was given preference over my brother. Though he had joined TNA much earlier than me, by 1963, I had caught him up and we were in the same class (class III). Azo Ngoapon could have easily given the seat to another candidate and ignored me. I was later told that someone from Mangan in north Sikkim was trying for the Lachen seat. However, I was the lucky one. My grandfather has now been dead for many years but I shall never forget the fact that he opted for me. The only real way of repaying my debt to him and to my people in Lachen, has been for me to make the best use of the education that I received from MH. My uncle, too, had put considerable pressure for my selection.

There were more than a dozen students from Sikkim who were admitted into MH in 1963 on government scholarship. One of them was my friend from Lachung, Thentok Lachungpa, who is now working in the SBI (State Bank of India). He, the candidate from Lachung, was previously a Deputy Superintendent of Police (DSP) in Sikkim, but later resigned from government service. Apart from Thentok, my other TNA friends, who joined MH along with me, included Udai P. Sharma and Bhupendra Thapa. While Udai, till recently a practising lawyer in Gangtok, is now the State Government's Public Prosecutor,

Bhupendra, a Superintendent of Police (SP), was till very recently in-charge of the Special Branch, the intelligence wing of the State Government, in Gangtok. On my first day in MH, I was pleasantly surprised to find out that Krishna Kumar Chettri, my friend from Yangang school, who is now working in the State Forest Department as a Block Officer (BO), was also in MH. He had joined the school one year before me in 1962.

Throughout our schooling, the Sikkimese students played an important role in the life of the school. Whether in the classroom, on the stage, or in the playing field, the Sikkimese students made outstanding and valuable contributions to the school which have been greatly appreciated. Most of my Sikkimese friends, including myself, held responsible student positions in the running of the school. As school monitors, prefects, House captains etc., Sikkimese students were outstandingly prominent and excelled in most activities they chose to undertake.

In 1971, our school 1st XI football team, which reached the finals of the prestigious Herlihy Cup Football Tournament in Darjeeling for the first time, had at least seven Sikkimese students, and I was proud to represent the team as its captain. A Calcutta daily labelled us as the "Giant Killers" when we knocked down the 2nd Gorkha Rifles team (previously representing the *Kumar Sporting Club* of Gangtok), perhaps the best team in the region during that period, in the quarter finals of one of the football tournaments in Darjeeling.

The majority of Sikkimese students, who were in my class, completed their SC (Senior Cambridge – class XI), also known as ISC (Indian School Certificate), in 1972, and by the end of 1973, almost all Sikkimese students of my batch had left the school. Only my friend and class-mate, Dhruba Rai, and I returned to MH in 1974 to undergo two years teacher's training at the Mount Hermon Undergraduate Training College for our Teacher's Training Certificate (TTC).

After successfully completing the two-year course in 1975, Dhruba and I taught in MH until he left at the end of 1978

while I stayed back for another year. Dhruba, originally from Chakung in west Sikkim, married Sandra Riley, a New Zealander of Indian origin, and left us to settle in New Zealand. Both of them have now become full-fledged teachers in Auckland. I went to Bombay to study law in 1980 and returned to Sikkim three years later in 1982.

Thirteen may be considered an unlucky number, but Mt. Hermon first started with only thirteen students! The school, then known as *Arcadia*, was founded on March 11, 1895 by Miss Emma L. Knowles (1840-1921), and was located below Chowrasta on the other side of the town facing Lebong in Darjeeling. Miss Knowles, an educational missionary under the Woman's Foreign Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, had already spent many years in India as Principal of schools for European Girls at Nainital and Calcutta before coming to Darjeeling.

Deeply religious and a committed Christian, Miss Knowles was convinced that it was God's will to establish a school for girls in Darjeeling. Within three years of the founding of the school, a terrible earthquake in 1898 completely damaged the school building, killing several of its students in the tragic incident. Undaunted by the terrible disaster, Miss Knowles purchased a piece of land near the railway station in the town area just above the Hill Cart Road and continued with the work. By 1902, the school had at least four dwelling houses and a three storeyed building. The enrolment of the school rose to fifty and the school was renamed Queen's Hill School (QHS).

In 1978, while I was working on the special historical edition of the school magazine – *Hermonite* – my friend, Ved Prakash Agarwal (SC 1971), who was then living in Darjeeling, and I took several shots of the old school buildings, which lay just above the cart road. These photographs are now recorded in the 1978 *Hermonite* magazine, which has now become a valuable historical document of the school. One of the ex-students of QHS whom we were able to contact during the

course of our research for the magazine, was the wife of Thondupla, owner of the posh Windemere Hotel in Darjeeling. She apparently knew Miss Stahl, who succeeded Miss Knowles as Principal of QHS, quite well. Unfortunately, we could not locate the original site of the school below Chowrasta. A second effort to spot the site must be made before the school celebrates its birth centenary in 1995.

Recalling the character and service of Miss Knowles, her assistant and the next to step into her shoes, Miss Carolyn J. Stahl, also from America and a member of the Society, said: "In her contact with young people, Miss Knowles was markedly a character builder. She had the ability in an unusual degree of bringing out and developing the best in a young girl's nature. Her pupils realised this and responded with lasting love and veneration. Scattered over many parts of India and Great Britain, are those who have received from Miss Knowles not only a good education throughout the schools but a lasting appreciation of the highest ideals of life and service".

From the beginning of the century till 1929, it was Miss Stahl (Principal 1918-1929), who really served the school, first as an assistant to Miss Knowles, and then as the Principal from 1918 to 1929. In 1914, the school was almost closed down due to the shortage of funds but because of the concern and dedication of both Miss Knowles and Miss Stahl, the school survived. Miss Stahl believed that "any great task can be accomplished by the exercise of boundless faith, much intercessory prayer and ceaseless work". By 1918, the total enrolment reached 163 and the school authorities felt the need to find a suitable site for expansion of the school. And for the third time, the school was ready to shift somewhere else. It was a clear indication that the school was forging ahead.

The present location of Mt. Hermon was purchased in 1920 during the time when Frederick Bohn Fisher (1882-1939) was elected to the Episcopacy and became the Bishop of Calcutta. Bishop Fisher – born in 1882 in Pennsylvania in the USA – was a man of intense energy and conviction and came to

India as a missionary and served in the Thoburn Methodist Church in Calcutta.

The present Mount Hermon Estate, which is about four kilometres away from the town, was bought from the Lebong Tea Company in 1920 for Rs. 50,000 and the Fernhill Estate (now occupied by the boys' hostels and the swimming pool), which is also part of the larger Estate, was acquired separately in the same period from the proprietor of the Grand Hotel in Calcutta and Mount Everest Hotel in Darjeeling for Rs. 35,000. Bishop Fisher himself came to Darjeeling to negotiate the purchase of the Estate.

The inauguration of the new school building, which has been described as "one of the finest buildings in the Orient", was performed by Lord Lytton, then the Governor General of Bengal, in May 26, 1926. At first, there were two institutions in the present campus – Queen's Hill School for Girls and Bishop Fisher School for Boys. Rev. E.S. Johnson of the Thoburn Methodist Church of Calcutta became Principal of the two institutions in 1929. In 1930, the school was renamed Mount Hermon School and became a co-educational institution. Today, Bishop Fisher is considered as one of the Founders of the school and a House (Fisher House – yellow) has been named after him in his honour.

Bishop Fisher's wife, Dr. Mrs. Welthy Honsinger Fisher, a noted educationist in her own right, visited MH in November 1967 when I was in class 7. We had the privilege of hearing her speak on the Speech Day as the Chief Guest. During the prize distribution on the Speech Day, I, as Captain of Dewey House, received the Dr. Master's trophy for the best House in the junior school on behalf of Dewey House from Dr. Fisher. It was indeed an exciting moment in my life which I shall ever cherish. In 1972, Sherab Namgyal, my friend and class-mate from Sikkim, and I shared the Bishop Fisher Cup, a prestigious annual award of the school, given for the best boy student of the school. The award is given in recognition of the student's character, leadership and sportsmanship.

Commenting on her husband, Dr. Fisher (now no more) wrote: "Fourteen years with Fred convinced me that living was an adventure. He was interested in the smallest creature and the most insignificant happening in our day, and wove them into the rich tapestry of his enjoyment. He taught me nothing is unbearable – unless we ourselves permit it to be. When we were riding on the hot dusty trains of India, the screeching of the flat wheels dinned into our ears all day long. But Fred would say, "Now, Welthy, just get into the rhythm of hot squeak!"

She described herself as "just a member of the human race" and felt that "racial discrimination is obnoxious". She wrote: "Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness". Bishop Fisher knew Mahatma Gandhi and Rabindranath Tagore on intimate terms. "He seemed to me to be one of the few Christians who walked in the fear of the Lord, and, therefore, feared no man", was Gandhi's comment on Fisher, who died of a heart attack in 1939.

MH endured another major crisis in the early 1940s. The effect of the Second World War hit the school badly and it was nearly closed down in 1943. Not only were the funds low, the students' roll also dropped to only 120. The uncertainty of the future of the mission in India also had an adverse effect on the school. But it was Rev. Halsey E. Dewey, who became the Principal in 1938, who was chiefly responsible for keeping the school going during one of its darkest periods. Rev. Dewey, who is the last of our Founders, visited MH sometime in early 1970s. He was then fairly old and grey. It was a great experience for us to have such a renowned historical figure of our school in our midst.

Recalling what the school had to go through in the early 1950s, Rev. W.W. Jones, then one of the senior members of the staff, and later the Vice-Principal (1973-77) of the school, wrote: "While I was training at Hartford, Connecticut in the summer of 1951, I got further news from Mr. Mathews (James Mathews, Indian Secretary of the Board of Missions of the

Methodist Church, who later became the Bishop of the United Methodist Church in Washington DC) that I wouldn't be going to Woodstock School, because there was an urgent need for help at Mount Hermon School in Darjeeling. Mr. Dewey was the Principal, and he was barely able to keep the school open. Staff were hard to get, the student enrolment was low (less than 150 in the whole school) and Mr. Dewey had heavy responsibilities for mission work in Bengal as well as in the school".

"During the winter of 1951, Mr. Dewey had seriously wondered if the school could be reopened for the 1952 session. He decided we would open if 100 paying boarders could be enrolled. We did open in 1952 with about 110. I still can't imagine how we did the things we did, with such a small student body. We fielded teams in Senior and Junior divisions against St. Joseph's and St. Paul's (schools in Darjeeling), in cricket, football and hockey. (Actually we were more afraid of St. Joseph's competition for the attention of our senior girls than we were afraid of them on the sports field!) We fielded a girl's hockey team against the Convent and defeated them once when Julie Dunne was captain (having transferred from Dow Hill to MHS). I had to learn hockey, so I could coach the junior boys, who lost only to St. Joseph's in 1954, as I recall. The senior team did well too, with chaps like Brang Seng, Mawu Naga, and Ram Bahadur making MHS a real football power. We came to the finals one year, and I made problems for the District Sports Association by preparing the whole school for American-style cheering, complete with drums, horns, tin cans and lids to be beaten, and organised cheers completely distracting the opponents. Unfortunately, this *bull* also distracted the officials, who had to stop play until I would agree to stop the din".

When I was editing the annual school magazine in 1978, the Hermonite Editorial Committee wrote to Dewey, who then lived in the USA. He wrote back to us and said: "As the school reaches out as it does through its students and a faculty to

many places around the world, we can rejoice in new opportunities, and perhaps new responsibilities, resting on our shoulders. Each one of us, who has had a part in Mount Hermon, has a responsibility placed upon us to continue to promote not only education but peace and goodwill everywhere".

But perhaps Mt. Hermon really grew up in the best sense of the word when Rev. David G. Stewart of the New Zealand Chinese Inland Mission (now re-named Overseas Missionary Fellowship) took over the school as its Principal in 1954. From only about a hundred students in the early 1950s, the school grew to well over three hundred students by the time Stewart left at the end of 1963. The school grew not only in strength, but in standards and character. Students of the Stewart-era, it has widely been observed, had their own distinctive mould and character which appealed to many of us.

It was in 1960 that the school was divided into four Houses and named after its Founders and Heads – Knowles (green), Stahl (red), Fisher (yellow), and Dewey (blue). In the Principal's report during the Speech Day on November 15, 1960, Rev. Stewart said: "May the Four Houses each seek to bring honour to the name of the founders after whom they have been called... In our school where we are builders together with God, we are building not a building of wood and stone or bricks and mortar, but of flesh and blood, of mind and spirit".

In a wider sense, the value of schools such as MH lies not in what we learn from the classrooms, however important they may be, but from the high ideals and standards set by those who lived and served in the school.

Rev. Stewart left MH after my first year in school in 1963, and in the following year, Murray, then Acting Principal, took over the school as its next Principal. They say "first impressions are the last impressions", and I'm glad that I have many fond memories of my first year in MH. One of the most pleasant memories of 1963, were the times when Rev. Stewart used to

casually walk into our dining room on Saturday mornings, while we were having our breakfast, and announce the name of the movie we were to see in the school hall in the evening. When he announced in his deep and husky voice, "Tonight's movie is...and it is a technicolour" (the emphasis is on the word *technicolour*, as most of the movies in those days shown on our 16 mm projector, were black and white), we used to go wild with excitement and gave him a big hand.

Rev. Stewart's next major visit to MH was fifteen years later, towards the end of 1978. His visit also coincided with Murray's final departure from MH, where he and his wife, Patricia Murray, had spent 24 years of service. 1978 was really my last year in MH; 1979 was spent looking ahead and packing up! It was also my best year after coming back to the school as a teacher in 1976. We had at least 10 ex-students on the staff in 1978 and all of us actively participated in the life of the school and had a lot of fun, too. Incidentally, in 1925, 8 of about 25 members of the staff were ex-students of QHS. 1978 was also Murray's last year in MH, and it was a great treat for us to see the Big Two (Stewart and Murray) together at the end of the year. Rev. Stewart was slightly thinner having lost some weight, but nevertheless, he was the same man we had seen one and half decades back.

What touched me most during Rev. Stewart's visit was a talk he gave to a small gathering in the school chapel on the need to have men and women of "integrity" in the world today. "Several ex-students have told me that what they gained from MH most of all was to recognise the need for integrity. To be true to themselves and their inner convictions, to be honest in business, loyal in friendship, trustworthy in word and deed, to be real people and not phonies".

Perhaps his message to the school as the Chief Guest on Speech Day in November 1978, reflects the real character and essence of a school such as MH: "It's always a scary thing to come back. Especially to come back to a place that has bound close ties around your heart. After fifteen years there won't, of

course, be any students who know you. The customs will have changed. Even the buildings will be different.. I don't know whether the students thought me strange or not, but I felt at home. A school is not, of course, buildings and playing fields and wooded hillsides, memorable as they all may be. A school is people, and a school is a shared spirit and philosophy... And how can one describe the spirit and philosophy which lies at the core of Mount Hermon School? I think it may perhaps be summed up in three words: initiative, wholeness, and integrity. And central to all is the spiritual dimension of life, a right recognition of God, and a striving for the highest ideals, as taught by a Christian school such as Mount Hermon".

And as I look back to my 16 years' association with the school, I can rightly endorse Rev. Stewart's views of what MH really is and should be. For without integrity, all our education and spiritual upbringing has no real value to the world outside, which has an abundance of experts in almost all fields, but which is lacking in people who are dedicated and committed to reach out beyond themselves.

Murray was a different sort of person altogether – more open, direct, robust, tough but friendly. What impressed me most about him was his realistic down-to-earth attitude to life. There was no beating round the bush with him, and if he wanted to tell you something, he give it to you straight between the eyes, whether you liked it or not. Of course, it hurt the person on the receiving end, but it made you tough in the process and prepared you for life ahead, which is often hard and cruel. Beneath his tough exterior, Murray, however, had a gentle, loving and a caring heart. He was full of energy, enthusiasm and had a natural zest for life. He often counselled us on the need to become 'responsible' persons and to take up responsible roles in society. And as I look back, I'm convinced that Murray had the greatest influence on me and prepared me most for the tough years that I have had to go through in this past one decade.

Murray's character and personality were most discernable

on the playing field of which I have many rich and happy memories. He was a born fighter and made us go all out till the very last minute of the game. He, of course, wanted us to win, but one of his chief concerns was not whether we won or lost, but how well we fought. He was pleased with the team even if we lost the game, provided we put up a good show. Scoring a boundary with a bad stroke in a cricket match was sheer "Junk!" for him. He preferred that we made the correct strokes even if no scoring was done.

In his last few years in Darjeeling, Murray devoted much of his time to the development of sports and games for the public. He was the Chairman of the Darjeeling Districts Sports Association and successfully ran the Gurkha Brigade Gold Cup Football Tournament for four years before he finally left Darjeeling at the end of 1978. As a player (he was a terrific goal-keeper in his early days in Darjeeling and was superb in cricket – both as a batsman and a wicket-keeper), coach and organiser of many sporting events in Darjeeling, Murray left his unforgettable mark on the field.

Rev. Johnston, who first arrived in Darjeeling in 1959 and who was well acquainted with Murray, had this to say about his friend and colleague: "Graeme Murray is one of those people who cannot easily be fitted into any neat category. Some may say, "he is mad on sport" – which no doubt would be true, but hardly adequate as a description of someone who is also mad on History and a walking encyclopaedia on the causes and pattern of current affairs. He is always busy in the wider community – Chairman & the guiding spirit of such diverse activities as the Gold Cup and the Darjeeling and Dooars Medical Association. But he is also the man willing to lay aside his business to give individual attention and loving counsel to someone in need".

Recalls Charles Dunne, one of the most popular and colourful ex-students of MH, who till very recently was still very active in many a social circle in Darjeeling: "I know Mr. Murray best on the sports-field. We all know how he per-

sonally participated by playing cricket and football for Mt. Hermon. Although he was one of the best New Zealand rugby players, he had to take up football as there were no turf grounds in Darjeeling. In cricket, he led the Darjeeling team against the Visitors' Team for many years, and he was always a terror when playing for the school in the Edinburgh (cricket) tournament. I would always dread being an umpire when Mr. Murray played wicket-keeper, particularly when he would knock the bails off and appeal to me with a loud 'How's that!'"

Charlie Dunne, whom many of us referred to him as just 'uncle', passed away quietly in Darjeeling on June 8 this year, the day Rev. Stewart arrived there for his visit. His death was a great shock for those of us who knew and loved him dearly. He will, of course, be dearly missed by us all and will remain rich in our memories, not only as a true friend and a great companion, but as a landmark of Darjeeling itself.

One of the most remarkable and unforgettable personalities of the school during my time was Mrs. Joy Rongong. Miss Joyce Stewart, sister of Rev. Stewart and mother of Roslyn Namgyal (wife of Sherab Namgyal – ex-student - SC '72), who was teaching in TNA till June this year, came to India in 1944 and married D.G.K. Rongong, a senior teacher of the blind school in Kalimpong in north Bengal, in 1954. Having taught in Dr. Graham's Homes school in Kalimpong for some time, she later joined her brother in Mt. Hermon as the Junior School Supervisor in 1960.

Mrs. Rongong was the Jn. School Supervisor when I was admitted to MH in 1963. She was also the main lecturer when I joined TTC eleven years later in 1974. Later, when I joined the junior school teaching staff in MH in 1976, she was again my boss as the Jn. School Supervisor. Mrs. Rongong lived a full and active life right till the very end. She died in Darjeeling in 1987, still at the helm of her latest project – looking after 80 orphans in Kalimpong. Heather, their younger daughter, is married to Michael Prickett and is now living in Australia.

Perhaps it was in TTC that I got to know Mrs. Rongong

most intimately. She was a superb lecturer, and with all the experience and training that she had in the teaching line, she was the ideal person to train the young would-be-teachers, most of whom were Anglo-Indians from Calcutta. In TTC, there was also quite a sizeable section from our hill community, including Tibetans and Bhutanese. The TTC commenced in Darjeeling in 1972 when the Under-graduate Men's Training College at the St. Thomas's School in Kidderpore, Calcutta was transferred to the management of the Mount Hermon College of Education Society. The transfer of the college from Calcutta to Darjeeling was initiated with a view to training local teachers in the hills for English medium schools in the region.

Mrs. Rongong really made us slog and squeezed out every ounce of energy that we had. I realised, under her, that unless you exerted yourself to the maximum in any work, you would not be able to realise your own potentials and limitations. She herself was a perfectionist and somewhat of a workaholic.

If in school I was able to receive an education which catered to the all-round development of my personality, it was in TTC that I grew up mentally. Although I still kept myself busy on the playground, I gradually became more interested in reading and writing and spent much of my leisure time indoor. History and Psychology became my favourite subjects. Ever since, I have continued to enrich my knowledge in these two subjects which then were fairly new to me.

If during my school days Mrs. Rongong was regarded as a strict disciplinarian, as a colleague, I found her to be very helpful, concerned and caring sort of person. She gave me complete freedom in teaching and never kept a tag on me as it is usually the case with other heads. I remember the times when she used to come to my classroom and fire somebody for something; and when she had finished and before closing the door to go out, she would give me a gentle smile as if to say that she wasn't firing me indirectly! She had perfect control over her emotions and her stern action against students was not an outburst of her uncontrolled emotions. It was part of her

disciplinary action.

In 1981, after she left MH and was managing the Albella Boys' Home, a hostel for orphans in Kalimpong, she, in an article in the *Light of Life*, a Christian growth magazine, wrote: "March 1963. Sikkim, the little kingdom surrounded by West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet was aglow with color. The richness of satin, silk and brocade in magnificent shades of purple, blue, gold and green was breath-taking. Excitement filled the air as the crown prince of the kingdom was united in marriage with the American heiress, Hope Cooke. In the midst of all this splendour, I found myself a guest. My purpose in visiting Sikkim was not to attend the royal wedding, but to test children who were seeking admission to Mount Hermon School, Darjeeling.

As I faced the 300 young hopefuls with my simple intelligence and aptitude tests, I asked my Lord to lead and direct so that I might select the twenty-four of His choice. I asked that He, who knows the end from the beginning, would guide me to select children who would respond, not only to the good English education we would give them, but to the call of the Lord Jesus Christ of whom they would learn at Mount Hermon School. There were 300 little village children and double that number of adults.

I set to work with my apparatus and with faith that He would lead. So, early in 1963, twenty-four little fellows from Buddhist and Hindu homes were enrolled in Mount Hermon. The years passed rapidly and happily. There were two or three disappointments, but with what joy we watched the seed of God's Word taking root in individual hearts from time to time. Of course there were some who needed to be spurred on to harder work at times, but never did we have any difficulty in getting them in front of a wicket or behind a football!"

Although, very few of those who became Christians in the school are still clinging to their faith, many, I'm sure, are, nevertheless, consciously or unconsciously influenced by the great teachings of the Bible and the high ideals and values that

have been taught in the school. There is definitely a marked distinction between the outlook and attitude of those who have their education in Christian missionary schools such as MH, St. Joseph's and Goethal's etc. and the products of other private and government schools. This distinction, which is lacking in today's society, is worth preserving.

For a while, the school faced a leadership crisis after Rev. Johnston left in 1990. Rev. Johnston, who took over the school after Murray left in 1978, was an old-timer in MH and his association with the school went as far back as 1959. I was lucky to renew my contact with the Johnstons in 1979 when Rev. Johnston became the Principal after Murray left. They had left MH in 1970 and were returning to the school after a long gap. One of their daughters, Carol, was my class-mate. She has now become the wife of another ex-student, Benu Chatterjee, and they are now settled in Australia after being on MH staff for several years.

Most students of my days would remember Rev. Johnston (nicknamed *Jobnny*) as a quiet, soft-spoken gentleman, who taught Bible and Biology, and also preached in the school chapel on Sundays. "Coming home" to MH "was the most exciting day", recalled Mrs. Val Johnston when the Johnstons returned to Darjeeling in 1978. They're now back in Australia where Rev. Johnston heads the Flinders Christian Community College, a small Christian school south of Melbourne.

Jeff Gardner, an ex-teacher of MH and the Rector of St. Paul's School, Darjeeling, took over the school in 1992 as its new Principal. The school's uncertain future after Johnston's departure in 1990 caused some worry to many of us, but Gardner's takeover was a good news to all Hermonites. I personally felt the school was in safe hands. Gardner, originally from Sherwood College in Nainital in Uttar Pradesh, came to Darjeeling in 1970 when I was in class nine. Being well acquainted with all the recent heads and teachers of MH, and having lived in Darjeeling for the past two decades, Gardner is perhaps the ideal person to look after the school at this critical

junction.

To me and to most people, who have spent some time of their life inside the old and friendly walls, MH was more than just a school. It was one big, happy family where we lived through many of our ups and downs in preparation for the life ahead. It will take a few volumes to recall in detail my days in MH, and perhaps there will be a time for me to do just that. But in this book, which is basically about myself, I want to recall and record a few instances of my school days, where I saw my attitude and character taking a distinctive shape which influenced my later years.

Speaking up for others and getting into trouble is nothing new to me. I remember three specific instances in school when I got into trouble for conveying to the authorities what the students and the staff felt on certain things.

For instance, during one of our football practices, most of the boys were against a certain method adopted by our new football coach, Bill Moore, a footballer-turned-preacher from Northern Ireland. Being a football enthusiast and a keen footballer, and having witnessed football matches and training sessions in Ireland and England, where the standard of the game is very high, Moore perhaps wanted us to adopt the same methods during our training. Instead of having the traditional practice matches which lasted for about an hour or so, Moore wanted us to have short practice matches with about 6-7 players on each side.

I actually wasn't at all disagreeable with the new training session, but there were some who were against it and were quietly grumbling and muttering something on the sidelines. This went on for quite sometime and when Moore found out that some of us were uncooperative, he asked for an explanation. When nobody spoke up, I told him, "Sir, we don't like this type of training. Why can't we have the usual practice-matches?" There was no way Moore would listen to us and he had his way.

The matter was reported to the Principal immediately and

I was called to Murray's office in the evening at around 5.30 p.m. Murray was disappointed at my behaviour with Moore and lectured me for about ten minutes. I interrupted, "Sir, I just told Mr. Moore what the boys felt. It was upto him to decide how we should be trained. Our only complaint was that he did not pay any heed to how we felt".

"Why should he listen to you people?", Murray retorted back.

"If our teachers don't pay any heed to what we feel, then how can we learn? They may not agree with us, but they should at least pay some attention to what we say", I replied. "If MH is like that, then I don't belong to this place. I'm leaving", I told him and headed for the door.

Before I finally left his office, Murray advised, "Don't make any hasty decision. Take a walk around the school to cool yourself down and don't go back to the study hall. Let me know what you decide finally".

"Sir, my decision will be the same", I told him and left his office.

I really felt bad and was all set to quit MH if it hadn't been for some of my friends who wanted me to stay. I was then in class 10. I had nothing against Moore. In fact, we got along very well, both inside and outside the playing field. Both the staff and students dubbed us "football crazy". I was only conveying to him how some of us felt, that's all. I felt that he should have at least listened to us even if he wanted to have his way. Finally of course, all the angry clouds blew away and I stayed on.

It was my class teacher, Miss Patricia Russell, who got me into trouble on another occasion. Our class had decided to go for a picnic all by ourselves without being accompanied by any member of the staff. Some of us were quite apprehensive that Miss Russell may barge in. If she did this, we would not be able to stop her. We had nothing against her but wanted to be on our own. While some of us were casually talking over the picnic programme in the Geography lab during the change of

period, Miss Russell overheard us and wanted to know what was going on. When no one wanted to tell her what we were discussing, I spoke up, "Miss, we are planning to go for a picnic and we don't want you to come with us". She seemed a bit surprised and disappointed over what I said but didn't react straightaway or make any fuss in the classroom. But later in the day, I was called to Murray's office. She had obviously reported the matter to *Bhunty* (Murray's nickname).

"You are being rude to Miss Russell, I hear", said Murray starring at me sternly over his glasses. "Sir, that's what the boys were feeling. We didn't want her to accompany us for the picnic. I told her how we felt and if that means I'm rude then I guess I'm rude". This was followed by a ten-minute lecture from him on 'being rude'.

When I came out from Murray's office, Miss Russell was at the door. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to get you into trouble", she told me. I was in no mood to listen to her consolation after Murray's lecture and I walked off – rude again?

Another heated exchange that I had with Murray was when I was on the staff. MH food wasn't really all that bad during our time. Surprisingly, the staff got the same food as the students and the only difference was the service! I ate a lot during those days when I was on the staff and so did my friends – Dhruva and Robin Sengupta – both ex-students who were on the staff. As bachelors, and being ex-students, the day's schedule was always hectic – teaching, coaching, supervising games, looking after the children in the dormitory etc. We ate together, particularly during breakfast. Of course, we did grumble over the food at times, but most of the time we ate what we were given and enjoyed it.

But there were some lady staff members, who used to grumble most of the time, and their constant nagging at the table put us off at times. But we preferred to ignore them. This went on for days, and one fine day, we decided to put an end to it by deciding to act on the matter. We made a formal complaint to Murray through a letter which was signed by

everyone who regularly dined in the staff dining room. I submitted copies of the letter to the concerned authorities, including Rockey Gardner (Jeff Gardner's elder brother), who was in-charge of the kitchen department.

Murray was wild when he called me to his office to explain what was going on. He seemed to be convinced that I was the "ring leader" who started everything. "We are a family here. You could have come and talked to me about it instead of writing such a note", he said. I never saw him become so angry with me or with anyone before.

"Sir, we felt that this was the best way to inform you of how we felt about the food". I sat there for a while and then got up, and before leaving his room, I told him, "Sir, if you think that I'm the only one who started all this, then you're wrong". Fortunately, the food improved, but only slightly, and I maintained my reputation for speaking my mind.

Not many recent Hermonites will know Dr. Charles M. Swan, who wrote many of our school *Going Home Day* (GHD) songs, sung mainly in November, just before the school ended. Perhaps the favourite GHD song by Dr. Swan starts with these words:

*"Old walls are friendly walls,
Friendly walls, farewell!
Old walls bold memories
That breathe a kindly spell;
Breathe then your benison
On me as I depart
I'll keep your memory
Warm in my heart".*

Sung at the end of the year, the song with its sad and melodious notes, truly captures the spirit and mood of those who were spending their last few days in the school which was their home for perhaps 5, 10, 15, or even 20 years.

Dr. Swan, an ex-student and also an ex-teacher of the

school, visited us in 1977. He was 69 then. Dr. Swan's over 20 years (1914-1936) association with MH goes back to the time when Miss Knowles was still the Principal of the school. He joined the school on May 15, 1914 in KG and later taught in the school from 1929 to 1936. Because of his long association with both the student and the staff, Dr. Swan and I, along with Dhruba Rai, share something in common, which is both rare and unique. He says, "When I was a small boy in old Queen's Hill, Miss Stahl had only just retired from the principalship. So my memory leads me to think of the original purposes of the school. It was patterned after the Public Boarding Schools of England, but the pattern was given an American flare, and some major adjustments were made to fit to the Indian scene".

According to Dr. Swan, the school was primarily started "to meet the needs of the Protestant and Evangelical families of the Anglo-Indian community, many of whom had been touched by Methodist revivals of the period. The children of missionaries were served well by the school but their needs were secondary. Instruction was based on the standards of British education. At that time, Britain was taking a leading role in the educational developments needed for a new age of industry, science and world perspectives. In this role, however, British educators generally retained their concern for the traditional values of the Judeo-Christian heritage and moral experience of the Church. Mt. Hermon, even today, is deeply rooted in that original setting".

Referring to Dr. Swan, the October 1992 *Newsletter* of the Mount Hermon Alumni of the USA, carried a tribute to him by an ex-student of MH, Linnea Sword Davenport: "He (Charles Swan) was my hero. I was about 7 years old when he knocked on our door at Bide-A-Wee, our cottage at Mt. Hermon. It so happened that the boys playing hockey on the top-flat had lost their ball in the ditch that ran along the path to Hafiz ("Half-fees") store. While retrieving it, they discovered a cobra lying besides the ball. The boys killed the cobra with their hockey sticks, and Charles had come to ask if I would like to see a

snake. I was both frightened and excited, but Charles promised I would come to no harm. He even hoisted me on to his shoulders so I would be out of danger. Then he took me to see the snake, which was quite dead, but I was impressed – the fact that he thought of a little girl impressed me even more. No wonder he was my hero. I still have a painting Charles did of Kinchenjunga, which he gave to my parents”.

I had the privilege of meeting Dr. Swan personally in 1977 in our school when I was in the second year on the staff. I still clearly remember talking to him of my interest in journalism in the staff-room. I was surprised to learn that he didn't give much importance to journalism but seemed to be more interested in me taking up serious writing. He suggested that I take up writing instead of going for journalism. "You are appointed" to write, he told me suddenly out of the blue while I was chatting with him. Unfortunately, I didn't know what he wanted me to write on, and because of the lack of time and rush of work, I didn't ask him either. Consciously, I didn't feel that I was influenced by what he told me at that time, but in retrospect, I feel that his three-word commandment – "You Are Appointed" – had a profound affect on me. It is interesting to look back now and note that my interest in writing took a definite shape in 1977-78.

Apart from writing something on Sikkim's history, much of my time in 1978 was spent preparing for the special edition of the school magazine. I bought a typewriter (Smith Corona) from an ex-student of MH, which I used for preparing materials for the *Hermonite* magazine. This book, too, is being typed on the same typewriter! And as I look back now, one of my lasting contributions to MH has definitely been the 1978 school magazine of which I was the editor. Dedicated to Mr. and Mrs. Murray, the *Hermonite* was prepared by the ex-students, who were on the staff in 1978. Neville Gardner, son of Rockey Gardner and one year my junior in school, who was then and still is on the staff, was the assistant editor. We wanted the magazine to become a historical document, which

would truly reflect the richness of the spirit and tradition of this great institution.

I wrote in the editorial of the magazine: "It is indeed a great privilege for us, who have whole-heartedly cooperated into making this a special issue. It is special because of the variety of people who have taken part in it. It is special because it is our turn to pause for a while, and may be look back with a feeling of warmth and affection, as we come to the end of another chapter in the history of this great institution. It is hoped that something of that spirit which has made Mount Hermon great may be ever present with us as we face the future. May the dreams of our founders, and the lives of great men of the school, ever remind us of our gratitude to their service and our allegiance to the values that have had a far reaching effect. May, we, too, hear the call from above and follow wherever He leads us".

The *Hermonite* was supposed to have come out by early 1979 but the printers took a long time and it was delayed by almost a year. It finally reached MH towards the end of 1979 when I was about to leave the school for college in Bombay. Murray, who was then back in New Zealand, wrote to Neville and myself on December 22, 1979, expressing his appreciation for our effort: "This letter should have been written long ago, especially to Jickmi as we had a letter from him sometime ago. However, the arrival of the 1978 HERMONITE today makes a letter really imperative. All of us do want to thank and congratulate both of you, and your helpers, for all the work you have put in to make it such a worthwhile publication. I know that you have been very upset and annoyed over the long delay that has kept it from publication, and I guess people have been rather critical, but I hope that this hasn't bothered you. We have been pouring over the magazine since it arrived, and are just thrilled at all that you have been able to include, the research you have done, and the general layout. I am writing today to Mr. Johnston to make sure that copies are sent to all ex-staff I know in NZ who will surely want a copy".

As ex-students, our association with the school continued for many years after leaving the school. In 1986, the Sikkim Hermonites Association started a cricket tournament in Sikkim in Murray's honour. The Murray Cup Cricket Tournament, perhaps the most prestigious cricket tournament in Sikkim, is going on in its eight year in 1993. Once we had our senior staff member from MH, Mathew Mathai, in Gangtok, prior to his final departure from MH, as the Chief Guest on the final day of the tournament, to present the trophy. Most of our team members ('Veterans') have been Hermonites (Sherab Namgyal, Tempo Bhutia, Thentok Lachungpa, Pema Wangyal, Lhundup Topden, Karma Bhutia, Namgyal Wangdi and myself). We've also had ex-students of TNA, St. Joseph's and Goethal's playing for us.

Murray again wrote to me from Wellington in 1986, expressing his happiness over our initiative: "Thank you so very much for your letter and for the photos and certificates enclosed. I am very, very touched by your action in naming the cricket cup after me – it is an honour which I very deeply appreciate. I just hope that one day I might be in Gangtok to preside over a final and present the trophy."

Sikkim Hermonites, who number more than 150, have been able to keep in touch with the school and other Hermonites over the years. Many of the children of ex-students are now studying in MH. Several of our old teachers have visited us in Gangtok in the past several years. These visits have been very memorable occasions for us all and we've had several 'get-togethers' on such occasions. Our school motto, "*Non Scholae Sed Vitae*" (Not for school, but for life), has become more meaningful to many of us after leaving MH, as we renew our friendship and extend our ties beyond the bounds of our school.

While Mrs. Rongong visited us in 1985 (just two years before she passed away), Mr. and Mrs. Johnston came to Gangtok in 1990 before they finally left MH. In 1991, Miss Cynthia Hawke payed us a short visit followed by Miss Russell in

the beginning of 1992. Miss Russell is now back in England after having spent 24 years in MH. Interactions with other Hermonites keep on taking place from time to time. In June this year, we were much honoured and delighted to have with us Rev. Stewart, who was in Gangtok for just two days. The time was much too short for the visit, which some of us eagerly looked forward to, nevertheless, we made the best use of it. The Sikkim Hermonites Association (SHA) organised a re-union of ex-Hermonites at Hotel Tibet in Gangtok on June 12, which was even attended by Madan Mohan Rasailly, an ex-student of the Dewey-era, who left MH in the early '40s. Three Hermonites from Darjeeling – Charles MacGilchrist, Pratap Singh Rai, and Jagdish Prasad – who accompanied Rev. Stewart to Sikkim from Darjeeling, also joined us at the evening's wonderful get-together. Besides enjoying each other's company, renewing old ties, refreshing our memories of old times, as well as establishing new contacts, we took the opportunity to set up new office-bearers of the Association with a view to revitalise the organisation.

My class-mate, O.T. Bhutia, who is a Minister in the Bhandari Government, was made the President, while I was chosen as the General Secretary. The re-union was also a rare occasion for us to sing our beloved school anthem – "*Hail Mount Hermon!*". Rev. Stewart, whom his colleagues in MH referred to him as the 'boss', had not changed much in appearance and in personality. He was still very much the same man many of us worked under three decades back in 1963. He showed the same concern and enthusiasm for the school and its products – both staff and students – who are now scattered all over the world. We are now looking forward to seeing him again, hopefully with his wife, in 1995, when MH celebrates its birth centenary.

In two years from now, MH will celebrate its 100th birth anniversary on March 11, 1995. Hermonites all over the world, particularly in India and the neighbouring areas, are making preparations to make the centenary year a grand success. This

has led to the setting up of the All India Hermonites Association (AIHA) with its headquarters in Darjeeling. Pratap Singh Rai (MH 1964-68), who is in-charge of the Association's activities in this field, has been very active in his work. The ex-students in Siliguri have recently formed The Foothills Hermonites with Jagjit Singh (MH 1962-71) becoming one of the most active members. The Mount Hermon Alumni Association Nepal (MHAAN) of Nepal led by Tom Crees (MH 1955-63), Sulee Hung (MH 1962-70) and Annie (Gardner) Vaidya (MH 1968-79) is also quite active and will definitely participate in the centenary celebrations. These associations, including the Sikkim Hermonites Association, are in touch with overseas Hermonites' associations such as the Old Mount Hermon Students' Association of the UK and Mount Hermon Alumns (formerly Mount Hermon West) of the USA. Many other alumni associations in India and all over the world need to be contacted to chalk out a concrete plan of action for a year-long centenary celebrations.

The occasion will give us an opportunity to focus our attention on the school, which needs help and guidance in various fields. Its problems and prospects will have to be studied in depth and a concrete plan of action has to be initiated by all Hermonites, friends and well-wishers of the school to take our dear old MH into the 21st century and beyond. We live and die, but life must go on. The ideals and values and the high standards set by the school must continue to enrich our lives and the lives of those around us. March 11, 1995 will indeed be an occasion for us all when we can, once more, join our hands and hearts together, and sing the school hymn in full-throated voice and mean it:

*"Beloved Mount Hermon, we greet thee,
Thy daughters and sons from afar
As oft as we pause in our toiling.
To hail thee whose children we are.*

*Hail Mount Hermon!
 Hail Mount Hermon!
 Safe for aye in memory's sbrine!
 Hail Mount Hermon!
 Dear Mount Hermon!
 Praise and love be ever thine.*

I loved MH and wanted to stay back, but something in me pulled me forward and I had to finally move out. And as 1979 approached, I knew it would be my last year in MH. By then, I had made up my mind to leave the teaching profession. MH had given me so much and the only way to show my gratitude was to give myself for the school for a few years.

My attitude to life has always been to give my best in whatever work I undertake. I certainly would not be able to do this if I did not enjoy what I was doing. I realised that I would not enjoy being in the teaching profession if I was not working in MH. It was partly because of this that I opted for another profession and decided to go for law studies.

My attitude to life is best described in these words from my little quotation book, which I have kept with me since 1967-68: "Behold, I do not give lectures or little charity; when I give, I give myself". I gave myself to MH fully and completely.

And as I look back now, I think the most valuable and the lasting thing that I have learnt in MH was not in the classroom, but on the playground; not from the text books, but from people and from every day experiences. Taking part in various school activities, leading various teams and finally the 1st XI football team, and going through our many defeats and victories on the playing field, have been some of the greatest moments of my life. Giving my best shot and fighting till the very end, irrespective of the consequences, is what I have learnt in MH. And as I look back over these fourteen years away from the old and familiar surroundings, I know that whatever MH taught me during my brief sojourn in Darjeeling, has withstood the test of time.

In my final talk to the school on November 25, 1979, I said: "I venture into new frontiers with good intentions, high ideals, and with faith in God. To those who will be leaving us at the end of this year, let me urge you to give your life to a great cause. The kind of person we are in ten years time will reflect what he have learnt here at MH. I wish you all the very best".

And with tears in my eyes and a lump in my throat, I gave my last few words to the school, which had been my home for sixteen short years: "Sometimes when you reach out for a dream, you have to leave something behind. I leave behind my school, my friends, my home... my MH.

*The woods are lovely, dark and deep,
But I have promises to keep,
And miles to go before I sleep,
And miles to go before I sleep".*

I left MH at the end of 1979 – but a part of me has always remained behind. And, I guess, a part of MH has always been with me. Hail Mount Hermon!

CHAPTER 4

Soul On Fire

"Take from the altar of the past the fire, not the ashes."

Jean Jauves

"A lone and forgotten man who lost his kingdom, his wife and everything that he stood for, stuck to his Palace, his people, his Sikkim till he breathed his last. Unbending in his misfortune, he dreamt of some-one, some day appreciating the righteousness of his cause and placing him in history as a true nationalist who fought single-handed against all odds for what he believed in".

B.S. Das, *"The Sikkim Saga"*

"...But to the thousands of watching mourners, for that one fiery moment, Sikkim was theirs again and not the 22nd state of the Indian Union".

"India Today", March 1982

I was in a private residence, about a few minutes drive from our hostel in Churchgate, Bombay, when the phone rang.

"Uncle, it's your call", said the young boy, who picked up the phone. "Hello, may I know who is speaking?", I asked, pick-

ing up the phone. It was around 6 O'clock in the evening

"*Agya* (brother) Jigme, it's me Sonam", came the reply. His voice was quite shaky and I knew at once that something had gone wrong somewhere.

"Yes, what happened? Is there any problem?", I asked instantly.

"*Agya*, they came to get you", came the reply, his voice still trembling.

"Who?", I asked.

"I'll come there myself to tell you. You stay there and don't come here", Sonam told me and put the phone down

By now my heart was pounding. Though I was not absolutely sure why they had come to see me, I felt that it had to do with what I had written in our annual college magazine on Sikkim and the late Chogyal of Sikkim. I was quite certain that they had come to see me in connection with the magazine. Anything could happen now – from harsh interrogation to indefinite imprisonment. I could even be beaten up and tortured. I had not undergone such experiences in my life and was quite nervous.

I left the house at once and headed for the bus-stop, which was about five minutes walk from where I was. I felt like a hunted animal. The feeling was really terrible. But then, as I walked alone to the bus-stop, something happened. I began to think coolly and rationally. The articles on Sikkim and the Chogyal, carried in our Association's annual magazine, were based on facts, and I had only expressed what took place and how the people felt on certain issues. As I thought on these lines, I gradually calmed down. I was then ready to face anything. Though I was still quite disturbed, I was confident that I would have the courage of my conviction to withstand anything – come what may. I was at peace with myself. Fear had been conquered.

Sonam, a close Sikkimese friend of mine and my batch-mate at the Government Law College in Bombay, arrived after about twenty minutes. He said two strangers had come to ask

for me at the hostel at around 5.30 p.m. They had met Sonam, who perhaps told them that I was not present in the hostel. He rang me up after they had left. I still wasn't sure who they were and what they were really up to, but didn't want to take any risk. There was nothing in my possession that was dangerous or damaging to the government and I wasn't up to any mischief either.

The only valuable things that I had in my hostel room were some books, personal files, text books and study materials. However, I didn't want to part with them and so Sonam and I quickly packed them and put them away in my friend's room nearby. Only a few days earlier, I had this sudden urge to clear my room of all important reading materials and papers, which I had kept since my school days. It was part of my habit to store away things, small or great, for record. I always depended on my hunches and instincts, and this time, too, I followed the signals and hid some of my things, not knowing why I was hiding them.

"*Agya*, I think you should leave at once. Our fear is that they might harm you physically. This would be really bad for you and for all of us", said Sonam, who kept everything a secret. He suggested that I should leave the place at once and stay away from Bombay for sometime.

Incidentally, I had already planned to come to Sikkim the next day, which was June 29, 1982. The plane ticket had already been purchased and I was ready to move out. My grandmother in Yangang, with whom I was quite close since childhood, had passed away and I had obtained our Principal's permission to be on leave for a few weeks to attend the death ceremonies. I was only hoping that no one would come to get me at the hostel before I left.

Despite Sonam's suggestion, I personally wanted to stay back and have it out with those who wanted to cause problems for me. I felt that I would at least get some media exposure if any action was taken against me in Bombay. Unlike other places in India, I found the people in Bombay quite

responsive and ready to react to events and issues of the day. If I did get into serious problems, at least the public would know about it and the government would, therefore, have to act cautiously.

Some of my Sikkimese friends had been taking courses in journalism along with law. I myself had already completed such a course and was working on a part-time basis in the *Daily*, a popular morning tabloid, which was then owned and edited by R.K. Karanjia, editor of the *Blitz* and one of the country's most colourful and best known journalists. It was Nari Rustomji, the former *Dewan* of Sikkim, who lives in Bombay who put me in touch with Karanjia. We were thus in contact with the Press and how it functioned.

However, the important thing was that I should be present during the 49th day death ceremony of my grandmother, and I wanted to be at home during this occasion. Since I was giving my final papers for the DBM (Diploma in Business Management), nobody at home wanted to disturb me with the news of grandma's death, and so I missed attending her funeral. Luckily, nothing happened in the night and I was able to complete all formalities at the hostel and left the place by 10 a.m. the next day.

"*Luksbyama*", the name given to the first annual magazine of the Sikkim Students Association (SSA), Bombay, was completed on June 15, 1982. It had a golden cover with our Association's crest, and was printed at a friend's press in Bombay. The magazine, dedicated to the late Chogyal of Sikkim, who died of cancer in New York in January 30, 1982, was a simple magazine with a few articles, including one on the Chogyal by Rustomji, and two on Sikkim by myself.

Perhaps the article, which may have upset the authorities, was my article entitled "Soul of Sikkim, Soul on Fire", where I had stated that the death of the Chogyal was "not the end of Sikkim and her people, but the beginning of a bright new day – the dawn of a new era". Did the people's acknowledgement of Prince Wangchuk, the eldest surviving son of the Chogyal, as

the new Chogyal mean the "dawn of a new era" in Sikkim? The Government of India naturally wanted to suppress any show of Sikkimese nationalism by the people.

On June 16, we had sent about 300 copies of the magazine to Sikkim through Pema Wangdi, one of our students from Sikkim, who was studying in an engineering college in Bombay. Public reactions on the magazine came only after it had been distributed in Gangtok.

On reaching Gangtok on July 1, I found out that *Lukshyama* was a hit. Friends, relatives and many others, with whom I came in contact, congratulated me on the magazine. "It created a sensation", said one. "You all have given a good lead for others to follow", praised another. One person said, "The issue is alive" and expressed his happiness, while another gentleman commented, "People will be able to understand and appreciate what you have written only after twenty years".

However, there were others who advised me to take precautions. They said the Centre was investigating into the matter, adding that the intelligence personnel were after me. "The Governor is looking for you to arrest you", warned my father, who was quite worried about the possibility of my being jailed.

Public reactions on my articles in the magazine did not affect me at all. I was neither carried away by their compliments nor cowed down by their warning. I wanted to do something and I had done it. Whatever happened to me or to others, because of my work, did not bother me much. This has always been my attitude throughout my life. I wasn't feeling scared at all. It was better, I reasoned, to be locked up in Gangtok than in an unknown place. I stayed in Gangtok for a few days and nothing happened. Nobody came to get me and I didn't come across anyone who particularly wanted to investigate into what I was up to. I had no one backing me, and I was up to nothing. So there was nothing to fear except fear itself.

Meanwhile, I went to my village in Yangang in south Sikkim, where some of my father's family members resided. I

spent most of my time in Yangang helping out with preparations for *Shegu*, the 49th day's *puja* of my grandma, which fell on July 19. It was good to be back home and spend some time in the quiet village away from the hustle and bustle of city life.

After about a month, I headed back for Bombay and left Gangtok on July 31 via Calcutta. It was by sheer coincidence that I came across the Sikkim Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, in Park Hotel in Calcutta. I had gone to the hotel looking out for someone, and as I was coming down the steps, Bhandari and a few others were coming up. He seemed to be in a happy and relaxed mood. I think he had just got the news that he had won a major case in the court. I greeted him with a *namaste*. He stopped for a while when he saw me and then all of a sudden asked me, "When are you bringing out that sort of magazine again? I had to give explanation to the Centre". I was quite stunned and didn't know what he meant but told him, "As and when the occasion arises". He then went up to his room and I left the hotel. I thought he was probably happy with the magazine but didn't know for sure.

When I got back to Bombay, I was told that the same type of persons had again come to the hostel looking for me. Two of them were in plainclothes and the other was in uniform. However, after my arrival nobody came to see me. I didn't expect anyone either. If they wanted to fix me up they could have done it in Sikkim, I thought. I was then busy preparing for the finals of my third year LL.B.

Having spent sixteen years at a stretch in Darjeeling, with only a year's break in 1973, when political upheaval broke out in Sikkim, I wanted to be by myself in a new environment just for a change. I had enjoyed teaching in my old school in Mt. Hermon, but now I was looking for something different. I wanted an independent profession where I could be free and be my own man. The place I had chosen was Bombay, and the new course was law.

Hem Lall Bhandari, who had just completed his B.A. (Hons) from St. Joseph's College in Darjeeling, also decided to

do law along with me in the same college. We finally landed in Bombay on January 8, 1980. In the beginning, we stayed at the International Students' Hostel (ISH) in Churchgate, and later, after having got admission into the Government Law College, we shifted to the Government Colleges' Hostel, which was located in the same area. Our college, which was supposed to be the best law college in the country, was two minutes walk from the hostel. This was our first visit to Bombay and the place where we stayed was in the heart of the city. The famous Marine Drive, where I used to go for early morning jogging, was just nearby as also most of the posh shopping centres, cinema halls, playing fields and other entertainment centres.

We had some problems with our hostel accommodation in the initial stage which kept us occupied most of the time. But when that was over, everything was fine and Bombay soon became the ideal place that I had been looking for. There were about six of us from Sikkim studying in Bombay in the first year. The number grew to around nine in the second year and then decreased in the third year. Most of us were in the same college and this enabled us to be together most of the time. Unlike Delhi, Bombay is very much a commercial city and the campus atmosphere prevalent in other colleges in the country, to a large extent, is non-existent in most of the colleges in Bombay, including ours. Most of the local students in our college did part-time work, and the only ones with whom we came into constant contact were some foreign students and those from the North-East states who, unlike us, were in large numbers.

Most of the time, we Sikkimese students stayed together, and as time went on we felt the need to form our own small group. We eventually formed our own organisation and called it the Sikkim Students Association (SSA). It so happened that the majority of us were politically quite alert and conscious, with Hem Lall having had some practical experience in student politics in Sikkim. I myself was quite aware of political developments in Sikkim, though I must admit that having been away

from Sikkim for so long, I was ignorant of many things. For me and for most of my friends, we had a high regard for Bhandari and his Sikkim Janata Parishad (SJP) for their bold stand on many important issues that concerned the State. Most of us appreciated the 'sons of the soil' policy adopted by the party. But the most important thing was, that despite all our faults and drawbacks, all of us had a genuine concern for Sikkim and the Sikkimese. This was all that really mattered to us at that time.

It was because of these things that we started the SSA and the first major activity of the Association was to oppose the proposed merger of the SJP with the Congress (I). While we wanted the Parishad to stay in power, we didn't want it to merge with the Congress (I), which was being and still is perceived as the party which "sold Sikkim".

We preferred an alliance rather than a complete merger. This, we felt, would ensure preservation of the regional identity of Sikkim, which was the Parishad's main policy, and at the same time get the Centre's support to stay in power. While a merger was to be avoided at all costs, staying in power was also equally important. If Bhandari was not able to keep the Centre in good humour, Mrs. Gandhi, who was then the Prime Minister, could easily have paved the way for the Parishad Government's downfall by giving the party flag to Kazi or to Nar Bahadur Khatiwada, Kazi's adopted son and a pro-merger leader. They would then certainly have initiated the toppling game in the State. Unfortunately, the Parishad was eventually forced to merge with the Congress (I) in mid-1981, a fatal decision that finally led to Bhandari's dismissal three years later in May 1984. Erosion of the people's faith on Bhandari and his concern for Sikkim's identity, within the Union, first began with the Parishad-Congress merger in June 1981.

The issue which concerned us most during our stay in Bombay was the preservation of the distinct regional identity of the State. Sikkim had been taken over by India and it was now pointless making it an issue. However, we could still

preserve what was left and what was permissible under the Constitution. This, we felt, could only be achieved through unity of the three ethnic communities of Sikkim – the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the Sikkimese Nepalese. Only if the people were united and conscious of their rights could they come together and organise themselves to keep a constant check on the government, irrespective of whichever party may be in power. Most of us, including myself, felt that Bhandari was the symbol of Sikkim's unity and it was absolutely essential for the Parishad Government to stay in power. Only Hem Lall deferred on this, but this made no difference to the stand taken by most members of the Association.

Bhandari was then very different from what he is today. In 1979, the pro-Sikkim and anti-merger party, Sikkim Janata Parishad, led by Bhandari, formed the government after the Assembly elections on October 18. This was the first Assembly elections after the merger in 1975. The Parishad, which captured 17 of the 32 seats, defeated all pro-merger forces led by Kazi, Khatiwada and Ram Chandra Poudyal. While the Parishad focussed on Sikkim's identity and unity, the main issue raised by Poudyal's Sikkim Revolutionary Congress and Khatiwada's Sikkim Prajatantra Party, which won 11 and 4 seats respectively, was the Assembly seat reservation issue.

In 1979, the 15 seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese in the Assembly were abolished through a Bill introduced in the Parliament. Poudyal and company fought against the Bill and termed it the "Black Bill" and made it a political issue. The fact that people voted for Poudyal's party proved that they wanted the Centre to honour the terms of the merger and restore the reserved seats of the Sikkimese Nepalese. The seat reservation issue was also raised by the Parishad, but Bhandari's approach to this issue was balanced and non-communal, unlike his opponents, who wanted reduction of seats reserved for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha tribals, instead of fighting for restoration of reserved seats of the Sikkimese Nepalese. The only way we could get the demand on seat reser-

vation met was to raise a united voice. I held this view then and still do now. Division means weakness, and when we are weak, we cannot achieve anything concrete.

Two issues which were constantly in my mind were the 'Black Bill' and Sikkim's unity. And it was perhaps for this reason that we had "*Progress Through Unity*" as our Association's motto. The formation of the SSA in Bombay was one of our major preoccupations in early 1980. As we went about discussing the type of student body we should have, we all came to the conclusion that we should have a bigger students organisation representing smaller associations from within and outside the State. This body would be called the All Sikkim Students Union (ASSU). Hectic plans and preparations were made for this body, including drafting of an exhaustive constitution for the ASSU. During one of my visits to Gangtok, I met the Chief Minister and obtained his support for the new body.

But finally when we got down to the actual task of forming the body, some members expressed the need to change the name to include other Sikkimese youths, who were not students. By then, some of our SSA members had completed their studies and were back in Sikkim looking for jobs. They wanted to pursue their goals and associate themselves with the new organisation. This was quite natural and we had to accommodate their views. During our meetings in Gangtok, this view was placed on the table for discussion. We accepted their suggestions and finally formed a new body called the "Sikkimese Youths Welfare Society" (SYWS) in December 1980. The SYWS was headed by Sonam Dorji, one of the SSA members who had completed his studies in Bombay, as its President. The Constitution of the new body was more or less that of the ASSU. Besides other Sikkimese youth, the Society would also represent school and college students, both individually and collectively.

Unfortunately, the SYWS never came into full existence. We were in Bombay and could not get involved in making the

newly-formed body active in the initial period which was most vital. Even the government's attitude towards the new organisation was negative and refused to give registration to the body. A notification issued by the government at that time listed a number of organisations in the State which the government did not approve of. Many of our members, who were government servants, treated this notice as a warning to the members of the SYWS. Soon, many members found it difficult to associate themselves with the SYWS and gradually the organisation, which we had struggled to bring to life, became defunct.

Two months before the formation of the SYWS's executive body, we held the first elections of the SSA in Bombay on October 18, 1980. I was elected as the President with Udai P. Sharma as the General Secretary and Hem Lall as the Treasurer.

The publication of the annual magazine of the SSA was taken up in 1981, but it took a long time for us to initiate anything on this line. The timing for publication of the magazine coincided with the death of the Chogyal, and we all felt that it would be most appropriate to dedicate the magazine to his memory. Many of us held the Chogyal in very high esteem, but there were some, like Hem Lall, who had the added fortune of being close to the Royal Family. Actually, it was Hem Lall, who first introduced me to the Chogyal. We visited the Palace on January 1, 1980 to wish the Chogyal a happy new year. We chatted with the Chogyal for a while on the small lawn beside the office and then had tea inside along with Prince Wangchuk, who also joined us. My first impression of the Chogyal after meeting him face to face was that he was a great man with immense dignity.

We came to know that the Chogyal had cancer on October 8, 1981. I was told by someone that the cancer had been detected in Calcutta in September, and soon after this, the Chogyal was immediately flown to New York for treatment. This news was a great shock to us all. Although I had made up my mind not to come up to Sikkim during the winter vacations,

I changed my mind after receiving the sad and shocking news.

"This news was a great shock to me", I wrote in my diary. I made up my mind to come to Sikkim in the winter of 1981 and meet the Chogyal personally and talk to him on a number of things. I wrote a letter to the Chogyal in New York on behalf of the Association expressing our love, affection and wished him a speedy recovery. I also said how much we respected him for the stand that he had taken for Sikkim and the Sikkimese, despite the fact that he had undergone great suffering for his righteous cause.

One of the reasons why I wanted to meet the Chogyal was to learn from him how he felt about Sikkim – then and now. How did he react to the changed circumstances, and what would be his role in Sikkim in the new political set-up? By then, the Parishad, which had the Chogyal's own backing, had merged with the Congress and this disheartened many Sikkimese, including the Chogyal. His closeness with Bhandari and other Parishad leaders, and his high expectations from the party and its leadership, were dashed to the ground because of the Parishad's betrayal and its eventual merger with the Cong(I).

Unfortunately, I never did get a chance to meet the Chogyal and find out what his last thoughts were for Sikkim and the Sikkimese. My only clues on these matters came from a book written by his friend, Nari Rustomji, where he has compiled many of his letters from the Chogyal himself over the past few decades. In his book, "*Sikkim: A Himalayan Tragedy*", published in 1987, Rustomji mentions: "It was not long after writing the above letter (Chogyal's letter to Rustomji dated August 17, 1981 – author) that the Prince (meaning the Chogyal – author) visited me in my home in Bombay with his son Wangchuk. He appeared tired and cheerless – the light had gone out of his life. After lunch, I suggested he should rest a little, while I showed his son the letters of his father that I had preserved during all the years of our friendship. Wangchuk confided in me that he had been pressing his father

to write about Sikkim and her trials, and suggested that I should add my weight to his pleadings. I informed him that his father had already apprised me some months earlier, of his decision to write the story of Sikkim's closing years and sought my help. It was to be the Prince's last request to me of his life".

In a letter to Rustomji, dated Gangtok, July 16, 1981, the Chogyal had written: "My dear Rusty, Wangchuk is insisting that I write the endeavours of the Sikkim Government during my time, as all and sundry are writing misleading books on this period. I have now decided to bestir myself to write. The sad thing is I had such a good memory in those days that I intentionally did not keep any notes. Hence with my memory short and with no longer any access to Government records, the task is going to be difficult. It is indeed going to be very sketchy. Your assistance and cooperation would be invaluable and I will call on you in due course from time to time..."

Sunanda K. Datta-Ray, another close friend of the Chogyal, who later became the editor of the *Statesman*, in his classic, "*Smash and Grab – Annexation of Sikkim*", published in 1984, begins his book with these words: "This is not the story of the Chogyal's life. Only he could have written that". Unfortunately, for us, we stand deprived of the privilege of reading a book by the Chogyal himself. All we have is the memory of his life lived out in the full gaze of the world. And perhaps, that was enough, an enduring record for us all of how he lived and died.

Because of the strain of work, I was tired and went to sleep early on January 30, 1982. At around 10.00 p.m., someone knocked at my door. It was Hem Lall. I thought he had come to give me the news of the results of our second year LL.B examination. But it wasn't that. I got a real shock when he said the Chogyal had expired. He had heard the news from someone who was watching the TV and had come to tell me about it.

Hem Lall, obviously feeling bad because of the news, went away quietly without coming into my room. I closed the

door and quietly lay on my bed in the dark – sleep had faded away. I thought of the Chogyal and his dreams for Sikkim. We at least had him to cling to in our dreams of building a better future for Sikkim, but with him gone, the dreams, too, faded away. What would become of Sikkim now that he was no more? Apparently, Hem Lall and Santosh Shilal, another Sikkimese student studying law, had the same reactions, and perhaps many others felt the same way, too. Only the enemies of Sikkim and the Sikkimese, and those who worked against freedom and justice could rejoice at his death. The Chogyal was a great man, who stood for his people and fought against all odds and did not give in. He had finally defeated all his foes and triumphed in his death.

The best way we could remember and honour him was to stand steadfast by the high ideals he had stood for. "It is the most honourable tribute that we can pay to a leader, who fought for so long, suffered so much, and yet got so little", I wrote in my diary after hearing the tragic news of his death. The Chogyal, "did not die of cancer. He was killed by the ugly hand of falsehood and betrayal", I noted.

By then, we had already made up our mind to come to Gangtok to attend the funeral, which was scheduled for February 19. I had a strong feeling that the funeral day would be a historic moment, which should not be missed at any cost. While we would attend the funeral on our own accord, we would also represent our Association. Pema, Hem Lall and myself left Bombay in the second week of February and reached Gangtok on February 18.

In the evening, Udai (by then he had finished law and was practising in Gangtok), Sherab Namgyal (was searching for a job in Gangtok after having completed his law studies) and I went up to the Palace and offered our condolences. I offered an *asbi khada* (traditional scarf) and Rs. 51 on behalf of the Association and Rs. 21 and a *khada* for myself to Prince Wangchuk, the eldest surviving son of the Chogyal. We then went to the Tsuklhakhang monastery, the royal chapel, where

the coffin was kept, and offered *kbadas*.

The following day, thousands of people from all over the State and outside had assembled at the Tsuklhakhang courtyard to pay their last homage to the departed leader. The Royal Family members offered their *kbadas* on the coffin inside the Tsuklhakhang at 4 a.m., and by 4.30 a.m., the coffin was brought outside the monastery and placed in the middle of the courtyard for the dignitaries and others to offer their *kbadas*.

"Previously, it was rainy and gloomy in Gangtok. But on the day of the funeral it was sunny. By 9 a.m., the whole of the Palace area was filled with people. It was a grand sight. But the grandest of all the sights was the coffin, which was wrapped in the Sikkim Flag. The wheel of the flag was placed at the front and the entire flag was visible to all. This was a touching sight. He never betrayed us. Sikkim lives on", I noted in my diary.

Presentation of the *kbadas* by the public began at 9 a.m., and by 9.30 a.m. the funeral procession had begun. It took at least three and half hours to reach Lukshyama, the royal cremation centre, located at the highest point of the hill top above Gangtok. The entire funeral procession was a solemn and spectacular sight. And finally at around 2 p.m., the Royal Family members paid their last respects and then the fire was lit. It was indeed the soul of Sikkim on fire.

Wrote *India Today*: "Only a king could have commanded, and deserved, such stylised pageantry. Instead of the sombre trappings of a funeral, the coffin room was a riot of colours. Two rows of wizened lamas in their red robes sat facing each other, eyes closed and lips moving slightly in prayer. Huge prayer flags and *tankhas* with intricate designs hung solemnly from the ceiling. One hundred butter lamps flickered constantly in the centre of the room, bathing the scene in an eerie glow. There was also a symbolic show of defiance in the form of the red and white Sikkim national flag draped over the coffin and hiding the Chogyal's mortal remains".

India Today's senior writer, Dilip Bobb, who was there to witness "the end of an era", grasped the spirit and sig-

nificance of the day when he wrote in the magazine's March 15, 1982 issue: "The last years of his life had been spent in bitterness and pain and even humiliation. He was a king without a kingdom, betrayed by his own people, his tiny Himalayan monarchy snatched rudely away by a mighty neighbour, his power and prestige reduced to nothingness. And then, the final denouncement: desertion by his American wife, he lay stricken with cancer in an alien land.

When Palden Thondup Namgyal, 59, the former Chogyal of Sikkim, finally passed into legend and history, there remained the ultimate irony; his voice box had been removed three months earlier so there were no last words, no epitaph he could give himself, no final benediction to his people. The irony, however, was not over. In death, if not in life, the Chogyal finally was a king again and his tortured soul had found peace... It was, in the end, a symbol of many things. The end of a shadowy era and the tenuous beginnings of another. An intangible tribute to the memory of a lost kingdom and a disillusioned king. But to the thousands of watching mourners, for that one fiery moment, Sikkim was theirs again and not the 22nd state of the Indian Union".

After paying our last respects to the departed soul, we bowed down three times in front of the burning pyre and then rushed down to the Palace where the "crowning" of Prince Wangchuk was to take place. We reached the Palace within minutes and at around 3.20 p.m. found Prince Wangchuk delivering an address to a small crowd in front of the Palace. Immediately after this, he went inside and then the people rushed in to offer *khadas*, acknowledging him as the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim. Thousands of those, who had attended the funeral and others, rushed to the Palace and offered *khadas* to the new Chogyal and this went on till about 8 p.m.

Not only was Prince Wangchuk acknowledged as the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim by the people, but 10 legislators of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly led by Bhim Bahadur Gurung, an ex-Executive Councillor of the Chogyal's Sikkim Council and

legislative leader of Poudyal's opposition Congress (R), who later became the chief minister of Sikkim for a short while in 1984, offered *khadas* to Prince Wangchuk, acknowledging him as the 13th consecrated "Chogyal of Sikkim". Six of the legislators were from the ruling Congress (I) while four represented the opposition. In a signed memorandum presented to the new Chogyal by these MLAs, it stated:

"On the Nineteenth day of February, Year Nineteen Hundred and Eighty two, Tibetan calendar Cha-Jya and Chukhy, the people of Sikkim have decided to offer traditional scarf to the thirteenth consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim, Tobgyal Wangchuk Tenzing Namgyal, at the Tsuk-la-khang of Gangtok at 3.00 p.m."

Amidst chanting of the Sikkimese national anthem, "*Dela Jong Sil Lee Gee Yang Chagpa Chil (Why is Denzong Blooming So Fresh and Beautiful!)*", there were shouts of "Long Live Denzong Chogyal" at the Palace premises. Acknowledging the people's gesture, Prince Wangchuk told visiting reporters, "It is for the people to accept and acknowledge me as the new Chogyal, and you can see for yourself the support I have been shown by the people".

The former chief secretary, Sherab Gyaltzen, who headed the administration during the Kazi Government after the merger, told Rustomji, who was present at the funeral, "It seems that the Chogyal has become greater after his death".

I wrote in the *Luksbyama* magazine: "The spontaneous way in which the people showed their love for their leader, who fought for them till his last breath, cannot be passed as 'mere sentiments' or 'emotionalism'. Emotions are vehicles in which human beings express their true nature. Elections rarely convey the real aspirations of the people. We in Sikkim have witnessed this reality in the past few years.

The greatness of a man is known not by the use of flashy cars or three-piece suits; not even by the mighty mansions and highways that he has built. The greatness of a man, in the true sense, is measured by how much he is loved after his death, by

how much he is missed by his people after he is no more. The 19th of February proved to the world, the love the people of Sikkim had for their King, Mewang Chogyal Chempo Palden Thondup Namgyal of Sikkim."

In less than a month after the funeral, the Sikkim Legislative Assembly on March 17 paid a rich tribute to the Chogyal. Lal Bahadur Basnet, Deputy Speaker of the Assembly and a distinguished Sikkimese writer, reading out the Assembly's obituary reference to the Chogyal, said:

"During the hour of his trial, when his very throne was at stake, Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal stood like a rock and sacrificed petty considerations for the lofty ideals he had expounded. He lost, but in the very process of losing his throne and status, he rose to his full stature. For when 'little men' who rule the roost in Sikkim will have been consigned to dust, posterity will look back with awe and respect upon the last representative of the House of the Namgyal on the throne of Sikkim and say that Palden Thondup Namgyal bowed out of the political stage of Sikkim with the grace of a ruler and with the courage of a real man. He lost his Kingdom but gained a martyr's halo. And his descendants will be able to walk with their heads held high whatever their circumstances in life happen to be".

Having come all the way from Bombay to pay our last respects to the departed leader, and having witnessed a historic event of great significance, there was no doubt in my mind that our first magazine should not be called "*Lukshyama*" and be dedicated to the man who made Sikkim great.

Back in Bombay, I received a letter from Prince Wangchuk signed "Wangchuk Namgyal of Sikkim" and dated February 22, 1982. The letter, written three days after the funeral, read: "My dear Jigme, Members of my family and I are deeply moved by your endearing expressions of sympathy and support for us at a time when we have been forever deprived of the love, affection and guidance of Miwang Denzong

Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal. My father's boundless love for Sikkim and his people transcended the constant inflictions of humiliation, privation and suffering that confronted him. Undaunted, he relentlessly persued his sacred duty to secure justice for his people. We, therefore, derive immeasurable comfort and strength in knowing that you share our feelings of grief and loss. May truth triumph in the end".

In the editorial of the *Luksbyama*, I wrote: "*Luksbyama* is dedicated to the man, who single-handed stood up against all odds and made Sikkim great. When others around him gave up and bowed down, Denzong Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal chose to live out his convictions to the very end and championed the rights of the Sikkimese people. He lived and died for Sikkim. To such a man we dedicate this issue and call it *Luksbyama*".

There were some disagreements amongst our SSA members whether I should publish my article entitled "Soul of Sikkim, Soul on Fire", which tried to capture the spirit and significance of February 19. Finally, after much thought and discussion, I took the entire responsibility on myself. I placed a note in the front page of the magazine which read: "The author is solely responsible for the views expressed in this issue". Moreover, I was not only the SSA President but also the editor of the magazine. If at all anything happened, I would be held solely responsible and no one else.

In the above article, I wrote: "The 19th of February 1982 will go down in the history of Sikkim. It was not a funeral day of the late Chogyal Palden Thondup Namgyal of Sikkim; it was the day of resurrection of the Sikkimese people, whose long suppressed spirit found utterance. He who goes out mourning will come back rejoicing. The 19th of February was such a day."

The day's events proved that Sikkim had demonstrated its defiance in a dignified way. I wrote in the magazine: "Over 30,000 people witnessed the happenings of the day. Some went away sad, some happy, and a few frustrated and defeated

– determined to snub us once again. The funeral day was a moment of reality. Truth cannot be suppressed for too long. Sikkim will never be the same again. The forces that work against its people cannot ignore the impact of the day. What they saw cannot be denied. What they heard cannot be forgotten. For on that day, the people spoke. Their silent speeches and their silken scarves will forever be recorded in the minds of those who witnessed the greatness of that day. The very fragrance of the day will last for eternity".

During the opening of the 'Sikkim Centre', a branch office of the State Tourism Department of Sikkim, in Bombay, on October 1982, I made up my mind to see the Maharashtra Governor. By then, I was quite convinced that it was the Sikkim Governor, Homi J.H. Taleyarkhan, who was from Bombay who may have informed the authorities in Bombay about the activities of the SSA. Taleyarkhan was not only a great admirer of the Gandhi family, but was also highly sensitive on issues connected to the Chogyal and the merger.

It was during that time that someone, posing as a journalist, had come to our hostel to enquire about the activities of the Sikkim students in Bombay. He was quite a suspicious-looking character. I felt that it was my responsibility to pay a visit to the Governor and sort things out if necessary. I didn't want to give anyone the impression that I was absconding. All that was in my mind was in the magazine. I sought an appointment with the Governor and went to see him. However, when I got to his place, I was told that he was out of station. Thereafter, I made no further effort to see him.

I didn't know how the authorities felt about me and didn't care to know about it either. I saw myself as a law student in blue jeans. I wanted to be myself and live out my feelings, irrespective of the consequences. Within two months, I was back in Sikkim, having completed three eventful years in Bombay. Like the Chogyal, I, too, decided to live with dignity in the land of my origin no matter whatever my "circumstances in life happen to be".

I was not the only person who appreciated the honourable role of the Chogyal in Sikkim, particularly during the last few years of his life. B.S. Das, India's own special representative in the Himalayan Kingdom, when the trouble broke out in April 1973, too, acknowledged the fact that he held the Chogyal in "great esteem". Das, then the Chief Executive of the administration in Sikkim, who assumed all powers of the Chogyal and paved the way for the merger, in his book, "*The Sikkim Saga*", published in 1982, wrote:

"A lone and forgotten man who lost his kingdom, his wife and everything that he stood for, stuck to his Palace, his people, his Sikkim till he breathed his last. Unbending in his misfortune, he dreamt of some one, some day appreciating the righteousness of his cause and placing him in history as a true nationalist who fought single-handed against all odds for what he believed in... His silvery grey hair and the small wrinkles on the face alone spoke of the strain of the past years but they made him look even handsomer than he was. The so-called friends deserted him as is the way with the world. Yet, he showed no rancour, no bitterness and held his head high. To leave his people and Sikkim was totally unacceptable to him... As a person, I hold Palden Thondup Namgyal in great esteem. I have met few personalities in my long career who could stand up and fight for a cause. For him, more than his personal gains, Sikkim's identity was a cause. That he fought using all means available to him does credit to him. His battle was one sided and against all odds. That did not deter him as it was a question of his faith in the righteousness of the cause."

CHAPTER 5

Return Of The Native

"The most powerful weapon on earth is the human soul on fire"

Ferdinand Foch

"There is no point in work unless it absorbs you like an absorbing game. If it doesn't absorb you, if its never any fun, don't do it. When a man goes out to work he is alive like a tree in spring, he is living, not merely working".

D.H. Lawrence

"To go against the dominant thinking of your friends, or most of the people you see every day, is perhaps the most difficult act of heroism you can perform".

Theodore H. White

Most of my Sikkimese friends from Mount Hermon after having completed their schooling returned to Sikkim in 1972 and 1973 and got settled. I chose to stay back in MH for a few more years. I actually returned to Sikkim after completing my schooling in 1972, stayed there for a year in 1973, saw the initial stirrings of the political upheaval in the Kingdom, which

eventually led to the merger, and then went back to MH.

Politics did not interest me much at that time, although what was happening in Sikkim was very crucial to all of us. Our Kingdom, which was very precious and dear to many of us, was losing its separate political entity and becoming a part of another country. In 1970, when I was in class 9 I accepted the Christian faith, and after completing my studies, I was more interested in what God wanted me to do with my life than what was happening in Sikkim.

I missed MH while I was away for one year. My contact with both staff and students of the school continued throughout 1973, and by the end of the year, I had made up my mind to go back to MH to do a two-year course for the Trained Teacher's Certificate (TTC) at the newly-established Mount Hermon Under-graduate Training College. The prospect of going back to Darjeeling, and particularly to the old and familiar surroundings in MH where the college was located, was very tempting. But it was mainly because of my deep spiritual conviction that I finally decided to go for the training.

Undergoing the teacher's training course was just one step in my life and what lay beyond that was totally another experience. I would have to take the next step when the time came. What is important is to live in the present and be fully alive to yourself and the situation around you. Ultimately, this is the best way of making use of the present and preparing yourself for the future.

The spiritual aspect of my life changed significantly after I left MH at the end of 1979. But the seeds of this change had already been sown a long time back. This is an important aspect of my life which I don't intend to touch in this book. What happened to me at the spiritual level during my stay in MH and later on, is another aspect of my life that needs further study and analysis. I shall leave this part of the work for later years.

However, besides my religious experience, my views on life as a whole have not changed. In fact, they have been fur-

ther strengthened and have now become a part of me. The significant point is that the values that we have been brought up with in the school, have been a part of me all through these years and have influenced my way of thinking and shaped major events of my life. And as life passed by, I became more and more aware of my own unique perspective of life and everyday happenings. I viewed life, not in terms of years and decades as many do, but in terms of activities and specific goals at a given time. For me, life was a step by step process and was to be lived one day at a time. The best preparation for the future is to live the present fully and wholly. The conventional view of life is more career-oriented and does not expect the individual to engage in other activities and perform different roles in life apart from the chosen line. This 'one-life, one-career' concept was easy to visualise but difficult to accept and live by.

I saw things differently and had a different perspective altogether. Each stage of human development has its own unique characteristics and one should get the maximum out of the various experiences in life so as to become a fully integrated personality. Only those who are alive to their own needs can truly make worthwhile contributions to society. My aim in life was not to become a lawyer or a teacher, but to become myself. Even though I may be a journalist by profession, I am, first and above all, myself. This has been a fundamental philosophy of my life for a long time now. Realization of my true nature, and growth from within, was important to me. What one does and how one is projected to the outside world should be an extension of who one really is.

I became increasingly aware of the gap between the conventional view of life and my own way of seeing things. But I took refuge in the thought that while others may have their own justifications for their mode of existence, I was determined to "hack a lonesome path through virgin land" and be my own man. I could see where I was heading and appreciated what Bertrand Russell was getting at when he said: "It has al-

ways been difficult for communities to recognise what is necessary for individuals who are going to make the kind of exceptional contribution that I have in mind, namely, elements of wildness, of separateness from the herd, of domination of rare impulses of which the utility was not always obvious to everyone".

Having spent two years in TTC, four years in MH as a teacher, and three years in Bombay doing law, I finally returned to Sikkim towards the end of 1982. This was exactly ten years after completing my Senior Cambridge in 1972. It was also about 20 years since I first left Sikkim for studies in Darjeeling in 1963. I was conscious of the fact that I was not just a college student returning home after completing his academic career, but was a young man, who had undergone numerous experiences, and was ready to begin life afresh. There was no doubt in my mind that I was an idealist. However, I had both my feet planted firmly on the ground. My sights were high but I was ready to start from scratch.

Three years in Bombay opened my life to many things which brought about a profound change in me and my outlook on life. How this change was brought about is another story. It was a gradual process, and perhaps the free atmosphere of a college life in the big city unconsciously affected me in a deep way which even at this stage is very difficult to understand and explain.

By the time I decided to come back to Sikkim, I had already made up my mind to live my life my way, irrespective of how others may react to my life-style. My social outlook was alien to most people in Sikkim and my political views were also quite different. In both these areas, I went against the dominant thinking. However, I was not at all concerned or apprehensive. But rather, I was all prepared and ready to swim against the tide. I believed then and still do now that my destiny in life lay in standing alone and going against the current – not only socially and politically, but spiritually as well.

By the time I returned to Sikkim, most of my school and

college friends were fairly well established in life. And all of them, by and large, were in State Government services. While many of them were gazetted officers and held important positions in the government, others were fairly well settled in various departments. At least three of my college friends from Bombay had just become deputy district magistrates when I arrived home at the end of 1982. They seemed to be happy and doing well. Being in a good position in the service entitled you to a government vehicle, government quarters, and various other perks. In short, it provided you with the much-needed security and status in life.

While I was conscious of the fact that some of us have to accept social responsibilities and join the administration, I could never visualise myself in government service. My attitude has been that I'd rather be my own master in my own small corner than work under someone, particularly when what I might have to do may have no meaning to me and no relevance to the needs of the society. Because of the corrupt and inefficient system, even those people, who would like to contribute something to society are deprived of the opportunity. Looking back, I think I made the right choice in opting to stay out of the mess. The way many of our government servants, including high-ranking officers, are forced to bow down on their knees and lose their self-respect and dignity, has been one of the greatest tragedies in Sikkim in recent times. I didn't want to be a part of this very painful and humiliating existence.

That apart, I felt life was too short and too precious to be wasted on government service. Sitting in an office the whole day long, passing files and doing virtually nothing wasn't my cup of tea. After some time, one got used to the system so much so that even if one wanted to quit, one couldn't. The false sense of security gets you nowhere, and you are forced to cling to it for the rest of your life. You just get stuck and become totally static and yield helplessly to the slow process of committing suicide. I wanted to do so much in life that at least a few more rebirths were needed to discover myself and allow

myself to grow and develop as a human being.

Moreover, I saw government service, particularly in Sikkim, as a school. The daily routine of a government servant seemed very painful and monotonous. You get up in the morning, wash your face, get dressed, have brunch, go to office at around 9.30 a.m., and then get stuck in one room the whole day. At the end of the day, you come back home, may be take a walk through the *bazaar*, chew a *pan*, buy a newspaper or do some window shopping, go back home, get undressed, relax for a while, have dinner, and finally go to sleep.

The same routine is repeated the next day and all the days of your life. The only thing that you look forward to is your pay cheque (I prefer to call it 'pocket money') at the end of the month. And perhaps if you are lucky or are specialised in the art of sycophancy (which is gradually becoming a way of life these days), there is the possibility of a better posting, transfer to a more lucrative post, or even a promotion. And after this, you have nothing to look forward to except your retirement. After a brief spell of gardening and looking after your grandchildren, you await your final exit from life. You have accomplished nothing in life and have contributed nothing to society. Your very existence, after a few years, is either forgotten or untraceable. What a tragedy!

I was a different person altogether and could not see how I could perpetually torture myself and get used to this kind of life. Most youngsters, at the outset of their life, have the desire not to conform to the ways of the world. But due to circumstances and lack of will to fight back, they give in and join the rat race and lose their self-respect and identity. In the process, they lose their most vital possession – their individuality. I was determined to become a non-conformist in the real and true sense of the word. My attitude to life can best be summed up in these words from the book – "*On Running*" – by George Sheehan, MD,:

"Heroism is the will to be oneself. The hero's will is not that of family or custom or society, but his own. His life is a

resistance to what is customary and habitual, to business as usual. The hero takes himself and his place in time and creates his own drama. We come into this world to play a part for which neither script nor role has been established. It is for us to compose and act out the drama of our existence. Success rests with having the courage and endurance and, above all, the will to become the person you are, however peculiar that may be. The free man is not what you or society want him to be. He wears no mask. He is the total expression of his body-mind-soul relationship – and nothing else, or he would be false. What is primary, however, is not the desire to be different or peculiar, but to have that difference, that originality, derive from a source of action natural to your body-mind-spirit totality – the unique person you are”.

I wasn't prepared mentally or professionally to come back to settle in Sikkim in 1972. But at the end of 1982, I was. Though I had no idea of what I would be doing in Sikkim, I was convinced that I'd be doing what I wanted to do and not what someone else, including my parents, wanted me to do. By and large, most parents in Sikkim wanted their children to join government service. "Government service" is carved on the foreheads of every school-going children and their parents in Sikkim. My parents were no different, and though they could not tell me directly, I felt that they, particularly my father, wanted me to be in the government. They naturally wanted a smooth and secure life. This is understandable in a place like Sikkim where people depend on the government for almost everything. To many, being placed in positions of authority, spelt success and status. But I had my own mind and held strong views on many things. What was important to me was not social status but social service; not what position one holds in society but what kind of person one really is. I had my way.

However, I did apply for a government job at first. But this was basically a stop-gap arrangement. I knew I would be coming back to Sikkim for good at the end of 1982 and it was

important that I get some sort of employment as soon as I reached Gangtok. In mid-1982, I had applied for a job in the Labour Department where there was a post vacant at the under-secretary level. I felt that if I got the job, it would at least help me financially at the initial stage. This would enable me to hang around for a while and get the feel of the place before I quit government service and started something on my own.

But what I really wanted to do when I came back home was to go straight to my village in Lachen in north Sikkim and live there for at least two years. I had a strange and enlightening experience in Lachen in the winter of 1975-76. For the first time in my life, I started viewing the life-style of the village folks in Lachen in a different way. I felt a deep and warm appreciation of everything I saw – the people, their dress, manners, customs, language, places and everything which was a part of my village. I knew that it was only a matter of time when 'civilisation' would break in and put an end to its rich and unique life-style, which has been preserved down the centuries. Unlike other places in Sikkim, the people of Lachen and Lachung, who lives in the extreme north, are of pure Bhutia stock and have a rare and unique cultural identity of their own. Besides observing every aspect of life in Lachen and recording it, I myself had a strong desire to live and experience the life there once again. I felt unsatisfied at having spent only a few years of my childhood life in Lachen and I still wanted to spend more time there.

This feeling has lasted all along, and when I went back to teach in MH in 1976, I kept a live interest in Sikkim's history and its cultural heritage, which was gradually vanishing. As yet, I still have not been able to spend as much time in Lachen as I had hoped. Perhaps there is a time for everything under the sun and I anxiously wait for the day when I can go back to the land where I was born and where I spent my childhood days. But the sad thing is that many of the older folks, whose company I would have enjoyed and who could also have given me invaluable informations about Lachen, have passed away in the

past several years, including my two grandfathers – *Cbo Dorji Lobon*, the Head Lama of Lachen monastery, and *Cbo Chozila*, an important and well-respected elder of the village, for whom I had great love and admiration. Beside extracting authentic informations from them, I have always wanted to be close to them and live with them for some time. Both of them passed away in mid-1992. This was a personal tragedy for me and my family and an irreparable loss to our village. Unfortunately, two more influential elders of Lachen, *Cbo Wangchuk* and *Cbo Pawo*, passed away this year. Their passing away symbolized the end of an era that had been a part of the old Lachen and my childhood memories, which I deeply miss and cherish.

One of the few things in life which I regret most is my failure to spend some time in Lachen with my people. My newspaper work and my commitment as a journalist kept me away from my people. Bringing out the *Observer* has really been a one-man-show all the way, and if it hadn't been for that, I could have made frequent trips to Lachen and spent a few weeks there at a stretch from time to time. But perhaps everything has its own time and I didn't want to rush and be out of tune with life. I would have loved to have lived the life of an ordinary villager in Lachen for a few years for the sheer joy and fun of it. It is only when we live our lives fully and completely that we are able to give as much as we want to receive.

However, this was not to be so, and life, gently and quite unexpectedly, led me through another route. A few persons persuaded me to teach in a private school in west Sikkim but I declined. Teaching was now a thing of the past and I wasn't attracted to becoming a teacher again, least of all in Sikkim. I could never give myself to any other school the way I had given myself to MH. My mind was engrossed on larger issues that concerned the people of Sikkim and I wanted to get involved and contribute my share to the people in my own special way.

One of the issues that caught my attention during those

days was the demand for grant of Indian citizenship to 'stateless' persons residing in Sikkim. Though the issue was a genuine one, the politicians were trying to capitalise on it for their own vested interests. I was quiet suspicious of the activities of some of our politicians and knew that under the pretext of fighting for the 'genuine Sikkimese', they would ensure that names of many non-Sikkimese would be included in the list of the 'stateless'.

I had an open mind on many issues which concerned the people of Sikkim, including the citizenship and Assembly seat reservation issues, which were vital to Sikkim. My firm belief then and now is that the rights of the Sikkimese, irrespective of whichever community they belong to, must be respected and protected at all costs. The very existence of the cultural identity and the future of the three ethnic groups in Sikkim is dependent on this. The activities of any individual or party should, therefore, be judged from this point of view and keeping these factors in mind. If they are in favour of the Sikkimese, they should be supported; if not, they ought to be opposed. We cannot and should not blame others for all the wrongs if we ourselves shirk from our responsibilities and become silent spectators. Some of us saw what was happening in Sikkim and spoke up and played our parts, while many others stayed on the sidelines and just drifted along. I can only recall what Dante said of such people: "The hottest places in hell are reserved for those who, in a time of great moral crisis, maintain their neutrality".

What was happening in Sikkim was not just a fight for "Sikkim for Sikkimese"; but underlying all these was the fight for liberty, freedom and human dignity. For I believe that a man should stand tall and "walk upright in the land they were born". Unfortunately, we Sikkimese were becoming aliens to our own culture and strangers in our own land. The people had not only become directionless but their very future was bleak and uncertain. The denial of the opportunity to participate in public life is the denial of human dignity and

democracy. It has not worked elsewhere, it cannot work in Sikkim. Major issues and political events should not be left solely to the politicians and political parties to decide. Social organisations, pressure groups, the media, and individuals must play their part in shaping and moulding public opinion and influencing political and social changes in a democratic society. It is only in a dictatorial regime, where the power to influence public life is confined to a few individuals, that the people are deprived of their right to shape their own future.

The lack of consciousness amongst the vast majority of the people, who were still unaware of their role in a democracy, and the realisation that they were helpless and unable to do anything even if they were fully aware of what was going on, is perhaps one major reason why I quietly brushed aside suggestions made by some that I join politics and contest the Assembly elections in 1985.

Only I knew what was in my mind. I did not come back to Sikkim solely to stand up from a particular constituency and fight elections; I came back to stand up for my people and to fight for them, irrespective of how long and tough the battle was. We cannot and should not put the blame on others for all the wrongs that we see around today if we ourselves fail to exercise our rights and responsibilities. For after all, "Democracy dies in the hearts of democrats before it dies at the hands of dictators".

CHAPTER 6

Freedom Vs Security

"The interest of property, the hours of labour, are nothing compared with the struggle for life and honour, for right and freedom, to which we have vowed ourselves"

Winston Churchill

"There is no security on this earth. There is only opportunity".

General Douglas MacArthur

June 1983 was a crucial month for me. I made two important decisions in the first fortnight of the month, which changed the course of my life. I decided to become a journalist, join the Press and work for the *Eastern Express*, an English weekly published from Gangtok. Another important decision, which was to have a far reaching affect on my journalistic career, was to bring out my own monthly magazine – *Spotlight on Sikkim*.

By the first week of June, I was quite sure that I would get into government service. The Labour Department needed a labour officer and I was qualified for the job. I was not only a local Sikkimese possessing the Sikkim Subjects Certificate (a necessary document for government jobs in Sikkim) but also belonged to a community designated as a scheduled tribe and

hailed from the backward tribal-dominated region of Lachen in north Sikkim. Furthermore, I had done labour law for my LL.B(G) and was fit for the job. Moreover, I had applied for the post a year back in mid-1982 while I was still in college. My application was also backed by the Lachen *Pipon*, who personally recommended my case to the government.

The post of a Labour Officer in the Labour Department had been vacant for over a year now. The delay in my case seemed unnecessary. I felt the only way to put pressure on the government for speedy disposal of my case was to approach the government through public representatives. The representation to the Chief Minister in my case was made by the "people of Lachen" through its elected representative, the Lachen *Pipon*. In his letter to the Chief Minister dated May 1, 1983, the Lachen *Pipon*, Anung Lachenpa, stated:

"The people of Lachen have been deprived from every facilities and aids provided by the government for the all-round development of our people. Thus, our people are still far from being even called a backward class. In the realm of education, we still lag far behind our own neighbouring areas which are considered backward regions in Sikkim. So far, we have been able to produce only two graduates from our village and that also with great difficulties. Apart from getting our youngsters educated, we face the problem of job security and other employment problems. Mr. J.N. Kazi comes from a good and well-respected family in Lachen. In school, he was awarded the Bishop Fisher Cup for Leadership, Character and Sportsmanship. In his training college, he was the first student to receive the Principal's award for all-round development. Apart from his excellent and outstanding performance in games and other sporting activities, he has been a distinguished student leader and magazine editor in both the school and college. All these achievements and many others have made us feel proud of him and we do not hesitate to give him further support and help which he requires in any field."

I soon discovered that the main factor which delayed the

process of my appointment in government service, was because of our college magazine, *Luksbyama*. I came to know this from the authorities at the Tashiling Secretariat. I didn't quite see why the State Government was against me on this. Was the State Government directed by the Centre not to give me employment in government service, or was Bhandari not happy over certain aspects of the magazine. Perhaps my references to "flashy cars" and "three-piece suits" in my article in the magazine may have annoyed Bhandari.

While pursuing my case with the government, I came to know that there were two more candidates, who were reportedly trying for the post I had applied for. There was also another vacancy at the High Court for law graduates. One of these candidates was qualified but I think the other one was not. I was also told that the other applicant was a lady candidate, who, though not qualified for the job, had the backing of the higher ups. Perhaps my case may have been considered if the government rejected the woman candidate's application. Realising how the government functioned, particularly regarding employment in government service, I had some doubts about my case but still remained hopeful.

"Why don't you take a *khada* and meet the CM personally over your appointment", advised the Labour Department Secretary, who was keen on having me join his department. He wanted me to get the job but the final approval was to come from the top, particularly in dealing with controversial cases. By now I was quite sure that I would get the job and meeting Bhandari was just a matter of formality. I didn't respond to the Secretary's suggestion, but just listened to him and kept quiet. I had decided in my mind not to see Bhandari. If I got the job, it was well and good; if not, so be it. That was my attitude and I firmly stuck to it.

It was only a matter of time now and a visit to Bhandari would have expedited the process of my appointment. The Establishment Department Secretary, Tashi Chopel, who was in-charge of employment in government service and with

whom I was in touch, asked me to make a fresh application. I was told that my earlier application had been lost, something not very unusual in our government departments. Meanwhile, the government would issue a public notice inviting applications for vacancies in various government departments, including the post that I had applied for. The notice was to come out any day.

I was waiting for the notice to appear in the papers, and in the meantime I came across Norden Gyalpo, presently the editor of *Lurnyuk*, then the editor of *The Encounter*, on June 6. We knew each other well. In the course of our discussion, he showed keen interest in helping me with the publication of a monthly magazine on Sikkim. By then, I had already decided to take out the paper even if I was employed in government service. Gyalpo, Kazi's nephew, was an intelligent and enterprising young man, who not only had the knack of convincing people to his way of thinking, but was also concerned about what was happening in Sikkim. We both wanted to contribute something to the people instead of letting things go by. If I had been employed in the government, he would be the editor of the paper and we would run the paper together. We decided to meet again on June 12 for further discussion. It was agreed that he would come up with his proposals and we would chalk out a plan of action for the new paper.

The idea of starting a paper of my own first struck me during a trip to south Sikkim in the early part of 1983. I felt very strongly about it and the thought never left me. Past experience convinced me that such intense feeling on a new venture should not be neglected, but acted upon, and carried to its logical conclusion.

The next day, I was on my way to the office of the *Eastern Express* to meet its editor, Suresh Prammar, when I spotted him near his office below Tibet Road at the Enchay compound. Prammar saw me coming down and I yelled, "I was just coming down to see you". "I was also looking out for you. Why don't you come down right now?", he shouted back and went into

the press.

I didn't know Prammar very well, much less his paper, which was quite popular. I got to know him on the playing ground, where we played a few cricket matches together on the same side, which also had some ex-students of schools in Darjeeling, including Mount Hermon. Prammar had been in Sikkim for several years before I returned home at the end of 1982. Some of his friends in Gangtok were close friends of mine. He was around 40 and seemed to be a nice person.

Prammar was sitting in the front room near the window when I got down to his press. He seemed happy to see me. We chatted for about ten minutes and arrived at a deal. My main purpose of seeing him was to get his printing quotation for the magazine I was to publish. He had his own reasons for wanting to see me. He wanted me to work for him in the Press. This was something I had not expected and it was difficult to decide anything at that point of time. My work was to help him with the paper, which basically meant reporting for the paper and also doing sub-editing and proof-reading. Except for Prammar, there was nobody permanently employed in the editorial section.

I was not at all prepared for this and his proposal caught me off guard. However, I was quite excited over his offer. I told him frankly that I had applied for a job in the government service and was about to get it. However, seeking employment in government service was mainly because of financial constraints, and if I got at least Rs. 1,000 per month from the press to start with, I would consider working for him.

His offer seemed quite attractive. He would pay me a monthly salary of Rs. 800 and would make sure that I got the stringership of a Calcutta-based paper, which would fetch me at least a minimum of Rs. 200 per month. Moreover, he would print my paper and the cost would be around Rs. 250 for printing and binding, excluding the cost of the paper. This was indeed a very tempting proposal. I told Prammar that I needed some time to think it over but I would let him know of my

decision within a week. Prammar was supposed to leave for Calcutta on June 14 and he wanted the decision by then. I agreed to his suggestion and then left the office. All of a sudden things started happening. I was excited and knew that I would make the right decision by the weekend. By and large, I had decided to join the *Express*. However, I didn't want to take any hasty decision and so I had asked for one week's time.

For the first time in my life, I made up my mind not to let anyone know what was in my mind. I wanted to make the decision myself without anyone's help and guidance. I was once again at the crossroads and wanted to apply my mind to the new and challenging situation. This actually meant taking it easy, looking inward into my feelings and letting situations take its natural course.

I spent the week quietly and let things happen naturally instead of making any effort to come to the right decision. I depended more on feelings and inner promptings rather than on logic and reasoning. I wanted situations and circumstances to lead and guide me and show me the way. This has always been my way of deciding things. However, there was a vast difference in my decision-making process this time and I was deeply aware of it. Earlier, I had faith in God, but now it was only me. I had faith in myself and made a point to apply it in action. Practice, to me, seemed to be the only way of verifying truth, and I wanted to put into test my new approach to life, which was then gradually becoming a part of me. I was aware of the fact that I was witnessing a revolutionary change in me and was determined to make it a real and genuine experience.

There were, however, some guidelines which I wanted to follow in the situation. I was aware of the fact that the choice that I was making was between being a government servant (even though it was a temporary one) and a journalist. It was just plain common sense to realise this. The government job offered security and status but less freedom and personal independence. An enterprising person would easily make more money than a government servant if one was prepared to take

risks and work hard, particularly at the initial stage. Being in the Press meant that I was free to engage myself in literary and other ventures, besides being involved in publication of newspapers and periodicals.

For me, business and service went hand in hand. You could make money and get financial security while contributing something to society. This would indeed be a rewarding and an enriching experience. The Press seemed to be the ideal place where business and service merged together harmoniously. My own little experience in the field of writing had been very rewarding. Furthermore, I had done a course in journalism and had also worked for a paper briefly while in Bombay. I also had tremendous faith in the role of the media in a democracy. However, until Prammar offered me the job, I never seriously contemplated on being a journalist and making journalism my profession.

Finally, the issue boiled down to choosing between security and status, and life and liberty. And I chose the latter. It was to me more challenging and would be more rewarding in the long run.

On June 13, I went to meet Prammar in his office in the morning and told him that his offer was acceptable and I would be willing to join him straightaway. I could have waited a little longer to see if the government had issued the notice for the job. But my decision was final and there was no point waiting for anything. Prammar said I could join him the very next day when he was to leave for Calcutta. Thereafter, I got in touch with Gyalpo and told him of my decision to join the *Express*. I also told him about the arrangement I had made with Prammar for printing our magazine. We planned to look for a separate place for our office in the town.

My first day at the *Express* was the very next day – June 14. I went to the Press at 7.15 a.m., came back for lunch at around 10.30 a.m., and went back at 11.30 a.m. My residence was located just above the press at Kazi Road, and it wasn't much of a problem going out for lunch. I took charge of the

press after Prammar left for Calcutta at 1 p.m. on June 14. I did some reporting and editing during the day, and by the end of the day, I was quite exhausted. I felt a quiet sense of satisfaction throughout the day – a sure indication that I had chosen the right line. I was very happy with myself.

I saw the government notice concerning the vacancies in government departments in the *Sikkim Herald*, the official organ of the government, on June 15. The issue was dated June 14. Of the seven posts vacant in various departments of the government, two were meant for law graduates. I did not react to the notice. I did not need the government job anymore. I had given my word to Prammar and wanted to keep it that way. I had found my place in Sikkim. The time for waiting in the wings was over. I was on the move again.

By the first week of July, I got my own room and furniture at the press. I was convinced that I had come to the right place and felt a sense of belonging. I worked the whole day at the press starting from 7 a.m. to 5 in the evening. At times, I came back to the press after dinner to spend more time reading and writing. During those days, the *Express* establishment was divided into four rooms and was located on the ground floor of a building belonging to a Tibetan. The paper had its own letter printing press which belonged to Prammar. The biggest room was kept for the compositors, which also housed the demi-size printing machine. The room adjacent to this was divided into three rooms of which the middle one was kept for the cutting machine. Prammar kept the front room while I got settled in the back room, which later turned out to be the better one.

Within three weeks of my stay in the *Express*, we decided to go daily as soon as possible and also to have a special issue of the paper on Sundays. We also planned to bring out a Nepali edition of the paper to serve the large rural populace. Although this took some time, we eventually went daily and was also able to bring out *Lokmat*, the Nepali edition of the *Express*.

On July 6, 1983, a month after I met Prammar, I wrote in my

diary: "I don't know how long I'll be in this line. Considering the changes that I have made in the past, I won't be surprised if I find something other than working in the Press. But this I can say to myself at this very moment – I want to stay here for eternity. I feel that I have chosen to be a journalist. I may have been a teacher or worked elsewhere in different capacities. But they were merely all preparations for this line. Even if I do shift on to some other profession, I can genuinely say that the first profession that I have especially chosen is to be a journalist. Therefore, I am happy and feel good that I have at last found myself".

Pramar came back from Calcutta within a few days. While he was there he made sure that I was made the correspondent of the *Telegraph*. The paper was only about a year old but was very informative and attractive. I sent my first despatch to the *Telegraph* on June 22. It was a political story concerning the newly-formed Sikkim Himali Congress (SHC) party and was meant for the 'Regional Round-up' column of the paper, which came out every Thursday.

Pramar was as excited as I was about my first report in the *Telegraph*. "Jigs! Jigs!", he yelled from my friend's shop in the town when he saw me from a distance. He had just got a copy of the *Telegraph* carrying my article. It was prominently placed in the op-ed page under the 'Regional-Round-up' column. The caption was "Sikkim: No unity, no opposition" and my by-line (Jigme N. Kazi) appeared below the article. I was naturally thrilled to see my article and name in the paper and felt good and proud of myself.

The formation of Himali Congress led by Dorjee Tshering, MLA, was the lead article in the *Express* dated June 19. I had personally gone to Singtam, a small town on the national highway enroute to Gangtok, to cover the first public meeting of the party. Subsequently, another article entitled "Stability at the cost of the people" appeared in the *Express* with my by-line. My next main piece was carried in *The Nation*, another English weekly run by the *Express* group, dated July 21. The

lead story in this paper was captioned "Sikkim United Council attracts the people" and again carried my by-line. The Sikkim United Council (SUC) was another new party launched in July and was led by Kazi. Sherab Palden and Sanchaman Limbu, MLAs and prominent ministers, who had just been dropped from the Cabinet by Bhandari, were also with the SUC.

Within two months of my joining the *Express*, Sikkim witnessed the formation of two new political parties. This was something quite remarkable considering the strength of the ruling party which had 26 of the 32 members of the House. There were talks of the two parties, SHC and SUC, merging to form a single political entity. The third opposition party in the State was Poudyal's Congress (R). Due to large-scale defections of its MLAs into the ruling party, the Congress (R)'s role as an opposition party diminished considerably, and by 1983, it had only two MLAs in the Assembly – K.N. Upreti and B.P. Dahal.

The activities of the newly-formed parties and dissidence within the ruling Congress (I), kept us on our toes all the time. The *Express* was considered an opposition paper and our contacts with anti-government elements was quite good. The Congress(R), even with two MLAs, was still quite vocal under Poudyal's leadership. Dorjee Tshering, its Vice-President, resigned from the party, and along with S.K. Rai, former MP, and P.B. Subba, formed the Himali Congress. The SHC was financed by M.K. Subba, a businessman from Assam, who is now an MLA from that State. Its main vote-bank was the *mat-wali* community, which formed the bulk of the Nepalese population in Sikkim. One of the main objectives of the party was to make Sikkim into a 'tribal state'. The formation of two new parties isolated the Congress (R), whose main issue was the 'Black Bill' of 1979 relating to the Assembly seat reservation issue. Poudyal, instead of asking for restoration of seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese, wanted further reduction of seats reserved for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha tribals. Many of his colleagues, who deserted him, disapproved of Poudyal's approach on this issue. Bhandari's demand on the seat issue

was more or less the same as before. He wanted reservation for all the three ethnic groups on equal basis. Despite feverish activities in the opposition camp, Bhandari was firmly in the saddle.

Within two months of my joining the *Express*, I got my first taste of how vulnerable the profession I had chosen was. On the night of August 19, Pramdar was assaulted by an unknown assailant. He was coming home late one evening, when all of a sudden someone came from behind and hit him on his head with a rod, resulting in a deep injury.

My report of the incident was carried in the *Telegraph* under the headline "Press-govt battle out in the open". The report carried reactions of Press organisations and political parties in the State to the attack. The reaction of the Sikkim Union of Journalists (SUJ), as reported in my story in the *Telegraph*, said the attack was aimed at curbing "the voice of an independent journalist, who has fearlessly exposed the many acts of corruption and mal-administration in the State". My report further stated, "Relations between the press and the state government have been strained from the beginning of the present government's term. The chief minister, who claims to have been an editor himself, has failed to maintain cordial relations with the press and has, on a number of occasions in the past, publicly abused newsmen for their exposure of his government's misdeeds".

By the time my next article appeared in the *Telegraph*, the authorities must have marked me as a troublesome journalist. The article "Where merit does not pay" related to the State Government's "arbitrary" selection of candidates for medical seats for Sikkimese students studying outside the State under the Central quota kept for the State. The report alleged that meritorious candidates were not selected for these seats. The issue was taken up by the students with some of them filing writ petitions against the government in the Sikkim High Court.

"Corruption in high places", my next article, which appeared in the *Telegraph* dated November 10, 1983, highlighted

the government machinery being used to obstruct the arrest of B.K. Shreshta, the managing director of Sikkim Tobacco and an influential Nepali businessman from Nepal, who had business interests in Sikkim. Shreshta was very close to Bhandari and some top bureaucrats in the State belonging to the Pradhan community. The "Pradhan clique", as the *Express* termed it, virtually ran the administration with Bhandari's full backing.

The Delhi Metropolitan Magistrate had issued a warrant of arrest for Shreshta for cheating and criminal breach of trust in a case relating to cigarette production in Sikkim by Sikkim Tobacco. Representatives of the GTC (Golden Tobacco Company), along with Delhi police personnel, arrived in Gangtok on October 29, to arrest Shreshta and to search, seize and produce all machinery in the court in Delhi. My report said Bhandari and other "top officials of the state administration" were backing Shreshta, whose Sikkim Tobacco, being involved in cigarette production in collaboration with the GTC, made several crores of rupees. I came to learn later on that Shreshta wanted to sue me and M.J. Akbar, then the editor of the *Telegraph*, over my report. Fortunately, no local lawyers were willing to take up the case against us.

Most reports, which were sent to the *Telegraph*, were also carried in the *Nation* and the *Express* with minor alterations. My association with the *Express*, which was considered the 'number one' paper in Sikkim, and with Prammar, a fiercely independent newsman, coupled with my *Telegraph* reports, certainly gave the impression that I was not an easy person to deal with. However, the government or the public's perception of my reports, whether positive or negative, did not affect me in my work. I went about my job without taking much notice of outside reactions.

Apart from my association with the *Express*, the *Nation* and the *Telegraph*, my own paper – *Spotlight on Sikkim* (SOS) – of which I was the editor, came out within a month of my joining the Press. The first issue of the paper, dated July 1983, was on the citizenship issue of the State. I had done a thorough

study on the subject and presented an analytical study of the issue, which was also one of the major political demands of the ruling party. The aim of the SOS was to "present an incisive analysis of major changes, issues, and problems affecting the people of Sikkim", and also to present a "study of the people and their way of life".

The second issue of the SOS was out in August 1983, and the entire 29 pages of the paper was devoted to the Assembly seat reservation issue. In it, I had provided facts, figures, reactions, and stand taken by various organisations and political parties in the State on the issue. My own stand on this vital subject, which is perhaps the most important issue of the Sikkimese people, has not changed over these ten long years. No matter what others say, the Sikkimese Nepalese, though they are in the majority today, will one day be reduced to a minority if political rights are not restored to them by having seats reserved for them in the Assembly. The Sikkimese Nepalese deserve reservation of seats as much as the Sikkimese Bhutias and Lepchas. Moreover, division among genuine Sikkimese of whatever ethnicity would gradually lead to the erosion of the distinct identity of the new State.

My studies on these two sensitive and vital issues of the State, which were presented in the first two issues of the SOS, clearly indicated my line of thinking regarding the basic political issues and trends in State politics. They also helped me to establish my credentials as a serious and responsible journalist.

CHAPTER 7

Foreigners In Our Own Homeland

"Each generation has to deal with its own inequities. The battle for equal justice under law can never be wholly won, but so long as courts are free and judges fair, it can never be wholly lost".

John D. Weaver

"There can be no darkness or more devastating tragedy than the death of man's faith in himself and in his power to direct his future".

Saul Alinsky

On November 30, 1983, Pramard told me that the Additional Advocate General of Sikkim, Anup Deb, wanted to see me regarding the Assembly seat reservation case in the Supreme Court. He said the Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association (STWA), an organisation of the minority Buddhist Bhutia and Lepcha tribals in Sikkim, which had been made a party in the case, required my help to fight the case in the court. Some senior government officials and members of the STWA may have approached the concerned authorities to seek my help. Deb had rung up Pramard to find out if I was willing to help out in the case.

While I was aware of the writ petition filed by Poudyal

and his brother, Somnath Poudyal, also of the Congress(R), in the Supreme Court on the Assembly seat reservation issue, I was totally ignorant of the exact stand and strategy adopted by the State Government and the Union Government, which were respondents in the controversial case, then a major issue of most political parties and social organisations in Sikkim. The involvement of the STWA seemed a bit strange. Though I was not fully aware to what extent the Association was involved in the case, I knew that its main motive was to defend the 12 seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas (BLs) and the one seat reserved for the Sanghas (lamas) in the State Legislative Assembly of Sikkim, which were under attack.

I went to Deb's chamber after talking to Prammar to find out the exact nature of the case and the STWA's role in it. I also wanted to know in what way I would be involved in the case. Deb, who was unknown to me till then, was brief and to the point. He said Poudyal may win the case if the STWA did not intervene. The case did not stand much chance if it was fought solely on legal and constitutional grounds. There was only one way to fight the case, and that was to defend the seats reserved for the minority community on 'historical' ground.

Poudyal and his brother had alleged in their petitions that the reservation of seats in the Assembly for the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Sangha were based on 'race' and 'religion', and were, therefore, illegal and unconstitutional. They wanted abolition of the lone Sangha seat and reduction of seats reserved for the BLs from 12 to around 6-7 seats. Poudyal claimed that the BLs in Sikkim represented only 23% of the State's three lac population, and the 12 seats reserved for them was disproportionate to their population.

The only defence in the case, which was to come up for final hearing shortly, was on historical grounds. The statement of Objects and Reasons of the Bill No. 79 of 1979, seeking re-adjustment of Assembly constituencies in Sikkim, stated that 12 seats were kept for the Bhutias and Lepchas because they were the 'original inhabitants of Sikkim'. The Statement of Objects

and Reasons, as contained in the Bill, seeking to amend the Representation of the People Act 1950/51, stated:

"Under the existing arrangements, the seats in the Assembly are reserved for the Nepalis, the Bhutias, and Lepchas, the Scheduled Castes and the Sanghas belonging to monasteries. As a result, other residents of Sikkim are not eligible to contest elections to the Assembly. In the circumstances, it has become necessary to modify the existing set-up of the Legislative Assembly. At the same time, it is considered that if the Bhutias and Lepchas, who are the original inhabitants of Sikkim, are given representation solely according to their population ratio, their interests may not be properly safeguarded. Accordingly, it has been decided that 12 seats in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim which may be constituted hereafter may be reserved for the Bhutias and Lepchas. In addition, the reservation of one seat for the Sanghas may be allowed to continue. The Scheduled Caste population in Sikkim is mostly of Nepali origin. Based on their population, the Scheduled Castes in Sikkim qualify for two seats in the Legislative Assembly. Accordingly, a provision to that effect is being made. On the basis of the reservations proposed, the remaining 17 seats in the Legislative Assembly will be general seats open to all electors".

My job was to place all facts and figures of history and to justify reservation of seats for the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Sangha on historical ground. The main reason why I felt that I was chosen for the job was because of my understanding of Sikkim's history and the political developments which took place during the merger. These were reflected in my writings. I accepted the job and told Deb that I would begin my work straightaway. I took about a month's leave from the Press to work on the new assignment, which I pursued with great enthusiasm and devotion.

I actually started the work at my residence on December 1, 1983, the day after I met Deb. My first step was to collect as many books as possible on Sikkim's history. I myself had a

fairly good collection of books on Sikkim to begin with. And besides this, I also had my own notes on Sikkim's history which would be of great help in the work that I had been entrusted with. I borrowed more books from other sources and from Deb, who had quite an impressive collection of books on Sikkim. I also made use of the world-renowned Sikkim Research Institute of Tibetology's (SRIT) library at Gangtok, and within two weeks, I completed my preliminary studies. I was then ready to move down to Calcutta for further work on the subject. My other part of the job in Calcutta was to get in touch with the former Advocate General of Sikkim, D.P. Chowdhury, to prepare the written argument for the case on behalf of the STWA.

I did not come in contact with anybody in the STWA except Chewang Tobgay, who was then looking after the case on behalf of the Association. An ex-student of Goethal's Memorial School at Kurseong in Darjeeling, Chewang and I made a good team and we got on well. Both of us were about the same age and hailed from the tribal-dominated district of north Sikkim. Moreover, we knew each other from school days and our views on the political situation and on important issues of Sikkim, as also our concern for the people, were quite the same. All financial matters of the STWA case and travel and hotel accommodation arrangements were entrusted with Chewang. My job was to concentrate on paper work only. I was aware that we were tight-pressed financially and the little that the Association collected from private individuals had to be used to pay for our travel expenses and the lawyers' fees, which was fairly high. Both Chewang and I undertook the work on a voluntary basis and were not compensated for our effort and the time spent on the job in any way. Our only satisfaction came from the fact that we did what was right and what had to be done.

I was in Calcutta for exactly a month – from December 12, 1983 to January 12, 1984. Initially, I stayed at the Sikkim Guest House at Guru Saday Road, but the place became inconvenient for me because of constant disturbances by the con-

tinuous inflow of visitors to the guest house. Finally, I moved to a quieter place in the city, where I would not even be seen by anybody who knew me. The only person with whom I was in touch during my stay in Calcutta were the STCS (State Trading Corporation of Sikkim) Resident Commissioner, Palden Gyamtso, who was in Calcutta, and a Marwari businessman from Sikkim settled there. These two gentlemen, particularly Gyamtso, who is now a secretary, were a great help to me during my one month stay in Calcutta. Among the tribal officers in Sikkim, I found Gyamtso to be one of the most sincere and helpful persons for the tribal cause in Sikkim. Other tribal officers, excepting a few, pretended to be doing a great deal for their community, but in actual fact they were doing practically nothing, and in many cases, their activities tended to go against the community.

It was winter and Calcutta was cool and pleasant. The weather was most suitable for me and my work. My main job was to do further research on Sikkim's history for the case and to prepare the paper book on behalf of the STWA, which was to be presented to the Supreme Court shortly. My daily timetable was simple, and by and large, remained the same throughout my stay in Calcutta. I'd get up at around 6 in the morning, finish breakfast by 7.30 - 8 a.m., and then get down to serious work. Lunch was at around 2 p.m., and after that I worked till around 6 p.m. I then took a short break and resumed work after dinner which was around 7-8 p.m. I'd often go for an English movie at around 6 p.m. if there was a good one showing in the city. I worked for at least 2-3 hours after dinner and went to bed at around 11 p.m. I normally spent 10-12 hours at the desk daily.

My main work was to go through the books (I had brought with me two big suitcases of books and other relevant papers for the case from Gangtok), mark all relevant sections which were helpful in the case, and finally get them typed. The only time when I went out was to see Chowdhury for the written argument. He stayed quite a distance from where I was.

But this was only for a few days in the beginning. The other place where I spent much of my time was at the Asiatic Society near Park Hotel, which had a vast collection of rare and old books on Sikkim and the Himalayas relevant to our case. Since we were not permitted to take the books out, I had to take down the notes in the library itself. By the end of my stay in Calcutta, I had compiled at least 250 pages of valuable researched work, which later became the basis on which we fought the case in the Supreme Court.

The 240-page paper book prepared by me and finally presented to the Supreme Court, had a few pages of Chowdhury's preliminary written argument, along with submissions. The major portion of the book, included a general history of Sikkim, making particular mention of the Bhutias and Lepchas, British intervention in Sikkim and its policies which encouraged large-scale Nepalese immigration from Nepal to Sikkim. Names of books, authors, page numbers, along with relevant extracts from the books accompanied by notes, also formed a part of the paper book. The importance of the Sangha seat, which represented the Buddhist lamas of the recognised monasteries of Sikkim and their influence on Sikkim's history and its cultural heritage, became another important section of the book. That apart, various treaties, conventions, and enactments relevant to the case were also included in the paper book, which also contained several zeroxed copies of old and rare maps of Sikkim and the Himalayan region.

Justifying Assembly seat reservations for the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Sangha, Part IV of the paper book stated as follows:

"It has been shown that from the beginning of Sikkimese history when three lamas met at Yoksam (west Sikkim) to consecrate the first Chogyal of Sikkim, the monks were always associated with the traditional way of life of the people. With their immense knowledge of Sikkimese history, rites, customs and laws, they were members of the Advisory Council as well as traditional institutions like *Lhadi-Medi*, which was

convened to aid the Chogyal in deciding matters of national importance. It has long been felt that as the former Maharaja and the Sangha had constituted such a vital and important role in the life of the community since the earliest known history of Sikkim, and have played a major part in taking the decisions in the Council of the past, there should be a seat specifically reserved for the Sangha in the Sikkim Council.

It is important to note how the historical background and the circumstances under which the *Lbadi* (Sangha) came to be represented in the temporal affairs of Sikkim. In view of this and also keeping in mind the role played by the *Lbadi* towards religious cultural, social and economic development of the people of Sikkim, *Lbadi* has been allotted a reserved seat in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, representing over several thousand members of the electorate as enumerated in Bill No. 79 (now Act) introduced in the Parliament so that the mechanism for the preservation of traditional custom and culture of Sikkim continue to be maintained. Under the Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 1980, (Act 8 of 1980), reservation of one seat has been made for the 'Sangha'.

The former Rulers of Sikkim promulgated various laws for preservation of the rights and interests of Bhutia-Lepchas from time immemorial. The Sangha seat was introduced in order to provide for the representation of a section, which was responsible for the basic culture of the Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepchas, including some sections of the other communities of Sikkim who are Buddhists. Their interest and safeguard was synonymous with the safeguard and interest of the minority communities of Sikkim. The said laws of the past Rulers of Sikkim are laws in force under Article 371F (f) of the Constitution of India.

Article 371F of the Constitution of India has been inserted in the Constitution when Sikkim became the 22nd State of the Indian Union in April 1975. By the Constitution (36th Amendment) Act, 1975, Sikkim not only became a part of India, but the Article 371F of the Constitution provided special provi-

sions with respect to the State of Sikkim.

Article 371F is designed to facilitate and make smooth the necessary process of the change-over in the Legislative machinery. A sudden and complete break with the past in these matters in Sikkim, as it is located, with its special features, which are largely the product of history, was considered desirable neither by the communities residing in Sikkim nor the Indian Parliament. The different sections of people, who have been dealt with in the impugned laws, have much in common but in the process of integration, special features or differences still continue interse to justify the present impugned reservations.

The reservations are not on the basis of religion or race but on the basis of different interests between different groups constituting these different sections for the purpose of Article 371F. Article 371F represents substantially the condition for initial integration of Sikkim with India and its becoming the 22nd State of the Republic. The process of integration of the different sections interse and with the general stream in India is a continuing process, the impugned reservations are transitional. With the march of time, necessary changes by suitable amendments are always open.

Article 371F of the Constitution provides the basic features for the safeguard of the rights and interests of the different sections of the population of Sikkim. With respect to the reservation of the seats in the Assembly, clause (f) of the Article refers to the 'different sections of the population' just as the 8th May, 1973 Tripartite Agreement and the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974 referred to 'various sections of the population'. Therefore, if under Article 371F 'Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution' Sikkimese people are entitled to special protective measures for their rights and interests as done previously, then the Bhutia-Lepchas would be and are entitled to the 50 per cent or parity formula. Thus the Bhutia-Lepchas are legitimately entitled to the 13 reserved seats, inclusive of the Sangha seat, and in fact, the Bhutia-Lepchas are

entitled to three more reserved seats. In the circumstances, the seat reservation made under Representation of the People (Amendment) Act, 1980 (Act 8 of 1980) is not unconstitutional".

I was back in Gangtok by mid-January 1984 after having completed my assignment. The final hearing of the case in the Supreme Court was fixed for January 24. My one month's leave from the *Express* had already expired and I had also completed the work assigned to me. I didn't feel that my presence was necessary in Delhi. But no sooner had I reached Gangtok, I was asked to proceed to Delhi straightaway for further work connected to the case. So, one thing led to another, and gradually I was fully involved in the legal battle on behalf of the tribals of Sikkim. I wasn't even aware of the fact that I had missed the New Year and *Losoong* (Sikkimese harvest festival) celebrations. It was only a year ago that I had come back to Sikkim and now I was fully soaked in my work and was always on the move.

There were four of us, who were involved in the seat case – the State Home Secretary and former secretary to the Chogyal of Sikkim, Jigdal T. Densapa, Anup Deb, Chewang Tobgay and myself. Densapa and Deb were officially representing the State Government, which was one of the respondents in the case. Chewang and I were there on behalf of the tribals, and the petition for the STWA was filed in the court in Chewang's name. All four of us were in Delhi by the third week of January. We went thoroughly through the paper book, which I had prepared, and then went to our Supreme Court advocates for final touches before it was presented to the court.

The date of the hearing had been postponed by a few days, and in the meanwhile, our main work was to brief the advocates, including those representing the Union Government and the State Government. We did this part of the work in the evenings and visited our advocates at their residences regularly for several days. Among the prominent counsels that

we came in touch were the Attorney General, K. Parasaran, Additional Solicitor General, Milon Banerjee, A.K. Sen, Shankar Ghosh, F.S. Nariman and A.K. Ganguly.

While Chewang stayed somewhere in the city, I was asked to stay at the Sikkim House. Densapa and Deb, who arrived in Delhi a few days after my arrival, also stayed at the Sikkim House. Because of the nature of the work, it was important that the three of us were together. While Deb looked after the legal aspect of the case, Densapa and I concentrated on Sikkim's history. Chewang's job, besides helping us with the paper work, was to fix up our appointments with the lawyers. Having been in Delhi for many years during his college days, Chewang knew the city well enough and was best suited for the job. It was a small and compact team and we got on well.

It was around this time that Bhandari arrived in Delhi with some of his ministers and MLAs. As I was involved in my work, I was not very interested in why they had come and what they were up to. I only learnt much later on that Bhandari was having a difficult time as dissidents within the ruling Congress (I) were lobbying in Delhi for his ouster. Almost all the MLAs were in Delhi during that period. While Bhandari and his men stayed in the Sikkim House, the dissidents camped at the Sikkim Lok Sabha MP, Pahalman Subba's residence in South Avenue and also at the Western Court near Connaught Place.

A strange incident took place during this period at the Sikkim House which is worth mentioning. I was quite surprised when one day Ujjal Gurung, my school friend and the Assistant Resident Commissioner of Sikkim House, with whom I was staying at the Sikkim House, asked me to leave the place. I was quite shocked and angry when Ujjal told me that the order to get me out had come from above but no mention was made of the person who had asked me to leave Sikkim House. Being a non-government employee I was legally not entitled to stay in Sikkim House, yet it was the government which wanted my assistance to help them in the case through the tribal body. The

main reason why the STWA played such an important role in the case was that the State Government and the 32 MLAs, who were also respondents in the case, were not willing to come out openly and side with the minority community for fear of losing the support of the majority Nepalese. If the tribals managed to defend themselves in the court, it would indirectly help the government and the ruling party MLAs to stay in power.

It may be noted here that one of the prayers sought by Poudyal in the writ petition was for an appropriate writ, direction or order declaring that the constitution and continuance of the then Assembly was illegal and unconstitutional. This meant that the Assembly may be dissolved if Poudyal won the case. The government was desperately dependent on the STWA's petition to defend their case in the court. That apart, my being in Delhi and staying in the Sikkim House was because of the fact that I was representing at least 35% of the State's population, who were declared tribals in 1978, and the 13 seats in the Assembly, which were kept for them, in the highest court of the land. No person on earth, including the Chief Minister, had the right to dislodge me from Sikkim House at such an important moment. I was determined to defy the authorities and stay on.

However, I also felt that if I adopted a confrontational posture, it may lead to unnecessary problems and I may not be able to help out in the case, which was to me the most important task at hand. And it was because of this, more than anything else, that I decided to leave Sikkim House and find another place. This not only meant extra expenditure but loss of time as well. It actually meant that both Densapa and Deb had to come to me for any work connected with the case. This would definitely cause unnecessary inconvenience to all of us and would also be harmful for the case.

This, it appears, was explained to the authorities in Sikkim House, who were faced with a complex and delicate situation. By now, Densapa, who is known for his cool-headedness even

under trying circumstances, was most furious. When I told him that I was willing to leave Sikkim House and stay somewhere else, Densapa was visibly upset. He then took a firm stand and told me, "I'm the concerned authority in this matter. If anyone asks you to leave the place, tell him to come and see me. It's time that I take my stand". It was only after this that I was allowed to stay on.

No matter what those at the Sikkim House may have thought, I neither had the time nor the inclination to find out why they wanted me out of Sikkim House. We were too engrossed in our work and there was little time for anything else. I later came to know that some persons from the dissident group came looking for me in Sikkim House. Perhaps the authorities felt that I was acting as a link man between them and some of Bhandari's MLAs.

I was completely involved in my work for nearly two months and was even out of Sikkim for one whole month. There was no way that I was able to find out the latest developments within the ruling party at that time. While in Delhi we were constantly kept busy the whole day and all the time with the seat case. At times we had to work during the nights also. There were times when I went to bed at 2 a.m. and got up at 5 a.m. A lot of work had to be done and there were only a few people to do it. What was important to me at that time was how best we could defend ourselves in the Supreme Court and save our future generations from being completely wiped out from their ancestral homeland. For me, what was important was not Bhandari's ouster, or his survival, but preservation of our identity, which to a large extent was dependent on retention of our reserved seats in the Assembly. My mind was fixed on the Supreme Court and not on what was happening amongst politicians in Sikkim House and elsewhere in the city.

The final hearing of the Assembly seat reservation case, which had been kept pending for about five years, was taken up by a five-judge constitution bench headed by the Chief Justice, Justice Y.B. Chandrachud, on February 2, 1984 at 12.30

p.m. in the main court room of the Supreme Court. The other four Judges were Justice P.N. Bhagwati, Justice M.P. Thakar, Justice A.N. Sen, and Justice D.P. Madon.

I was in the court room with my pen and a small note book and jotted down everything in great detail. I was conscious of the fact that I was witnessing a historic moment, which would certainly go down in Sikkim's history as an important event. While we sat on the right hand side of the court, on the left side sat Poudyal, Somnath, and a few others. None of Poudyal's MLAs were present in the court and this was quite a surprise to me. Except for two, all the 11 MLAs belonging to Poudyal's Cong(R) had by then defected to the ruling party, many of whom were made ministers and chairmen. Even K.N. Upreti and B.P. Dahal, the two Cong(R) MLAs, were not with Poudyal in the court. Poudyal seemed to me to be all alone in his legal battle. My observations, all along, has been that it was only Poudyal, who really and truly pursued the case all along since 1979, when he first filed a writ petition in Delhi High Court on the seat reservation issue. For Poudyal, the moment that he had been waiting for ever since September 1979 had come at last, and he was as anxious to know the outcome of the case as we were.

Poudyal was seated near the front row along with his counsels, namely Siddarth Shankar Ray, the former West Bengal chief minister, and K.K. Venugopal, both senior advocates of the Supreme Court. It was Ray who began the hearing of the case by giving relevant facts of the case, including the historical background. He was placed on the defensive from the very beginning. Soon after the hearing of the case had begun, Justice Madon asked Ray whether the petitioner was challenging Article 371F of the Constitution. This was a relevant question as it was one of the pleas made in Poudyal's petition.

And then to my astonishment, Justice Madon remarked, "If Article 371F is challenged, Sikkim would no longer be a part of India". Justice Madon was well aware of the fact that the basis on which Sikkim had joined the mainstream in 1975 was

on the basis of 36th amendment of the Constitution of India, which made Sikkim the 22nd State of the Indian Republic. Article 371F was inserted in the Constitution after Sikkim became a part of India. This important Article related to special provisions with respect to the State of Sikkim.

Although Poudyal was challenging Article 371F of the Constitution, his counsel was not at all prepared to tackle the remarks made by Justice Madon on this sensitive issue, which I felt, was the main point of the entire case. Sikkim's merger, as reflected in Article 371F and other agreements and enactments signed between India and Sikkim at the time of the takeover in 1975, was conditional, and if the terms, as laid down in these enactments, were challenged, Sikkim could well go out of India and regain its previous status.

When Justice Thakar asked the petitioner if he was a representative of the majority Nepalese community in the case, Ray was evasive in his reply. He said Poudyal did not contest the 1979 Assembly as he felt that the new seat arrangement in the Assembly was illegal and unconstitutional. The Judges asked a number of specific questions, such as – Is the petitioner representing 70% of the population in Sikkim who are Nepalese? Was Article 371F of the Constitution the basis for Sikkim joining the Union? Who are the Bhutias and Lepchas? Ray's answers to all these questions were evasive, although the point he made during the half an hour session was that the BLs were a 'race' and that this community was justifying reservations of seats in the Assembly on historical ground. The court closed down for lunch break promptly at 1 p.m.

"Who are the Lepchas?", was Justice Bhagwati's first pointed question when the court resumed hearing sharp at 2 p.m. Ray said the Lepchas were from Burma and Assam and the Bhutias had come to Sikkim from Tibet. Justice Chandrachud wanted to know whether the petitioner was a Nepali and whether the Nepali language was the same as the languages spoken by the Bhutias and Lepchas. After a while, Justice Chandrachud came out with a startling observation. He

said, "The more we see, it is not a matter for the court to decide".

When Ray argued that reservations for the Bhutia-Lepchas were based on 'race' and, therefore, unconstitutional and discriminatory, Justice Madon shot back and asked, "Who are the Anglo-Indians? Why are the Anglo-Indians protected and how do you classify them?" There was no answer to this pointed question and Ray again dodged around the issue. After a while, Ray stated that the Bhutias were the richest people in Sikkim and the Nepalese and Lepchas were the poorest. Such wild and sweeping generalization would certainly not convince anyone, including the Judges, I thought! Ray even went to the extent of stating that the owner of the Windemere Hotel in Darjeeling, which mostly catered to foreign tourists, was a Bhutia. It was his way of proving that Bhutias were well-off economically and did not need any constitutional protection. He actually misled the court in this matter as the owner of Windemere, Thondupla, was a Tibetan and not a Sikkimese Bhutia. The case in the court concerned the 'Sikkimese Bhutias' and not Tibetans, who are also known as 'Bhutias' to many people.

For a while, the matter under discussion in the court was confined to whether Sikkim belonged to the Chamber of Princess or not, but Justice Sen intervened and put an abrupt end to this subject when he observed, "How can there be a treaty between Sikkim and India if Sikkim was a member of the Council of State?" While Ray tried to give historical facts of the case with reference to the 1817 Titalia Treaty, it was Justice Bhagwati, who came to the heart of the matter when he observed that what the petitioner was challenging was that law made under 371F(f) of the Constitution violated provisions of Article 14 of the Constitution, which dealt with fundamental rights and equality before law.

When Ray argued that reservation cannot be made for the Sangha as it was based on 'religion', Justice Madon said seats could be reserved for priests. Justice Thakar's observations on the Sangha seat made the petitioners even more nervous when

he pointed out that if the Sangha seat was abolished, the rights of the Sangha would be affected. It would also affect the BLs, who were Buddhists, and they would have no say in matters concerning their social and cultural welfare.

Justice Thakar even pointed out that if seats kept for the Anglo-Indian community were challenged, their community would be affected and they would have no one to speak up on their behalf. He then wanted to know whether the petitioner had come to the court on a personal basis, or whether he was representing the Nepalese community.

This was a delicate issue raised by the Judges repeatedly but they were not given any satisfactory answer by Ray. Though Poudyal and his brother had contested the case on their own, they were really political figures and were representing a political party of their own. Poudyal was the President of the Congress(R), which was making the seat reservation issue its main political platform. That the petitioner was a Nepali and belonged to a party, whom many in Sikkim regarded as a 'communal party' voicing issues, which mainly concerned the Nepalese and raising demands against the minorities, were important points for the court to take note of.

This was followed by another important observation made by Justice Chandrachud, who said if BLs were scheduled tribes, then reservation for them was on a scheduled tribe basis and not on race as alleged by the petitioner. And as the court was about to close down for the day (it was nearly 4 p.m. then), Justice Madon asked, "Who are the interveners?". It was then our turn to speak up, as the STWA was allowed to appear in the case as an intervener, and file its case in affidavit. By the end of the day, I realised that our effort had not gone in vain. The fact that the court had observed many important points mentioned in the STWA's written argument during the course of the proceeding, and that it was now asking for the views of the intervening party, meant that we were being heard in the highest court of the land.

We had defended our case on factual and historical

grounds. Contrary to the petitioner's allegation that the population of the minority community was only 23%, we, in our written argument, stated that the Bhutia-Lepchas, who were declared Scheduled Tribes in 1978, consisted of at least 35% of the State's population. That apart, the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim were the original inhabitants of Sikkim, who were gradually being reduced to a minority community because of large-scale immigration in the past one and half centuries, due mainly to British policy in the region. And as such, the BLs rightly deserved necessary protection under the law, including the 12 seats reserved for them in the Assembly.

The hearing of the case resumed after a gap of four days on Tuesday, (February 7) at 12.30 p.m. The first point raised was on the Sangha seat. When Ray stated that the Sangha belonged to monasteries, Justice Sen asked a pointed question, "Did Sangha belong only to the monastery?" "Yes," came Ray's reply, "The Sanghas live, sleep and eat in monasteries only". This was a blatant misinterpretation of facts. In our written argument, it plainly stated that the lamas, apart from their religious functions, performed other works as well; and though they belonged to the monasteries, their activities were never totally confined to the monastery. For instance, many of the lamas in Sikkim were married and lived in their homes and had family and social obligations. Even the role of the monasteries, which are found everywhere in Sikkim, were not limited to performing or supervising religious functions only.

After Ray made the point on the Sangha, and then having read Article 371F(f), he pointed out that the defendants defended the reserved seats on the ground that the BLs were the "original inhabitants of Sikkim". After this statement, Justices Chandrachud and Bhagwati, who sat next to each other in the court, had a long chat quietly. For a while, the court was silent and quiet. Finally, Justice Bhagwati read out Article 371F(f) and said if the BLs had power to override "one man, one vote", how could the court decide over the case. He pointed out that under Article 371F(f), reservation for the BLs

and the Sangha in the Assembly were justified. The petitioners, obviously did not expect this sort of observation from the court, particularly from Justice Bhagwati, who, they felt, would side with them on matters relating to equality before law and fundamental rights.

Article 371F(f) read: "Parliament may, for the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of the different sections of the population of Sikkim make provision 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".

After the Court had observed these points, Justice Thakar stated that the case was not meant for the court to decide. He pointed out that if the court gave its verdict on the case, an Assam-like situation may develop in Sikkim. His observation was that the case was of political in nature and reservations of seats in the Assembly was a political matter. Ray, having realised that this was not what he wanted, then went on the defensive and evaded the issue raised by Justice Thakar. Sensing that he was on the losing side, Ray then changed the topic and raised that issue of 'delimitation of constituencies', which was also a part of the petition.

After lunch, while Ray wanted to stick to the delimitation issue, the Judges wanted to take on the first issue, which dealt with the number of seats reserved for various sections of the population of the State in the Assembly. However, Ray again, perhaps for tactical reasons, tried to focus on the delimitation issue but without much success. Ray kept on arguing on minor matters even when Justice Thakar pointedly asked him, "What is exactly your point?"

Justice Bhagwati finally came down to the heart of the matter and remarked, "Your whole point is challenging reservation made under Article 371F(f). What percent is needed for reservation is not for the court to decide. Take the matter to the

government for the Parliament's point of view". All the Judges agreed with Justice Bhagwati's observation. Justice Madon then added, "Take the matter to the government and the people. How many seats are necessary for protection is a political policy. It is unnecessary for us to say whether Parliament had powers to make laws under 371F(f) is wrong or not". Justice Sen backed his colleagues and stated, "It appears to be a political matter. Therefore, the court cannot decide".

Ray finally realised that he was cornered and admitted that a judgement in the case may create more problems. He pleaded that the case be not dismissed but kept pending. When he argued that dismissal of the case would not be right as Poudyal had led the 'revolution' in 1973, suffered much, and later became a minister in Sikkim, Justice Chandrachud remarked, "We cannot encourage his poll prospects. Withdraw it". When Ray again requested that the case be not dismissed but kept pending, Justice Chandrachud said the court would again have to consider the case and come to the same conclusion.

Justice Bhagwati also stated, "Article 371F(f) gives the Parliament the right to reserve seats for various sections of the people. Court cannot examine how many seats should be reserved for various communities. Only when it is totally unreliable can the court intervene, for example, if only one seat is kept for the Nepalese. Bhutias are a section, Lepchas are a section. We cannot go beyond legislative facts. We do not know the reason why Parliament reserved for them. We cannot examine whether they need reservation of seats or not".

While discussing on the subject of "original inhabitants of Sikkim", Justice Madon and Justice Chandrachud said that it was the Parliament and not the court to decide who the original inhabitants of Sikkim were. Justice Thakar, while referring to his earlier observations, said if 15 lac immigrants entered Sikkim, the original identity of Sikkim would be lost as in Assam. He also made the point that the court had no power to decide over such matters.

When Ray argued that seats reserved in the Assembly for the BLs were not equal to their population, Justice Bhagwati remarked, "They are a particular kind of Scheduled Tribes". When Ray brought in Article 14 of the Constitution to defend his case, Justice Madon said Article 371F is "Sikkim's first Constitution", and as it begins with "Notwithstanding anything in this Constitution", it cannot come under Part III of the Constitution, which relates to the basic structure of the Constitution.

When Ray brought out the subject of proportional representation in the Assembly, Justice Madon asked, "What is proportion and what is protection?" He then pointed out, "100 per cent seats" reserved for the BLs may be "unreasonable" but this was not the case. When Justice Sen asked on what basis the reservations were made, the counsel for the respondent, F.S. Nariman, pointed out that population alone could not determine reservations and other factors should also be taken note of. The counsels for the respondents also pointed out that they were also prepared to defend the case on factual ground. They said that Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim were declared Scheduled Tribes through a Central order in 1978, thereby increasing their population considerably. Under the Constitution (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribes Order, 1978, the BLs were declared the Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim. Others, who were earlier not identified as 'Sikkimese Bhutias' but were included in the list of Scheduled Tribes in Sikkim in the Order, were Chumbipas, Dophthapas, Dukpas, Kagatays, Sherpas, Tibetans, Tromopas and Yolmos.

The counsels for the respondents pointed out that based on the population of the STs in Sikkim, the tribal community deserved at least 11.5 seats in the 32-member Assembly. Justice Chandrachud then pointed out that if this was a fact, then there should be no argument and asked Ray to withdraw. By now the Judges were quite annoyed with Ray's refusal to abide by their request to withdraw his unsuccessful bid to argue the case. Finally, at the fag end of the day's hearing (nearly 4 p.m.),

Ray admitted that the issues relating to the case were political in nature and decided to withdraw his petition. Somnath Poudyal's counsel, Venugopal, who was there to argue against the reservation of the Sangha seat, intervened to raise his issue. But even as he made the point that "Sangha is a religion", Justice Bhagwati in reply said, "It is a section of the people" in Sikkim and asked Venugopal to take it up with the Government. Justice Madon said Sanghas do not only perform religious roles, they had properties and wielded power also. This put an abrupt end to the Sangha issue.

Just then, Nariman in his rather commanding voice displayed a book by Nari Rustomji called *"Imperilled Frontiers"* and told the court that the book stated that imposition of one culture on another would surely invite an Assam-type situation in Sikkim. Commenting on Rustomji, Justice Madon said, "He was known as a Parsi Lama!"

Just when the court was about to close down for the day, Ray informed the court that the petitioner was quite upset over the court's observations and wanted to make representations in the court personally. This was disallowed and the Judges once again appealed to the petitioner to withdraw the case and make representation to the government.

Realising the unanimous views expressed by the court, Ray, Venugopal and Poudyal quietly discussed amongst themselves for a few minutes, and then Ray again pleaded his case and said his client wanted to speak. However, Justice Chandrachud finally said, "If you want to argue go on but we want you to withdraw". It was now exactly 4 p.m. and the hearing of the case came to a close for the day.

The case resumed the next day (Feb. 8) at 11.35 a.m. Ray informed the court that he had decided to withdraw his petition but stated that his client had gone to Sikkim to have consultations with his colleagues over the matter. Ray admitted, "It is a matter for the government and not the court to decide. 99% we have decided to withdraw". Justice Chandrachud again reiterated his earlier stand and advised the petitioner to make

representation to the government instead of arguing the case. "We will pass the final order on Wednesday (Feb. 15)", stated Justice Chandrachud, and with this, the hearing was over.

In the meanwhile, Nariman handed over the copies of the *"Imperilled Frontiers"* to the Judges. We had purchased several copies to be presented to the Judges after the hearing of the case. One copy of the book was also given to Ray upon his request.

When the court resumed after a week on February 15, Poudyal decided not to withdraw the case but keep it pending. Several prominent Bhutia-Lepcha ministers and MLAs, including Lachen Rinpoche, Athup Lepcha, Tenzing Dadul and Sonam Tshering, had come to the court to hear the court's final verdict on the case. These MLAs belonged to the dissident group and were camped in Delhi all the while. Being tribals, they naturally were against Poudyal and had come to witness the final hearing of the case.

However, Ray twisted things to suit his own convenience and mischievously informed the court that as some ministers and MLAs had also come from Sikkim to witness the hearing of the case, he had decided not to withdraw his petition. Ray made it appear that these MLAs had come from Sikkim to hear the case on Poudyal's behalf. In reply to Ray's request to continue with the case, Justice Chandrachud said the court understood his difficulty if his client could not accept the court's decision to withdraw the case. Just then, Justice Bhagwati stated, "If we decide, we will decide according to law". The hearing of the case finally came to an end at 11.40 a.m. and the Judges took up the next case.

There was no more hearing of the case thereafter and it was kept perpetually pending. Bhandari was ousted from chief ministership in May 1984. This was followed by Mrs. Gandhi's assassination in October of the same year. Political developments in the country and in Sikkim changed dramatically with Poudyal himself becoming the President of the State unit of the Congress (I) towards the end of 1984. How the new politi-

cal developments affected the Assembly seat case is a different story altogether and need not be discussed in this chapter.

For Poudyal, who had been constantly pursuing the case since 1979, the court's decision to ask him to withdraw and to make representation to the government was indeed a deathly blow. I felt sorry for him when I saw how desperate he was in the court, particularly when he realised that he was about to face defeat. One could appreciate his determination to fight on. Though we were battling against each other legally, yet we were on most friendly terms outside the court, and even went out for lunch together on several occasions during the hearing of the case. "Only the two of us are fighting in the court", he used to tell me jokingly in private. I appreciated his fighting spirit although I did not see eye to eye with many of his views.

Poudyal first filed a writ petition on the seat issue in the Delhi High Court on September 18, 1979. On June 6, 1980, the said petition was withdrawn from Delhi High Court and was filed before the Sikkim High Court. Finally, the case was transferred to the Supreme Court on July 30, 1982 and the matter came up for final hearing on February 2, 1984. He did not contest the Assembly elections in 1979 in protest against the Bill, which he termed as the 'Black Bill'. His party, the Congress (R), made a political issue of the 'Black Bill' and won 11 seats in the Assembly elections in October 1979.

Apart from his attack on seats reserved for the BLs and Sangha, Poudyal, in his petition, challenged that Article 371F of the Constitution was destructive of the basic structure of the Constitution and, therefore, illegal and unconstitutional. The Congress (R) policy, as reflected in the party manifesto and programmes on the seat issue, was very much the same. In its Election Manifesto released on September 22, 1979, the Sikkim Congress (R) stated: "We are opposed to the Black Bill No 79 of 1979. We are contesting this election under protest and have filed a writ petition before the Hon'ble High Court in Delhi against the undemocratic and non-secular features of the Bill. As long as the Bill is not withdrawn or suitable amend-

ments to it is not done, the Sikkim Congress (R) will launch a sustained movement against it by legal, Parliamentary and legislative measures".

Poudyal, who was one of the leaders spearheading the anti-Chogyal movement in Sikkim in the early 1973, could not understand how in a democracy a minority could be equated with the majority. His cryptic comment on the parity system on seat reservation maintained in the Assembly even after Sikkim became the 22nd State of the Union was, "Parity system will not do. If majority is equated with minority, then minority will dominate".

Try as he may, he did not see that for all practical purposes the 17 general seats and the 2 seats reserved for the Scheduled Castes (all Sikkimese Scheduled Castes belong to the Nepalese community in Sikkim) were actually Nepali seats. A section of the Nepalese belonging to the Limbu, Gurung, Newar and Tamang communities are Buddhists and, therefore, the Sangha seat did not solely represent the BLs. Moreover, except for two tribal constituencies in north Sikkim, the rest of the 10 seats reserved for the BLs in the Assembly, did not really belong to the minority community as the majority of the voters in these constituencies were Nepalese. Although, no seats were reserved for the Nepalese in the Assembly, at least 29 of 32 seats were actually representative of the Nepalese in the Assembly. Therefore, it was clearly seen which community actually had a dominating role in the affairs of the State.

Though the Sikkimese Nepalese are in the majority in Sikkim today, due to increasing influx of outsiders, they could easily be outnumbered in course of time if timely precautions are not taken. Poudyal's petition in the court did not reflect his concern for the Sikkimese Nepalese. The main allegation against Poudyal was that although he portrayed himself as championing the Nepalese' cause, he, in his writ petition, did not ask for restoration of seats reserved for the 'Sikkimese Nepalese'. He was, perhaps, more concerned for the Nepalese in general than for Sikkimese Nepalese in particular. His prime

motive, many suspected, was to completely annihilate the identity of the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim through abolition and reduction of their seats in the Assembly. His attempts to scrap Article 371F of the Constitution, which provides special protection to Sikkim, was also seen as a bid to destroy Sikkim's unique socio-cultural identity, which has been preserved down the ages.

In July 1982, a nine-member delegation of the STWA went to Delhi and made representations to the Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, requesting the Government of India to make suitable provisions to safeguard the interests of the BLs. In its memorandum submitted to the PM, it stated: "A minute section of our larger community of Nepalese in Sikkim are seeking to challenge some of the basic rights and traditional heritage of our communities through a writ petition ... It is, therefore, imperative that the Government of India should not only bless and protect our communities but must kindly consider all possible measures in the armament of its legal and constitutional battles to ensure our legitimate rights and interests in our ancestral homeland."

Though the tribal community had 13 seats, including the Sangha seat, reserved for them, because of the fact that most of these reserved constituencies had Nepalese voters in the majority, tribal representatives were not able to openly side with their community for fear of losing their vote bank amongst the majority Nepalese community. Thus, it became imperative for the tribals to voice the demand for delimitation of Assembly constituencies in such a way that the tribals may have 'genuine representation' in the Assembly. The STWA had made several representations to the State and Central authorities on this vital issue.

In early 1983, the STWA filed an affidavit before the Supreme Court requesting that it be made a party in the Bill No. 79 case pending before the court. The court allowed the Association to appear as an intervener and file its case in affidavit. Since the State of Sikkim and the 32 MLAs, who were

also respondents in the case, were unable to directly fight against Poudyal, a prominent leader of the Nepalese in Sikkim, it made arrangements with another party, namely the STWA, to become a party in the case and defend the respondents.

I was acutely aware of the fact that Poudyal, in his petition, had not asked for restoration of reserved seats for the Sikkimese Nepalese. Going against him, therefore, did not mean opposing the demand for restoration of seats kept for the Sikkimese Nepalese. Poudyal's main onslaught, unfortunately, was targeted against the tribals. Fortunately for us, our efforts paid off and we won a temporary victory in the court. I finally returned to Sikkim from Delhi in the first week of March 1984. We were successful in our struggle in safeguarding our rights – for the moment at least.

CHAPTER 8

On My Own

"The credit belongs to the man who is actually in the arena – whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood...who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions – and spends himself in a worthy cause – who at best if he wins knows the thrill of high achievement – and if he fails at least fails while daring greatly – so that his place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who know neither victory or defeat".

Theodore Roosevelt

"Where the common people are forced to yield to tyrannical forces; where to go against the establishment even on minor points would mean an end to one's career; where to live a decent life one must bend his knees; the Press has every right to speak out loud and clear and be heard...When the fashion of the day is to evade responsibilities and shirk one's duties, the Press must have the courage and tenacity to say "The Buck Stops Here" and mean it."

"Spotlight on Sikkim", July 1984

I lost touch with the *Eastern Express* after I took leave from the press on December 1, 1983, to take up the seat reser-

vation case on behalf of the STWA. By the time I came back from Delhi in March 1984, after the hearing of the case, I was planning to leave the *Express* and set up my own press and concentrate on my own paper – *Spotlight on Sikkim* (SOS).

Throughout 1983, I was able to take out only three issues of the SOS. While the first two issues of the paper focussed on the citizenship and seat reservation issues, the third issue of the paper covered more than one subject. However, it kept up to the basic objective of the magazine and provided an in-depth analysis of the subjects presented.

Public response to my new magazine was very encouraging. Among those who appreciated my contribution and congratulated me on the first two issues of the paper was Elisa Maria Kazini, Belgian wife of the Kazi. Kazini wrote to me from her Chakung House residence in Kalimpong in north Bengal and said: "I am very impressed with your new magazine – material, format et al, and must congratulate you on your successful venture. In the lectures I am preparing, I trust you will not mind my using some of your material, with, of course, recognition to your good self". I had never met the Kazini, also a journalist in her younger days, and her letter was most encouraging.

Another letter came from H.B. Rai in Gangtok who said: "I wish to congratulate... Mr. Jigme N. Kazi for his brilliant analysis on the citizenship issue. It is indeed the burning problem of the day and every leader worth the name, must view the problem in toto without fear, prejudice and short-sightedness. After all, we don't want another Assam repeated. The ethnic population of Sikkimese Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia support the views of the citizenship (issue) wholeheartedly".

Starting a paper on ones own was not easy, particularly under the circumstances in which we were functioning. But it was these little appreciations – most of the time expressed verbally – and your own sense of responsibility to yourself and the society, that kept you going. Because of my involvement with the seat case in the Supreme Court, I was not able to

devote much time to my paper, and as a result, I had to temporarily suspend publication of the SOS between September 1983 to June 1984.

I regret the lapses, but under the prevailing situation, I had no choice but to temporarily discontinue the paper. I felt that the seat reservation case in the court was far more important for the people in the long run than my success in my profession. This made me devote more time to the case and my professional activities took a back seat. Even after my return from Delhi in March 1983, I was told that the case would come up for hearing in the following month and I was again requested to attend the hearing of the case.

Somehow, after Bhandari's dismissal from chief ministership on May 11, 1984 and imposition of the President's Rule in Sikkim on May 25, I was able to fully concentrate on my paper, which had been neglected for far too long. The SOS came out regularly every month from June 1984 till early 1985, when Bhandari came back to power with his newly-formed Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). I was able to take out one issue (April-May 1985) after Bhandari's return. Subsequently, the paper, due to financial and other constraints, was finally forced to close down for an indefinite period. Till today, the SOS, my first venture into journalism, has not been able to hit the stand. But someday when the political atmosphere in Sikkim improves and when I'm on a better footing financially, I hope to revive the paper. If we cannot put the spotlight on our own problems and prospects, no one else will. We will then become sufferers in the long run.

I was in-charge of the *Express* for about a month from March 8 to April 8, 1984. Pramari, in the meanwhile, was out of station. During the month, I was away in Lachen for a week on personal work. My appearance at the press became more irregular after Pramari's return from Delhi. Much of my time was spent in securing a small loan from the UCO (United Commercial Bank) bank in Gangtok to help out with the publication of my monthly magazine. That apart, I was in Calcutta for

about a week in the third week of April for some other personal work. Finally, I took two weeks leave from the press on April 24. Since leaving the *Express* in November-end in 1983, I had always been engaged with the seat reservation case, and now that I was back in Sikkim, I wanted to take some time off for a short break. Another reason for taking leave was to accompany Rustomji on a short tour of west and south Sikkim.

Rustomji and his family members were very kind to me during my three-year stay in Bombay, and it was a great privilege and pleasure to accompany the old man around Sikkim for a short while. I, too, needed to rest and relax for a while. I had my first glimpse of some of the historic sites in west Sikkim for the first time, and the short trip to these interior regions of Sikkim was most educative and exhilarating. During the preparation of the case book and hearing of the seat case, I realised how helpful some of the books on Sikkim and the North-East region written by Rustomji were.

I handed over my resignation letter to Prammar on May 7 1984. This was done mainly with the motive of securing a loan from UCO, which was giving a financial assistance of Rs. 25,000 to 'educated unemployed youths' in Sikkim to start their own business ventures. I could not avail of the loan if I was employed at the *Express*. The resignation letter was a formality to obtain the bank loan. Although I had intended to quit the *Express* eventually, I was to stick around for a while.

My main purpose for taking the loan was to establish my own printing press unit. I had begun the SOS in 1983 with no funds at my disposal. Though it was not making a profit, I was happy that the paper survived. To sustain the paper, I borrowed Rs. 5,000 from the SBI (State Bank of India) in Gangtok and was able to keep the paper going. Apart from anything else, I was able to get a first-hand experience in the new field. Though we had the *Express*, *Sikkim Express*, *The Truth*, *Encounter* and other vernacular papers, I felt the need for another journal to study important issues and events of Sikkim in an independent and analytical manner. The SOS was able to

fill that gap and create its own place amongst the Fourth Estate in Sikkim.

Despite the ruling Congress (I) having 26 of the 32 MLAs in the House, Bhandari's position was shaky. But as my mind was elsewhere, I was not able to concentrate too much on what was happening within the ruling party, which was then facing serious internal problems for the first time since forming the government in October 1979. The rift between the Chief Minister and the dissidents within the ruling party, which included several ministers and party office-bearers, had widened and reached a point of no return. The elections were approaching and the dissidents were all set to face it without Bhandari's help. They alleged that Bhandari was corrupt, communal and dictatorial and were gunning for his ouster from chief ministership. The dissidents were even prepared to form a regional party and face elections if the Congress party high command failed to take firm action against Bhandari.

My chief preoccupation during this period was the establishment of my own set-up. The Assembly elections were approaching and I was planning to quit the *Express*, possibly before the elections, and run my own paper. Working at the *Express* suited me immensely, and it was indeed a very rewarding experience. By the time I returned from Delhi, we had gone daily, and *Lokmat*, the Nepali edition of the paper, was also launched. We had another man, Kharga Lama, at the *Express*, who, in Pramar's and my absence, virtually ran the press as well as the paper. My job at the press became much more lighter after Kharga's arrival. This was one of the reasons why I was able to take leave from the *Express* so readily after coming back from Delhi.

Kharga, originally from Bhutan and a trained and experienced journalist, later became the PTI (Press Trust of India) representative in Sikkim. The three of us literally controlled the media in Sikkim. Besides the *Express*, which was then the most sought-after paper in the State, *Lokmat* and *Spotlight on Sikkim*, we had the stringerships of UNI, PTI, *Indian*

Express, *Telegraph*, *Business Standard*, *The Week* and *Caravan* (now *Alive*). We also free-lanced for various other publications in the country, including *Onlooker*, *Sunday* and the *Statesman*. Most national journalists visiting Sikkim, made it a point to get briefings from us.

By now, it was almost a year since I joined the Press. I liked the profession and wanted to stick on. I had made the right choice and I was more than satisfied with my decision to join the Press instead of opting for government service. The Press offered a lot of scope for creativity and service. Besides, business prospects were equally bright. Good planning, efficient organisation and some capital were all that was needed to become professionally and financially successful.

And as time went on, I felt the need to gradually delink myself from the *Express* and stand on my own feet. While I was still with Pramdar, I was convinced that finally I would have to step out on my own. My aims were high but I started small. Just thinking on these lines was enough as a first step. I appreciated what Pramdar and his paper were doing for the State. A vibrant Press is an asset to any society and the *Express* made great contributions to the people in Sikkim. We were fully committed to the work, which at times meant speaking up and taking risks. We knew the cost and paid the price. Financially, we were not at all on a sound footing, but we got a lot of respect, appreciation and clout.

However, I was not content with this. I felt the need to establish my own identity as a journalist before people started identifying me with Pramdar and the *Express*. Not that there was any harm in identifying myself with the *Express*, but to carve out my own special place in the media circle in Sikkim, was more desirable and meaningful to me personally. The SOS had done a great job in enabling me to establish my own identity as a journalist in Sikkim, where the profession did not attract much local talents. Practically all the journalists then were non-Sikkimese.

The Assembly elections were approaching and it was

important to put forward my views on various issues to the people. It was important for me to branch out at the earliest convenient time which would suit me as well as Pramar. I had doubts about Bhandari's return, but even if he did make a comeback, I felt he would not be as powerful as he was then. Just before he was ousted, he had 26 MLAs with him. Many of them were those who had defected into the ruling party from the opposition Congress (R). Majority of the ruling party MLAs in the dissident camp, belonged to Bhandari's original group, who contested the elections in 1979 as Sikkim Janata Parishad candidates. The main reason why Bhandari was becoming increasingly unpopular in the party was because of his arrogance, alleged corruption, and superficial implementation of the party's 'sons of the soil' policy on which it fought the elections.

Pramar's proximity to the dissident group did not worry me. This was but natural as they depended on the Press, particularly the *Express*, to ventilate their grievances and carry their views. Most of the local papers, as is the case even today, played it safe and preferred to carry reports that were less controversial and favourable to the ruling party. This was most unfortunate, but that was the ground reality.

I kept my distance from politicians from the very beginning. I was neither too close nor too far away from them. A respectable and reasonable distance between journalists and politicians should be maintained at all costs. Even when opposition leaders desperately needed us, I kept my distance and acted in a professional manner. This has been my policy throughout my journalistic career. This, I feel, is the safest way for reporters and editors to maintain neutrality and balance.

I felt that if the elections were held on schedule and conducted in a fair manner, the dissidents would have the upper hand in forming the next government. The possibility of the *Express* becoming soft towards the next government if Bhandari failed to make a comeback, was pretty high. I anticipated this situation and chose to part company with the *Express* –

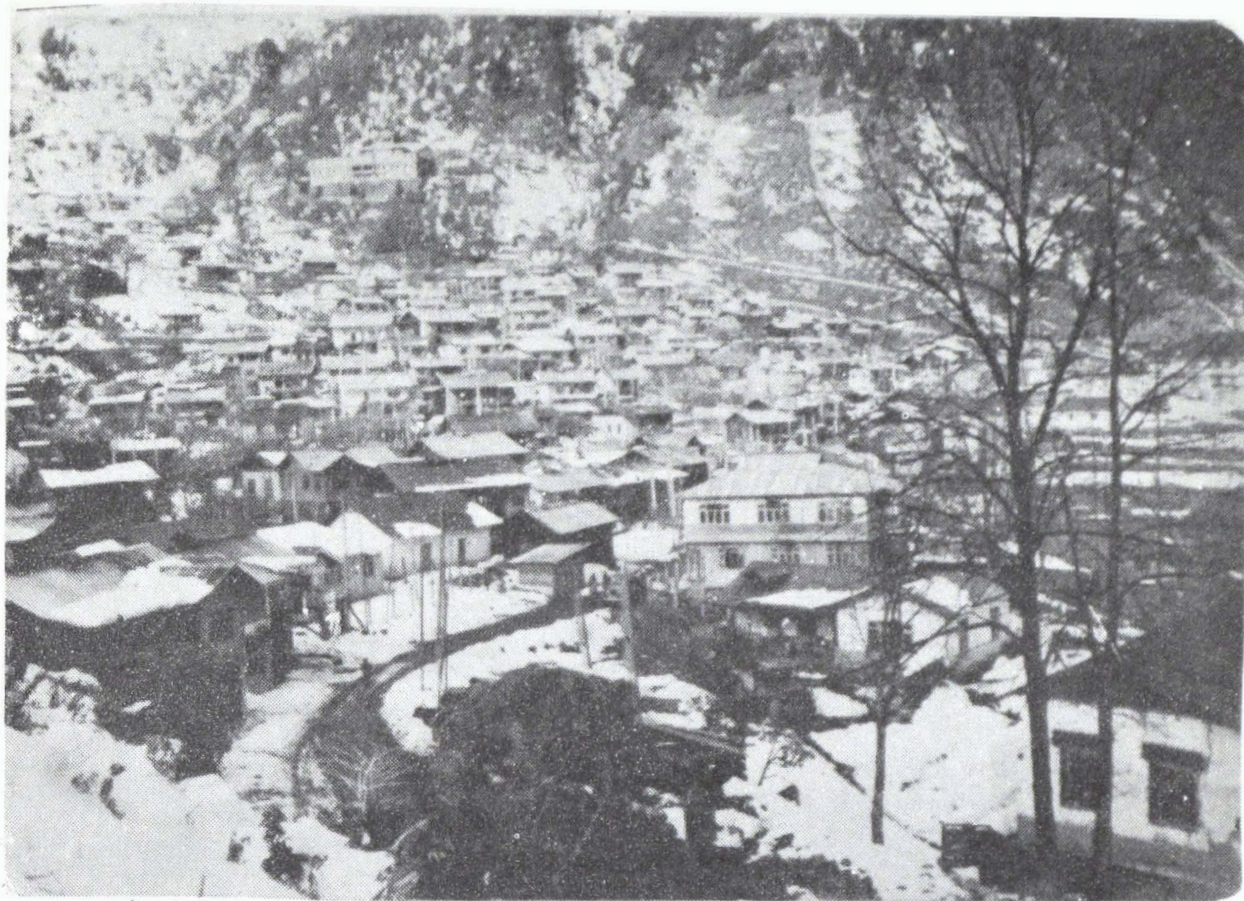
step by step.

However, my main motive for moving out was to establish my own identity as a journalist and run my own paper. Though the *Express* was bold, independent and free in its outlook, by the time I had joined it, it was dubbed as an 'anti-Bhandari' paper and was very much looked upon as an opposition paper.

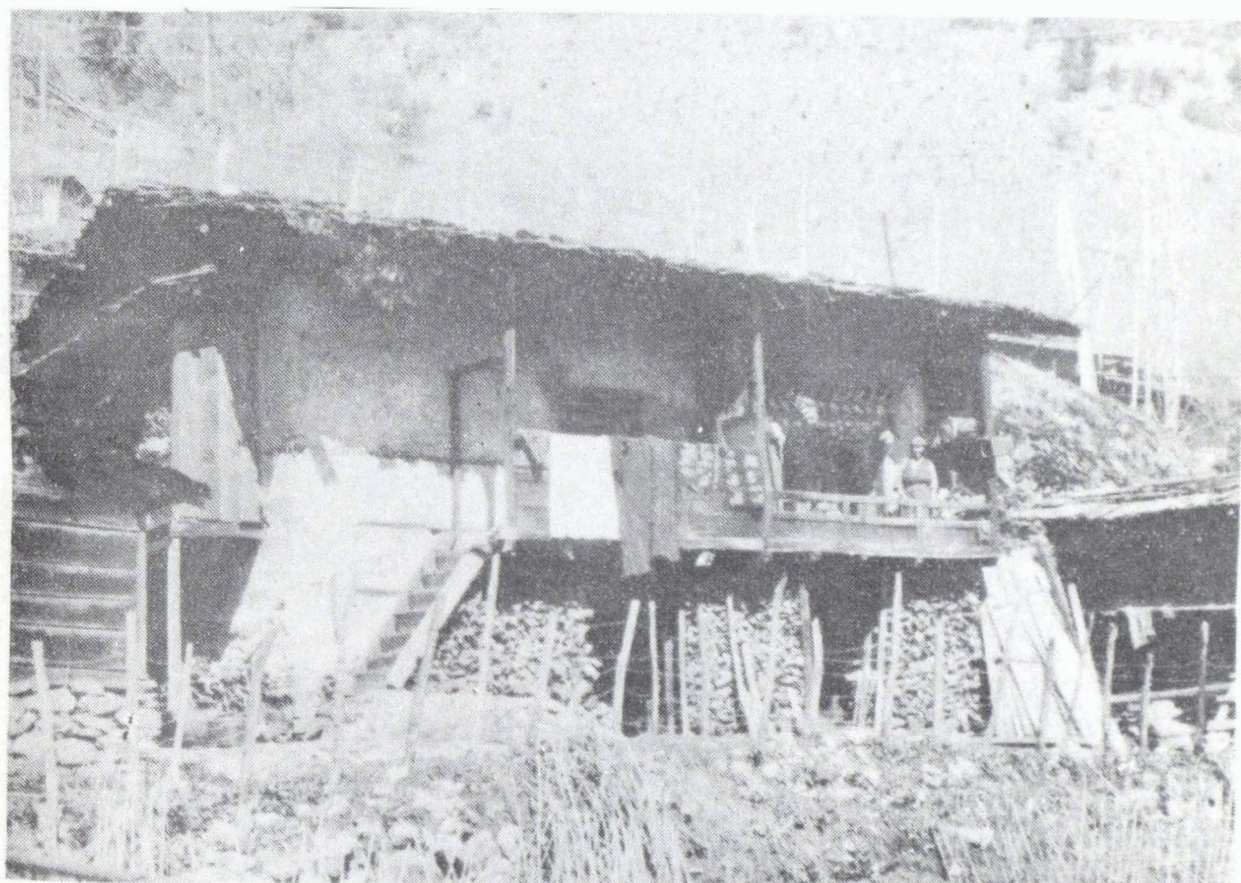
Unfortunately, most people in Sikkim, including the pseudo-intellectuals in Gangtok, have a very superficial understanding of what democracy is all about and the role of the Press in a democratic set-up. Blinded by their own ignorance and prejudice, most of them regard a particular newspaper as either a "pro or anti" government paper. The concept of the freedom of the Press, and objective reporting by independent journalists, is understood only in theory, and that, too, by a minute section of the elite.

My views on the role of the Press is and has been the same. I wanted to maintain neutrality at all costs. I'd rather close down the paper than submit to unnecessary censorship and continue with the publication. This would mean taking out a paper which lacked credibility and balance. Fairness and fearlessness of a paper is the hallmark of a great paper, no matter how small it may be. For me, the independence of the paper and credibility of the journalist are the most important and essential qualities of a good Press. They are, in the final analysis, the real assets of any newspaper establishment in the long run. Though one of the main roles of the media is to check and expose the many misdeeds of those in power, it is important that the public does not identify newspapers with a particular party or personality.

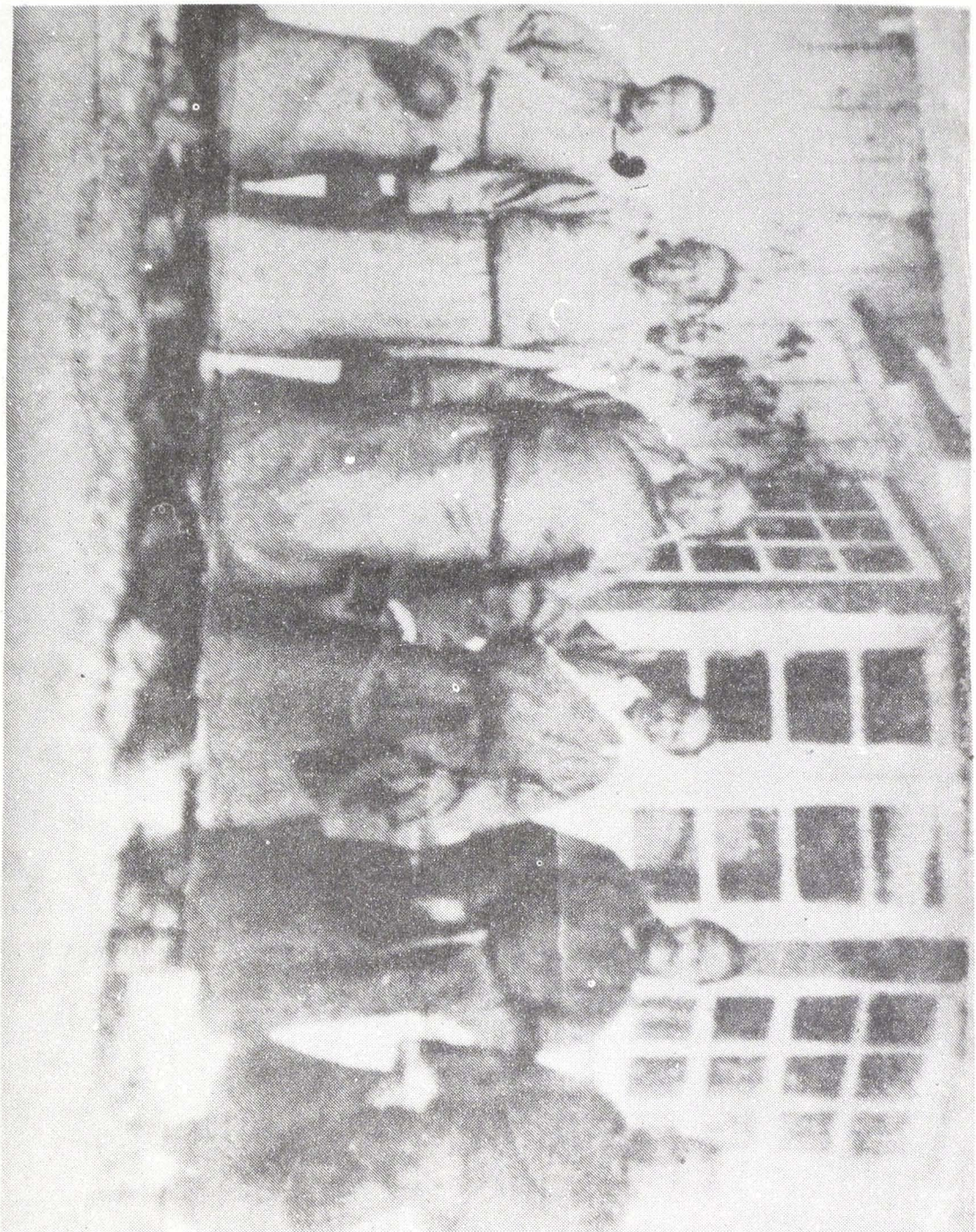
Writers, with the power of their pens, cannot bring about real change; only the people can do this. But writers and journalists must be responsive to people's aspirations, and they must reflect the reality they see around them in their writing. People's reaction to our writing, no matter how varied and cynical, should never hinder us from what we want to say.



The village of Lachen in North Sikkim.



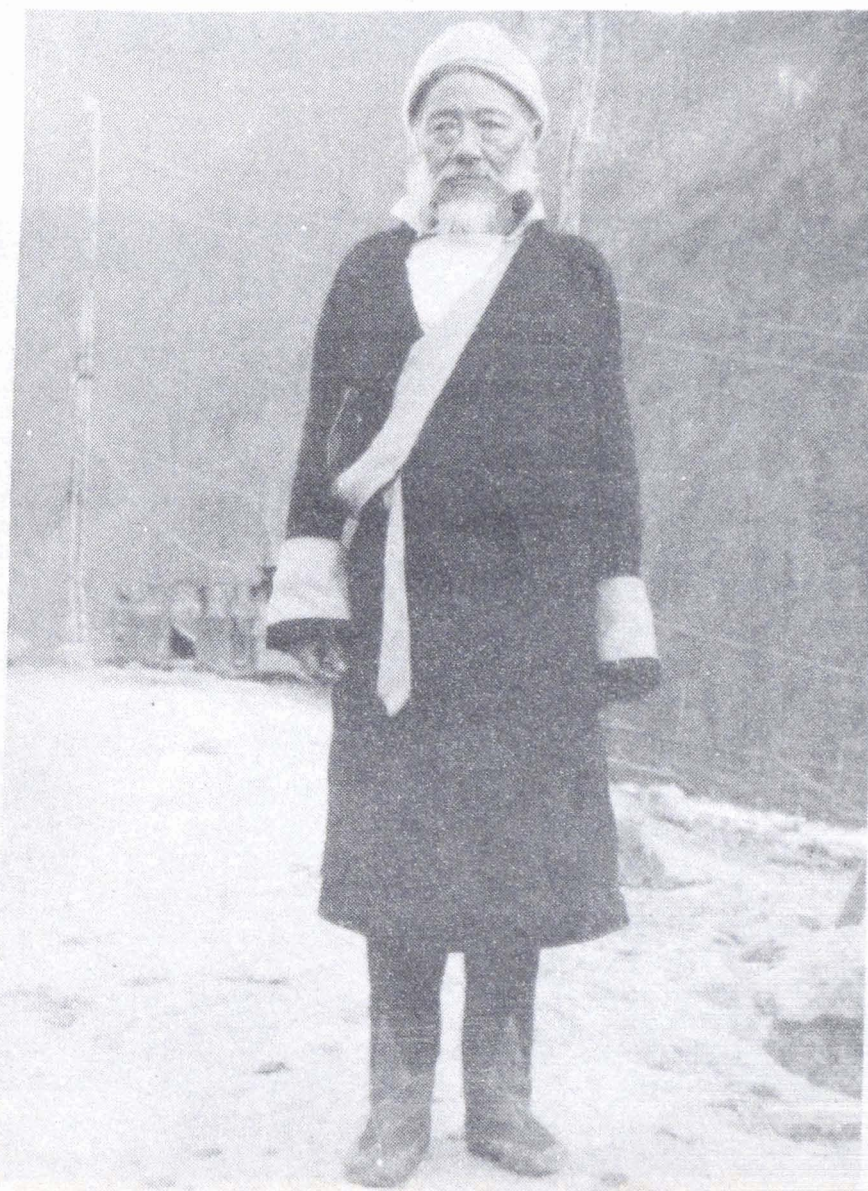
A typical traditional house in Lachen.



Ancestors of leading families of the Lachenpas.



Cho Dorji Lobon, the late Head Lama of Lachen monastery performing puja.



Cho Chozila, a highly-respected Lachenpa who passed away in 1992.



The late Lobon Dochung, my first teacher in Lachen.



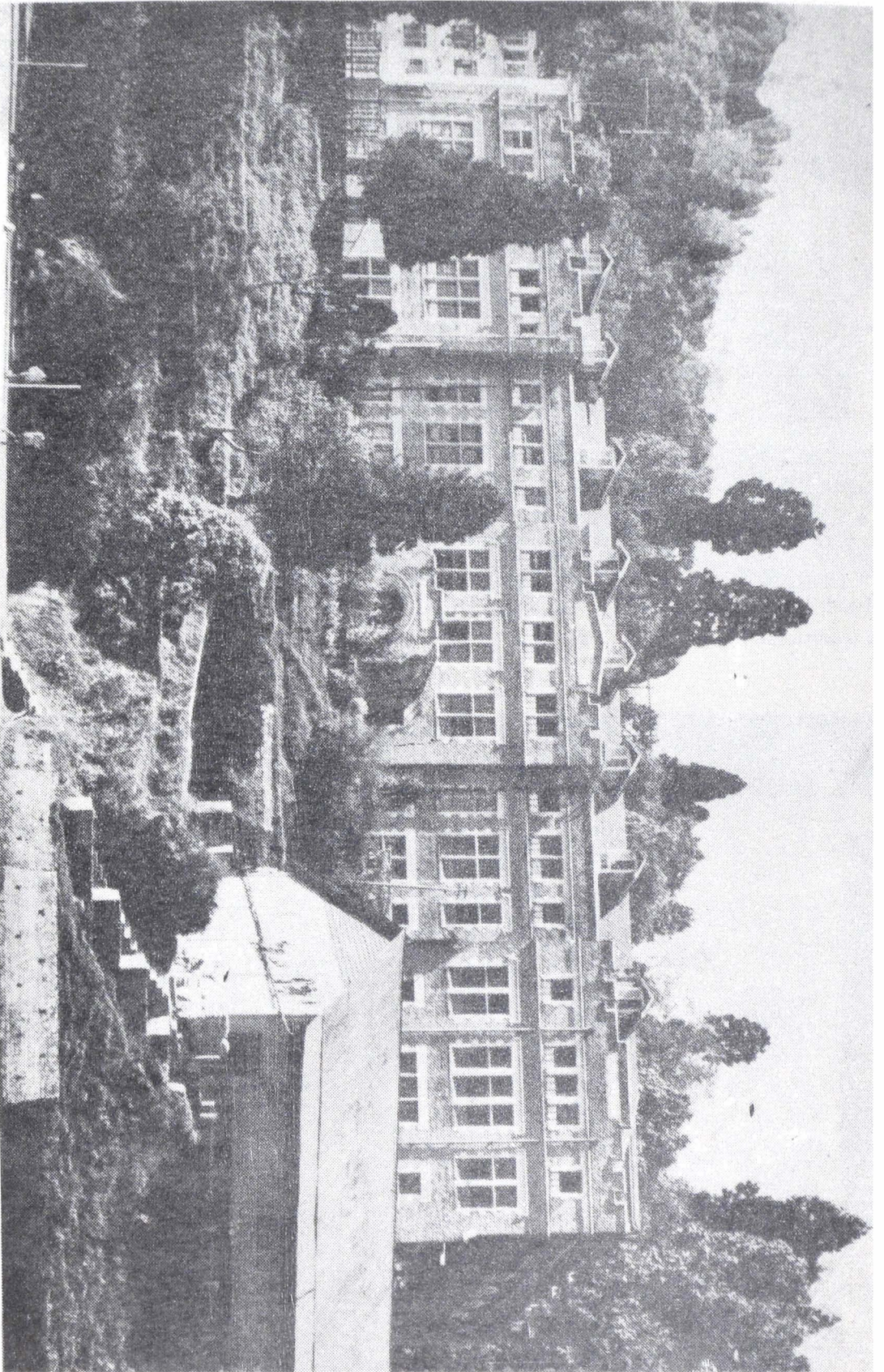
Cho Kalzang Gyatso, my grandfather and teacher in Lachen school.



Myself (right) and my wife (middle standing) along with my family members in traditional attire



Myself (right) along with my family members during the Tibetan New Year day



Mount Hermon School, Darjeeling.

Founders of Mount Hermon School



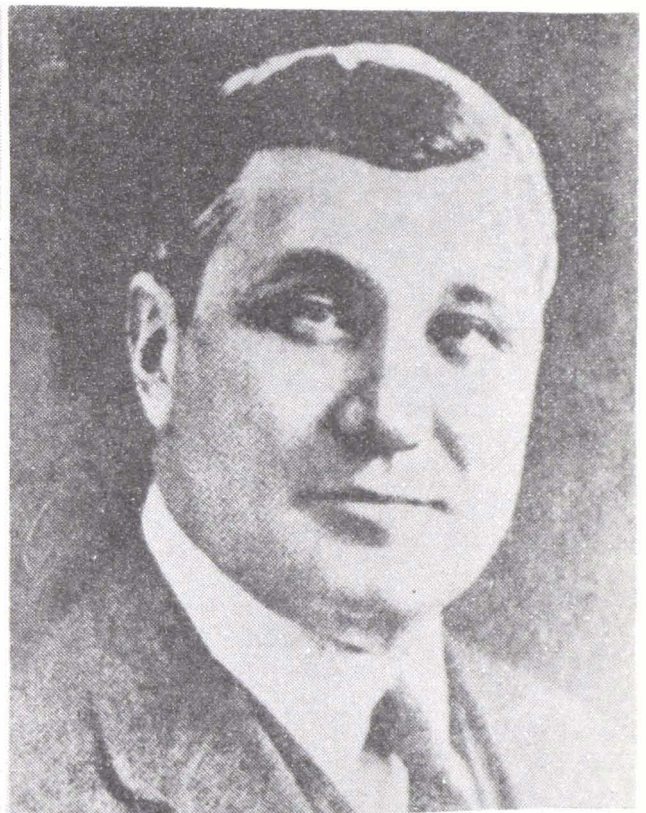
Emma L. Knowles



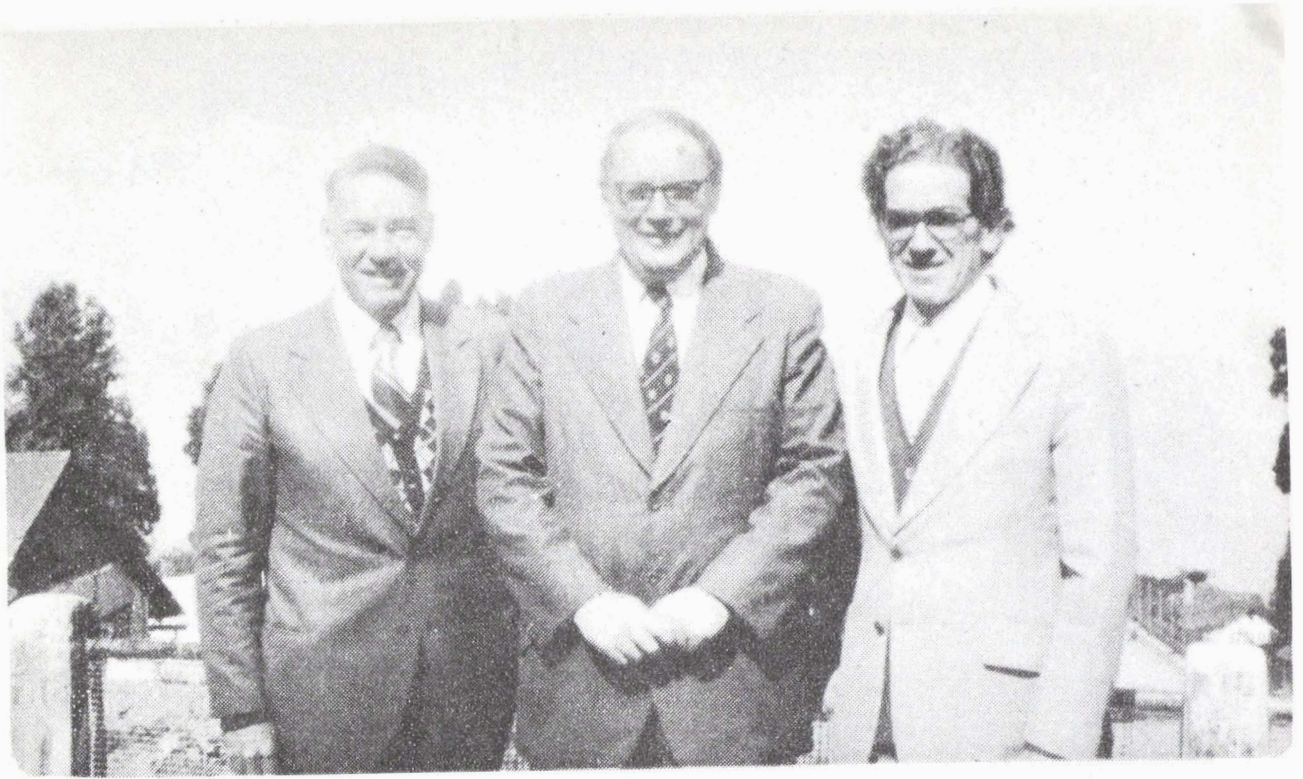
Carolyn J. Stahl



Rev. Halsey E. Dewey



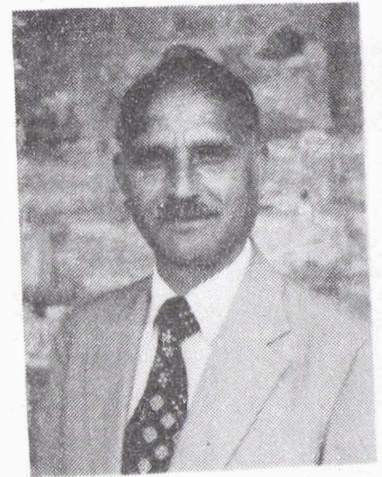
Bishop Frederick Bohn Fisher



Ex-Principals of Mt. Hermon School: (L to R) Rev. David G. Stewart, Graeme A. Murray and Rev. J.A. Johnston.



Mrs. Joy Rongong: one of the pillars of Mt. Hermon who passed away in 1987.



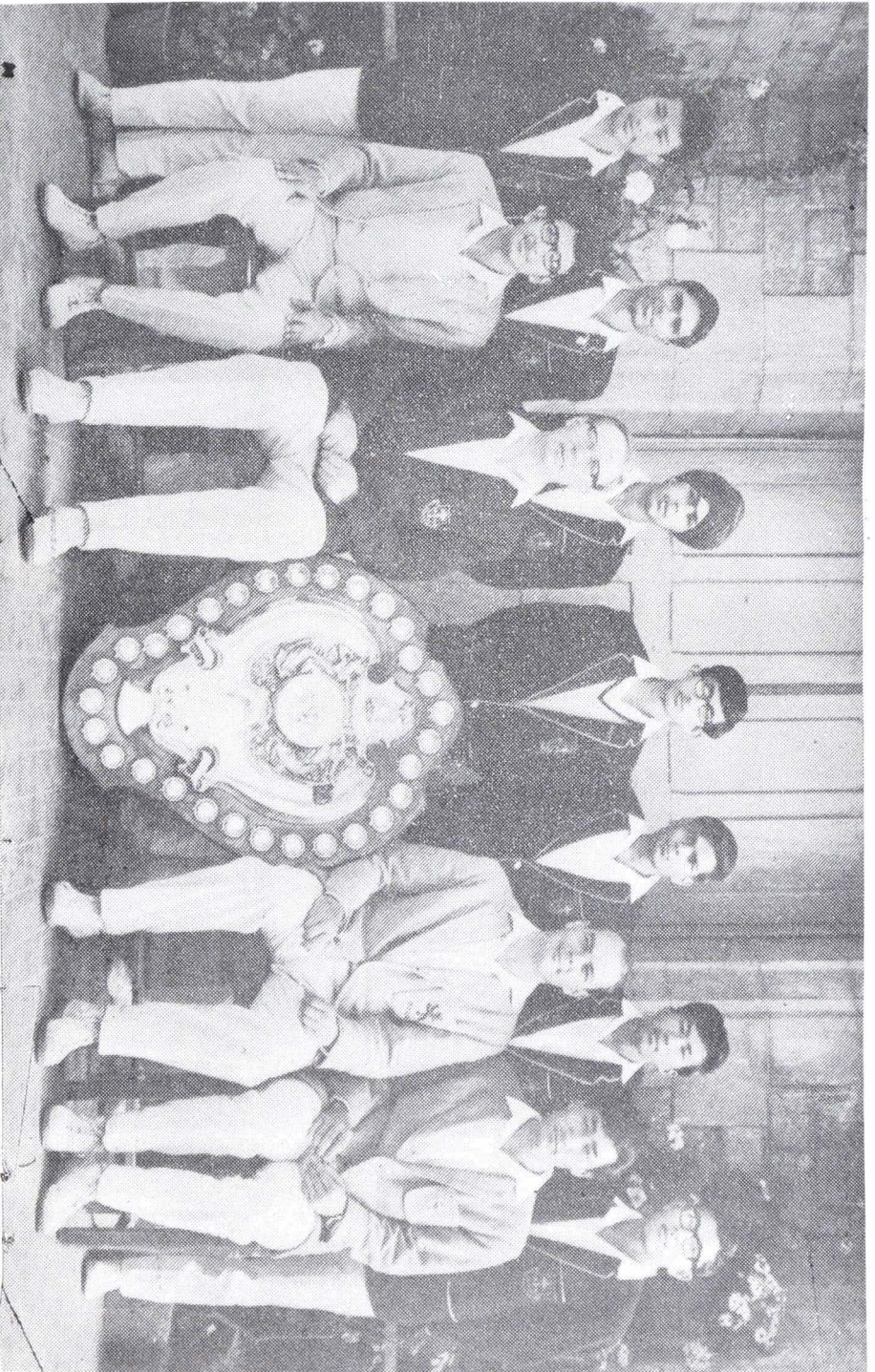
Jeff Gardner: present Principal of the school.



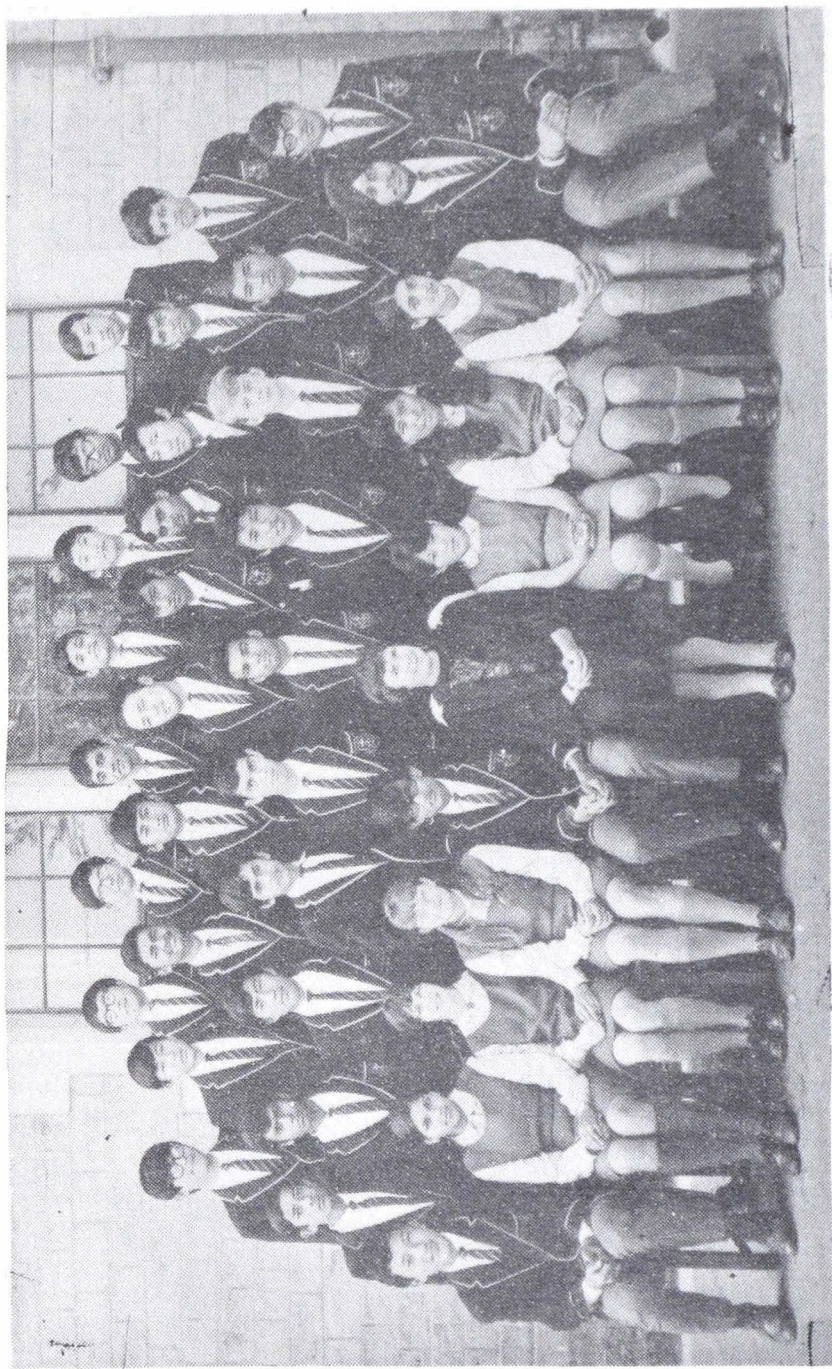
Mr. and Mrs. Murray with Dr. Welthy Honsinger Fisher (middle) in 'MH' in 1967.



Myself receiving a trophy from Dr. Welthy H. Fisher on Speech Day in 1967.



The school Edinburgh Shield team in 1968 (myself extreme left at the back).



The class of 1970 with Miss P. Russell (myself fourth from right on first row).



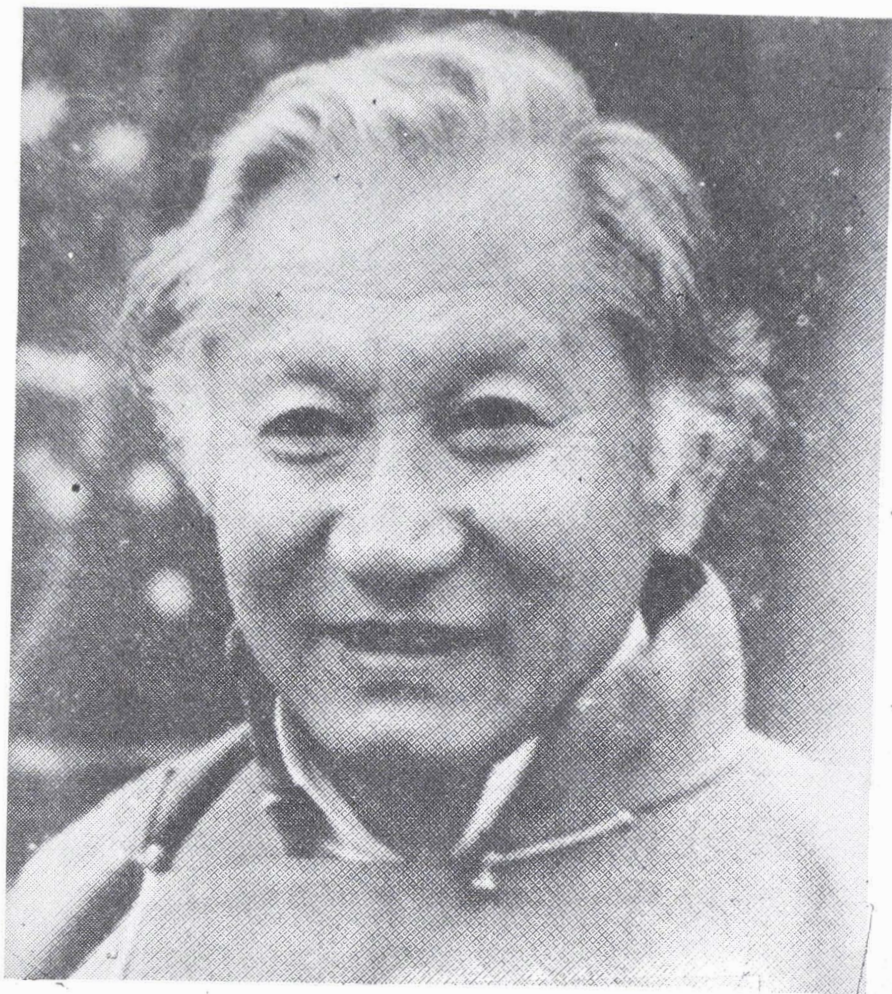
Rev. David G. Stewart (middle) with ex-students in Gangtok in June 1993.



The Murray Cup Cricket Tournament finalists at Paljor Stadium in Gangtok.



The royal family members leading the funeral procession of the late Chogyal of Sikkim in Gangtok on February 19, 1982.



Palden Thondup Namgyal, the late Chogyal of Sikkim.



Prince Wangchuk Namgyal.



The late Chogyal and Gyalmo with their family.



The Chogyal during an important cultural function.



Merger veterans: (L to R) B.B. Lal (Governor), L.D. Kazi, R.C. Poudyal, N.B. Khatiwada and Rinzing Tongden.

Political developments took a new turn in mid-May 1984, and within a month, Sikkim was placed under President's Rule for the second time since the merger. Bhandari was asked to step down from chief ministership, and when he refused, he was dismissed by the Governor, Homi J.H. Taleyarkhan, on May 11, 1984. The AICC(I) observer and Union Minister of State for Home Affairs, A.P. Venkatasubbaiah, who was in Gangtok at that time, said Bhandari was removed as a majority of the State legislators had lost confidence in him. Several corruption charges had also been levelled against him. However, Bhandari's version of the reasons for his dismissal was different. He claimed he was dismissed because he refused to compromise with the "hopes and aspirations" of the people. Venkatasubbaiah later refuted Bhandari's claim that he had been dismissed because he refused to withdraw his demands made to the Centre.

The then Finance Minister, Bhim Bahadur Gurung, who had defected into the ruling party from the Congress (R), became the next chief minister. Gurung, a veteran politician, who was more acceptable to both the minority and majority communities, wanted to run the government through "cooperation and consultation and not confrontation". Unfortunately, the Gurung Ministry did not last even for two weeks. Due to constant changes of loyalty and unpredictable moves by the MLAs, the Centre was forced to impose President's Rule in the State on May 25. The political situation in the State became more stable after the imposition of President's Rule. The new political atmosphere in Sikkim suited me and enabled me to move out from the *Express* and start my own establishment.

The need to move out from the *Express* became stronger and more urgent after Bhandari's removal and installation of the Gurung Ministry. I felt that it was a good time to make a clean break with the past and start afresh. On May 14, three days after Gurung became the chief minister, I withdrew Rs. 10,000 from UCO, my first instalment of the loan, and started preparing for my final exit from the *Express*. Four days

later on May 18, I wrote to Prammar informing him of my intention to resign from the *Express*. This was my real resignation letter. My exit from the *Express* had come much sooner than I had anticipated.

I moved to my new office in Nam Nang on the other side of the town on June 1, and within a week, I also shifted my residence from Kazi Road to the Development Area, a residential complex in the capital. The latter was more spacious although it was some distance from Nam Nang. I left for Calcutta to see the press machinery and equipment on June 9. I visited a number of press suppliers in Calcutta and got their quotations and also checked the machines. I was back from Calcutta within a week. The remaining part of June was spent on publication of the fourth issue of the SOS, which was printed at the Encounter Printing Process in Development Area. The entire issue was focussed on Bhandari and was entitled "The Rise and Fall of Nar Bahadur Bhandari". I enjoyed doing this issue as it reflected my own perception and views of the general public about Bhandari.

My comments on the state of Sikkimese politicians, as carried in this article, stated: "Whatever the Centre had in mind in bringing the President's Rule, the common people welcomed it. The question to be asked is not whether the legislators had confidence in the leadership, but whether the people themselves had confidence in the legislators. The Assembly House, the House of the people, had become a den of thieves. Everyone was aware of this fact. The representatives of the people no longer cared for the people's welfare but catered only for their own greed and growing ambition. Leaving aside a few, the dissolution of the Assembly is what these 'honourable men' deserve...Nine years of democratic experience under two leaders has been a shattering experience to this tiny Himalayan State. Our leaders must learn from past mistakes and realise that the best way to restore their credibility is to be credible and in order for us to be trusted, we must be trustworthy."

Commenting on Bhandari's dismissal, I wrote in the editorial of the SOS: "If the President of the United States of America can be thrown out of his office through the force of public opinion (President Nixon was forced to resign on August 9, 1974, after the Watergate scandal), there is no reason why a similar thing cannot take place in the world's largest democracy. In America, it was the *Washington Post*, which took the lead in the ouster of President Nixon; in Sikkim, the tiny Himalayan State of India, it is the *Eastern Express*, which was in the forefront amongst the local papers that helped public opinion to assert itself. The result was the dismissal of Nar Bahadur Bhandari from chief ministership on May 11, 1984.

Ultimately, it is the voice of the people, expressed through various vehicles, which finally decides the fate of those in high places. Where the common people are forced to yield to tyrannical forces; where to go against the establishment even on minor points would mean an end to one's career; where to live a decent life one must bend his knee; the Press has every right to speak out loud and clear and be heard. In spite of the mounting risk to personal safety that it may face, it must never give up and buckle down, but prove to the world that the power of the pen overrides the tyranny of the sword. When the fashion of the day is to evade responsibilities and shirk one's duties, the Press must have the courage and tenacity to say "The Buck Stops Here" and mean it".

This issue of the SOS was the first issue brought out from another press. By then, I had already parted company with Prammar. In the same editorial, I stated: "My one year's association with the *Eastern Express* has been a very exciting and rewarding experience. I have now decided to devote my time and energy to look after my own baby - *Spotlight on Sikkim*. Like any newborn baby, it needs a lot of love and care which I have been neglecting for quite sometime".

In the first week of July 1984, I made another trip to Calcutta. This time, it was to purchase the types for the press. I

took one of my workers to help me out with the work, and by July 9 we were back with the types and other press equipment. The bulk of the types purchased were of 10 point size and were to be used for the SOS, which needed this kind of type face. Much of my time in July was spent in settling the press and the office at Nam Nang. By the first week of August, press furniture which were given to be made, were completed. After the types were distributed in the cases, we, for the first time, began our work in the newly set-up press with the composition of the SOS.

I had about four workers at the press then and my two-room establishment on the third floor of Lachen Building, belonging to Nedup Lachenpa, one of my relations from Lachen, was given to me for Rs. 600 per month. We were fairly well settled in the new establishment by the first week of August, and by the third week of the month, the first issue of the SOS, was out. Only composing and binding of the paper was done at my press; the printing was done elsewhere since we had not installed our printing machine. I had made the orders for the printing and cutting machines during my last visit to Calcutta and they were expected to reach Gangtok shortly. I was eagerly awaiting the arrival of the machines to complete my whole set-up. The setting up of my own unit in such a short time was a remarkable achievement, and I was more than satisfied with the progress of my work.

The new establishment, of which I was the owner, was called Hill Media Publications and was registered with the Industries Department as a Small Scale Industrial (SSI) unit. I intended to involve the press mainly in publication works. As my printing press was basically a newspaper establishment, I didn't expect much job work from the government.

By the first week of September, I was already making plans to start my new publication – *Sikkim Observer*, a weekly tabloid. I even prepared a dummy of the front page of the paper and informed some of my friends and relatives of the new venture. The name of the paper was chosen in Rongpo, a

small town in east Sikkim, in April 1984, while I was accompanying Rustomji on a tour to west and south Sikkim. I had a few names to choose from and we felt that *Sikkim Observer* was the most appropriate. By October 1, all formalities connected with publication of the *Sikkim Observer* had been completed with the east District Magistrate's office, and I was all set to launch my new weekly.

The press machines arrived from Calcutta in the third week of December, and by the first week of February 1985, the machines were installed in Nam Nang. The delay in installing the machines was mainly due to the fact that I had chosen another place nearby my office to set up my new establishment. Placing the machines on the third floor of the building was not only inconvenient for the residents, it also involved some risk. Printing press units were normally installed on the ground floor. But when the place of my choice was not available, I decided to have the machines installed where I was. The two machines were installed in the front room and I had to share my room with the compositors. We were all crammed up in the two rooms. It was all neat and very cute and I was happy and proud of my new set-up.

Along with the press, I had also started an advertising agency called "*Image Ads*", which was temporarily looked after by my school friend, Arthur Pazo, and my cousin, Chukie Topden, who also helped me financially in the initial stage. Because of the congestion, we had to rent another place nearby for the ads section. Besides securing a loan of Rs. 25,000 from UCO, I also obtained a loan of Rs. 50,000 from SIDICO (Sikkim Industrial Development and Investment Corporation), a financing agency for industrial units of the State Government. These, along with my own contributions, helped me to set up my new unit. I was lucky to have secured the loans from SIDICO during the President's Rule. Things would certainly have been different with Bhandari in power.

If the common man benefitted from the President's Rule, it suited me well. I was able to get things done fast and have

my own press set up. By the time Bhandari came back to power after the Assembly elections in March 1985, my new set-up was well established. The publication of the SOS had been regular since June 1984. With the publication of the March 1985 issue, the SOS completed its first anniversary, having successfully brought out twelve issues. In the editorial of the anniversary issue, I wrote: "*Spotlight on Sikkim* today enjoys a reputation of having a distinct personality of its own – a paper which speaks out loud and clear without fear or favour. To many living here, who have not been able to ventilate their feelings and express themselves, *Spotlight on Sikkim* has become their voice. It is this responsibility thrust on the paper that will further inspire the paper to rededicate itself with renewed vigour and enthusiasm".

Unfortunately, I was able to take out only one issue (April-May 1985) of the SOS after its anniversary issue of March 1985. And, after almost two years of publication, the SOS finally folded up. This time indefinitely.

I was not the only victim of the confrontation between the media and the government. The negative attitude of the government towards independent papers, forced the closure of the *Truth* and the *Encounter*. The government was not content with strangling local newspapers financially but also resorted to violence and terror tactics to suppress the freedom of the Press. Denial of government advertisements to local papers and delay in issue of accreditation cards to journalists in the State were nothing in comparison to threat to life and property. Journalists lived in constant fear all the time.

On April 29, 1985, a group of about two dozen women of the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad stormed the *Express* office, assaulted Prammar and caused extensive damages to press property. The *Express* managed to survive after this most unfortunate incident but with little success. It finally folded up in the following year. Prammar himself quit Sikkim for good. I reported for national papers only. My plans to start the *Sikkim Observer* had to be abruptly abandoned as the political

environment was far from congenial to the growth of a free Press.

In the last issue of the *SOS* (April-May 1985), I carried excerpts from an address delivered by Justice H.R. Khanna, eminent jurist, under the heading "There Is No Freedom To Destroy Freedom". The message that I wanted to convey to the authorities in Sikkim was clearly articulated by Justice Khanna on May 19, 1985 at Sapru House in New Delhi, during the presentation of the B.D. Goenka Awards for excellence in journalism. Highlighting the role of the Press in a free country, Justice Khanna, in his presidential address, said: "Freedom of media, there can be no doubt, is a basic prerequisite of a democratic set-up to which we have pledged ourselves in our Constitution.

One of the important features of democracy which distinguishes it from dictatorship and other forms of government is, to respect what I said on a former occasion, the freedom to express a view different from that of a ruling party or the individual. Regimentation of ideas ill goes together with a democracy. To be afraid of ideas is to profess failure or unfitness for a democratic government. The right to exert all government powers in aid of maintaining our institutions and resisting their physical overthrow does not include intolerance of and persecution for ideas and opinions even though they be opposed and alien to dominant thinking of the person or persons in power.

It is customary, indeed it is fashionable, for the intellectuals and elitists to talk, when times are favourable, of the freedom of the Press and the freedom of expression. We are told, and indeed it is a truism, that freedom of the Press and freedom of expression are the most cherished values, values which are a part of the common heritage of mankind in a democratic world, values without which life would lose all meaning and be bereft of all decencies.

There, however, come periods in the history of nations when there is a challenge to these values and any talk of them

becomes anathema to those in power. Such periods prove to be crucial, for they are the times for testing the mettle of each one of us. It is at such moments that we need persons who would not deviate or swerve on question of principle and would not bend or bow in the name of expediency before the powers that be. It is no test of our allegiance to the ideal of freedom of the Press to abide by the values enshrined therein when times are normal and the sailing is smooth.

The real test and the crucial moment arises when the times are abnormal, when there is a brooding sense of fear, when pressure, sometimes open and undisguised and at other times subtle and covert, are applied and when any deviation from the views of those in power involves calculated risks and hazards.

Freedom of the Press knows of no finer hours than the refusal to surrender or hypothecate one's conscience in the face of such heavy odds. In the context of the freedom of Press, as in the context of freedom of others, it is necessary to bear in mind that there is no freedom to destroy freedom. Freedom carries with it certain responsibilities and it would be nothing short of social suicide to let it degenerate into licence".

In an article in the same issue of the SOS, I wrote: "The few independent presses, which apprehend trouble similar to the one faced by the *Eastern Express*, are taking necessary precautions to protect themselves. Knowing full well that the government machinery is inadequate for their protection, they are now turning to the people for help and security. Unfortunately, the people themselves are not too keen on being identified with newsmen, who are not in favour of the government. The atmosphere for a free and healthy growth of the Press in a democracy, as enshrined in the Constitution, is non-existent in the State, which is now completing its tenth year as an Indian State."

I was happy to be on my own, but with Bhandari's comeback, I was convinced that the dark ages had, once again,

begun. With his "massive mandate" (the SSP captured 30 of the 32 seats), it was clear to all of us that the era of "one-man-rule, one-party-system" had just begun. The new ruler felt that he had the legitimate right, the power, and the freedom to destroy freedom.

With Prammar gone, and the *Express* closed, I was literally on my own. The only way to face the situation was not to submit and surrender, but to struggle on and suffer in silence.

CHAPTER 9

One-Man Rule Begins

"If you once forfeit the confidence of your fellow citizens, you can never regain their respect and esteem. It is true that you may fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all the time".

Abraham Lincoln

"Every country has the government it deserves".

Joseph de Moistre

"We are living in a very dangerous international situation. The whole concept of democratic institutions is under attack, by very powerful forces that have every intention of eliminating democratic procedures, because these procedures pose a constant threat to their own authoritarian regimes".

Eldridge Cleaver

"Kabray Kancha", as Bhandari is known in his native village of Malbasay in west Sikkim, was a different man when he returned to power for the second time in March 1985 leading his ultra-regional Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). The dissi-

dents within the Congress (I), who engineered Bhandari's ouster in May 1984, suffered a humiliating defeat with the Congress (I) returning only one man, Kalzang Gyatso, from the tribal-dominated Kabi-Tingda constituency in north Sikkim.

However, with the victory of Balchand Sarda, a plainsman from the prestigious Gangtok constituency, where the voters are equally divided among the Nepalese, tribals, and the plainsmen, there was also some humiliation and embarrassment for Bhandari, who claimed himself to be the undisputed leader of the people of Sikkim. Sarda, an influential businessman from the Marwari community in Gangtok, fought as an independent candidate and defeated the SSP candidate and wife of the Chief Minister, Dil Kumari Bhandari. This was the first time that a member from a community, other than the three basic ethnic groups, had been elected to the State Legislative Assembly.

With a view to win over local sentiments, both the SSP and the Cong(I) did not field candidates from the plainsmen community, which had the right to contest the elections from the 17 general seats of which Gangtok was one. However, many others, including Sarda, saw things differently and took their own stand. His public statement prior to the polls was: "Under the Constitution, we have the right to vote and be voted. Bhandari is the leader of Sangram, Poudyal is the leader of Congress (I), and Balchand is the leader of the independents". Of the 195 contestants, 95 were independents.

There was more than one reason why Bhandari's newly-formed Sikkim Sangram Parishad captured 30 of the 32 seats in the House. Bhandari's triumphant return was as much due to his own popularity as to the totally confused and disorganised state of the Congress (I), the main opposition party, which was led by a bunch of discredited and self-seeking leaders, whose main preoccupation was to squabble among themselves over petty matters. The SSP, on the other hand, depended on the force of Bhandari's popularity and the party's "pro-Sikkimese" propaganda, which was based on the three basic demands –

seat reservation, citizenship, and Nepali language – and the 'sons of the soil' policy. Bhandari himself was convinced that his return to Mintokgang was a prestigious issue. He had to come back to avenge those who threw him out nine months before in May 1984.

Bhandari's message to the people was, therefore, simple and straight. He continued to project himself as the sole spokesman of the Sikkimese people, whose rights were trampled down by the Centre. His party's main propaganda was that he was thrown out of office because of his uncompromising stand on the three demands of his party.

Having realised that he was thrown out of power with the help of dissidents within the Congress (I), who were mainly tribal leaders, Bhandari's main thrust for the 1985 Assembly elections was distinctly pro-Nepalese, although his stand on preservation of the Sikkimese identity through retention of the parity formula on the Assembly seat issue, helped him to get tribal support.

The opposition camp was in a state of total disarray ever since the imposition of President's Rule in Sikkim, particularly after Poudyal's induction into the Congress (I) as the SPCC(I) President. What made matters worse was the untimely assassination of the Congress President and Prime Minister, Mrs. Indira Gandhi, who was gunned down by her own security men on October 31, 1984. The Congress (I) leadership in Sikkim could never recover from this shock. It was Indira Gandhi who knocked down Bhandari, and the Centre's attitude towards him, after her death, was uncertain, and this climate of uncertainty and doubt had a crippling effect on the party's organisation in the State.

Rajiv Gandhi, the AICC(I) General Secretary, who stepped into his mother's shoes, was an inexperienced leader, and his handling of the political situation and the Congress (I) unit in Sikkim, more than proved this. One major blunder made by the Congress (I) party high command after Rajiv took over as the AICC(I) President, was the merger of the Congress (R) with

the Congress (I) and Poudyal's induction into the Congress (I) as the SPCC(I) President. This marriage of convenience, unfortunately, took place on the eve of the by-election to the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim in December 1984. Not only did the State Cong(I) leadership object to Poudyal's joining the party, but there was a general feeling of disappointment and frustration among the people over the change of leadership in the Congress (I).

For the majority of Nepalese, Poudyal's unconditional entry into the Congress (I) as the President of the SPCC(I) proved two things – that he had betrayed the people on the Assembly seat issue, and that he was ready to sacrifice the interest of the party and the people for purely personal gains. Poudyal, along with Bhandari, had earlier indicated that they would not contest the elections till Assembly seats were reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese. 'No seat, no vote' was their election slogan.

Poudyal's induction into the Congress (I) also forced a section of the minority Bhutia-Lepcha tribals to side with Bhandari, who was viewed by the tribals as the 'lesser evil'. Poudyal had not only directly challenged the cultural and religious identity of the tribals in the Supreme Court, but he was also against Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917, which protected land belonging to the Bhutia-Lepchas. He was, therefore, totally unacceptable to the minority tribals, who had 12 seats reserved for them in the Assembly. Unfortunately for Poudyal, he could neither bring his followers in the Congress (R) into the Congress (I), nor was he able to keep the minorities within the Congress (I) fold. As a result, the Congress (I) was faced with an awkward situation. Moreover, Poudyal could not get along with the State Congress leaders, who considered him a rank outsider and highly communal.

These factors meant that the reactions of both the minority and majority communities in Sikkim over Poudyal's induction into the Congress (I) favoured Bhandari, who was once again ready and eager to dub the Congress as the party

which 'sold away' the country. Apparently, all merger veterans – Kazi, Gurung and Poudyal – were now in the same camp once again, and Bhandari's claim that he alone represented the real aspirations of the people as against the *desh bechowas* (sellers of the country), whose prime motive was to finish Sikkim and the Sikkimese, sold well to the people.

Moreover, Poudyal's induction into the Congress (I) came in November 1984, which was less than a month from the by-elections to the Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim. Bhandari contested the polls and defeated his nearest rival, the former Congress (I) MP, Pahalman Subba, with a convincing margin of over 35,000 votes. Of the total electorate of 1,48,944, a total number of 86,024 votes were polled of which Bhandari polled 56,614 (68.5%) and Subba polled 21,327 (15.02%).

Commenting on Bhandari's victory in the December 1984 issue of the SOS, I stated: "Bhandari won because he had no opposition in the State united enough to ensure that he did not make a comeback. He won because he had the necessary resources to defeat his adversaries. But Bhandari won primarily because he wanted to win. For him, it was the fight of his life. If he had lost, his political career would have ended in 1984". While the entire opposition was in an even more confused state after the Lok Sabha polls, Bhandari's SSP was undoubtedly in a far better position, psychologically and politically, and was able to march ahead determined to form the government in March 1985.

But there were other major factors which also helped Bhandari's comeback. The Congress (I) high command had already been informed earlier by its State unit and other Central Government agencies in Sikkim, that the party was not ready to face the elections and wanted extension of President's Rule. Many Congressmen blamed the State Governor, Kona Prabhakara Rao, for misleading the Centre over the political situation in Sikkim. By calling for the elections, the Governor literally paved the way for Bhandari's comeback.

Another basic factor which helped Bhandari was the

revised voters list. Reports of alleged irregularities in the voters list had been brought to the notice of the opposition, but apart from the Congress (I), other parties paid little attention to it. Even the Congress (I) did nothing besides giving occasional Press statements on the issue.

The intensive revision of electoral rolls was carried out in Sikkim in 1983. This was in preparation for the Assembly elections slated to be held in the following year. I made a careful study of the issue and found out that there was an alarming increase of about 30,000 names in the voters list since the last Assembly elections in 1979. I was quite suspicious of the revised list and also the process by which the enumeration was conducted. I also doubted the credibility of some of those who were in charge of the election department.

I informed Prammar about my suspicions, but he didn't pay much attention to it. Probably, he was not aware of the dangers inherent on the issue as I was. When asked to give his opinion on the increase in the revised voters list, a poll expert in Calcutta, who had some administrative experience on this line in Sikkim during the merger, said there were grave irregularities in the new list and added, "If 30,000 names have been added to the revised list, then the tribals would be the losers", clearly indicating that majority of those newly enlisted would be from the non-tribal community. My apprehension was that names of large number of non-Sikkimese were included in the revised voters list. It was much later when Prammar came to grips with the issue and gave extensive coverage on the issue in local as well as in the national media. Unfortunately, the politicians were still far behind us and failed to act on our reports.

The voters list had increased from 1.18 lacs in 1979 to 1.55 lacs prior to the Lok Sabha by-elections in December 1984, showing an increase of about 37,000 names in the period of five years. By the time the March 1985 Assembly elections approached, the list of those enumerated increased to around 40,000. The Congress leaders were aware of these facts

and alleged of grave irregularities in the final list: names of a large section of voters who voted previously were not in the new list, many of those listed in the revised list were "bogus voters", and names of some foreign nationals were also included in the new list.

After their humiliating defeat in both the Parliamentary and Assembly elections, the Congress (I) leaders pointed out the defects in the voters list to the Central leaders, including the then AICC(I) Joint Secretary, Jagdish Tytler, and the Assam Chief Minister, Hiteswar Saikia, who were camped in Gangtok. It was pointed out to these leaders that there was an increase of more than 1,000 'Nepalese' voters in almost all the 31 territorial constituencies. This definitely favoured the ruling SSP, which was heavily banking on Nepali votes.

The Congress (I) candidates, who unsuccessfully contested the elections, were asked to file election petitions challenging the voters list. Surprisingly, apart from Lachen Gomchen Rinpoche, the Sangha candidate of the Congress (I), no one approached the court. The failure of the Congress party to file election petitions even when they were told to by competent authorities, proved that some persons within the party were playing mischievous and dubious roles.

I was and am still very suspicious of the voters list. It needs to be thoroughly revised in the interest of all Sikkimese and the country's strategic interest in the region. The State Government has claimed that the names of 80,000 eligible persons, whom it termed as the 'left out' persons, were not included in the voters list. If their names are included in the list before the next Assembly elections, the increase in the new list would certainly raise a lot of eyebrows. This issue, which is part of the citizenship issue, is dealt at length in chapter 14.

In January 1985, the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in a Press statement, as reported in *India Today*, said, "We have started identifying the corrupt people occupying strategic positions. The corrupt and inefficient will be weeded out and the honest and efficient ones suitably rewarded". But his stand

made little impact in Sikkim where corruption had become a way of life. Bribery and corruption in political circles, in the administration, and in the Congress (I), had become an accepted fact. Most voters chose candidates not according to their integrity and competence, but according to their purchasing power. The people were willing to sell their political rights, which came once in five years, for a few hundred rupees.

My observations on Sikkim's second Assembly elections since the merger, was reflected in the editorial of the SOS of January-February 1985: "Five years ago, when the erstwhile Chief Minister, Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa, lost the Assembly elections from the remote Dzongu constituency in North Sikkim, it was the victory of the Sikkimese people. Today, five years later, the Sikkimese people will go to the polls for the second time since the 'merger'. The battle this time is between Bhandari's Sikkim Sangram Parishad and the Cong(I).

Whichever party gets the needed majority and forms the government this time will in no way be an indication that the people have triumphed once again. For the people of Sikkim, the battle had already been lost in 1981 when their Parishad was sold in open market in New Delhi for a few bags of cement by those very people who are now desperately trying to make a comeback.

There is a vast difference between the two Parishads. Yesterday's Parishad was built through the very blood, sweat, toil and tears of the people. It took years to give it the shape and stature that it required for its triumphant success in the 1979 Assembly elections. Today's Parishad is built on the ruins of the old Parishad. Its builders are those who have caused the ruin. It will not last. Only the people know the truth from the false.

There is also a great difference between yesterday's Congress and today's. That is why the people of Sikkim looked towards New Delhi with much hope and anticipation. A change is going to take place in Sikkim, they said to each other.

Everything is going to be straightened up; the crooks will be routed and the people will rule. But their hopes did not last long as they gradually became aware of what was actually taking place in front of their eyes. The very people whom they felt would be relegated to the background, were once again holding the reins of power. People, who in the past caused so much misery and anxiety to the vast majority living out here, seemed to be getting a push from the seats of power to take charge once again.

Many of those who have felt the punch are now out in the open on their own to fight it out on March 5, when the State's one and half lakh electorate will give their verdict through the ballot. Wrong men cannot make the right moves. With due respect to a few honourable candidates, who are determined to make themselves heard, for the vast majority of the people, everything is a big farce.

New Delhi admits that they've made a mistake in Sikkim. Others are suspicious of some kind of mischief among various political circles. Only the people, in the coming five years, will pay for this mischief and mistake in Sikkim".

Apart from some of the basic reasons already given here for Bhandari's comeback, what really worked wonders in the last hour of the polling, was the highly communal and underground propaganda that if the Congress (I) came to power, the next chief minister would be from the Bhutia-Lepcha community, and if the SSP formed the government, the chief minister would definitely be a Nepali. This kind of communal and emotional appeal sold well to the Nepalese electorate, particularly in the rural areas. The majority of the Nepalese, irrespective of whichever party they supported, felt that they would rather prefer anyone from their own community, to take the top post than someone from the minority community no matter how capable that person may be. This was one of the main reasons why many BL leaders, including Kazi, Sherab Palden, Lachen Rinpoche, Athup Lepcha, 'Captain' Sonam Yongda, Samten Bhutia and Sonam Tshering lost in the elections.

By and large, the people were convinced that Bhandari's new gang in the Assembly were handicapped and functioned as mere puppets, who had won the elections on the strength of Bhandari's popularity. There was no doubt in anyone's mind that "Sangram is Bhandari, Bhandari is Sangram". Nothing was expected from the newly-elected representatives, and till today, they continue to be faithful and loyal 'yes men' of the Chief Minister.

Bhandari emerged as a new politician after the March 1985 elections. He was more powerful, confident, authoritative and somewhat cocky. He demanded complete submission to his authority, and he got it. He did not tolerate any criticism from both within or outside the party. Political parties and social organisations had to either join him or face being silenced forever. The Press was told to behave or face the consequences. Some newsmen, however, refused to bend their knees and bow down to the highest authority. They paid dearly for their stand.

The message of the new regime was clear – Bhandari was the new ruler and all others were his subjects. His supporters portrayed him as the new *raja* and his wife as the new *rani*. They were the Nepalese version of the Chogyal and the Gyalmo, and together they tried to live up to this image and re-enact past dramas of the Chogyal-era. Not only did the red and white SSP flag fly from every housetop, Bhandari's portraits adorned every household and shops in the State. Sycophancy and hero-worship became the order of the day.

The only visible opposition parties in Sikkim – the Congress (I) and the Naya Sikkim Party (NSP) – completely disappeared from the political scene after their debacle in the Assembly elections. There was also no trace of the Congress (R), Himali Congress and the Sikkim United Council. Poudyal himself took the blame for the party's defeat and resigned from party chief's post after the elections and chose to keep quiet. Infighting within the Congress (I) continued over the leadership issue and party activities in the State came to a standstill.

By then, it was clear to everyone that the era of "one-man-rule and one-party-system" had begun.

The defeat of prominent tribal leaders, some of them ex-ministers and office-bearers of the Congress (I), in the March 1985 Assembly elections, justified the apprehension that though 13 seats in the Assembly, including the lone Sangha seat, were reserved for the BLs, genuine tribal candidates, who had some standing amongst the people, could not be voted as the majority of the voters in the reserved constituencies of the tribals were Nepalese.

The only visible political activity in Sikkim after Bhandari's comeback in 1985 was the move for formation of a strong and united tribal organisation in Sikkim. The initiative towards this goal was taken by the Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association (STWA) under the leadership of Pasang Obed Pazo, ex-secretary of the State Government and a soft spoken Sikkimese Christian belonging to the Lepcha community. Pazo, who unsuccessfully contested the 1985 Assembly elections as an independent candidate from Gangtok constituency, was the choice of most tribals to head the STWA, which was then the only recognised and credible tribal organisation in Sikkim.

By the end of 1985, almost all tribal organisations in Sikkim, including Denzong Tribal Yargay Chogpa, Sikkim Lhomon Youth Council, Rangjyong Mutanchi Rong Tarzum, and Mayel Pronzum, decided to form a "joint front" to work towards the formation of a strong and united tribal body to press for the genuine demands of the tribals and to highlight their basic issues. A Joint Action Committee (JAC), headed by Pazo, was formed to pursue this goal.

In its six-point memorandum submitted to the Governor, Bhishma Narain Singh, on October 1985, the STWA raised the demand for restoration of reservation of 16 seats in the Assembly for the BLs, delimitation of Assembly constituencies for genuine tribal representation in the House, grant of citizenship to the 'stateless persons' based on provisions made under the Sikkim Subjects Regulation, and extension of inner-line per-

mit system to check influx of outsiders. These were not new demands, but reflected issues raised by the Association in its many memoranda presented, from time to time, to the State and Central authorities by the STWA ever since its formation in 1978.

The memorandum explicitly emphasised the need to safeguard the rights and interests of the tribals as enshrined in Article 371F of the Constitution, which dealt with Sikkim: "With the passage of time, the original inhabitants of Sikkim, namely the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals, have been reduced to a minority in our own homeland and thus endangering our very survival in the land of our origin. The gradual disintegration and destruction of our distinct socio-cultural identity over the past few decades and especially since the merger in 1975, has been the cause of much fear, suspicion and insecurity amongst the tribal community, who have lived in peace and amity in the past so many centuries. We have every reason to believe that we are now on the brink of extinction if proper and timely steps are not taken on this vital matter".

Stating that seats reserved for the tribals had been reduced to 13 from 16, the memorandum pointed out that the reservation of their seats in the Assembly was being challenged by a section of the major community in the highest court of the land. In order to fully protect the minority community, the STWA demanded restoration of the earlier 16 seats reserved for them prior to the merger.

On the controversial demand for grant of Indian citizenship to the "stateless persons" in Sikkim, the memorandum was even more explicit: "Ethnic representation and reservation of seats in the State Assembly envisages that this right will only be in respect of the ethnic communities of Sikkim. We now feel that all attempts are being made by interested groups and persons, much to the misfortune of the people of Sikkim as a whole, and particularly of the Bhutia-Lepchas, to induct and give citizenship status to a huge number of outsiders for inclusion of their names in the electoral rolls, irrespective of the

qualifying years of residence in Sikkim. This will undoubtedly create serious logistical problems and thus the very fabric of Sikkim's economic, social and political structures will be completely disarrayed, and endanger the very existence of the genuine Sikkimese Indian citizens".

The memorandum further added: "Names of foreign nationals, which have been included in the electoral rolls, must be deleted. The identity of those with doubtful citizenship and those who are said to be 'stateless persons' must be finalised before granting them rights of citizenship. We propose that Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961 be used as a base for the purpose of determining grant of citizenship in Sikkim. There should be no representation for such persons in the Assembly before finalising their identity".

But perhaps the main issue of the tribals, which is well known to everyone in the State, is the demand for "genuine representation" of the tribals in the Assembly through fresh delimitation of Assembly constituencies. The STWA, particularly under Pazo's leadership, highlighted this demand and made it its main issue. The memorandum presented to the Governor was reflective of this: "This spirit behind the reservation of seats will have no meaning unless and until fresh delimitation of the Assembly constituencies is made to ensure genuine tribal representation in the Legislative Assembly. In spite of the fact that elections have taken place in Sikkim on the democratic principle of equity and justice, the ethnic minority community has not been justly represented in the State Assembly. Those who are elected have to depend on the vote bank dominated and controlled by the major community. As such, the Bhutia-Lepcha candidates, elected from their reserved constituencies, virtually become ineffective to safeguard the basic fundamental rights of the ethnic minority tribals of Sikkim. So far, only two constituencies (Lachen-Mangshilla and Dzongu in north Sikkim) of the 31 territorial constituencies, genuinely represent the tribals in the State. As such, we pray that the constituencies may be so demarcated as

to include all pockets dominated by the ethnic tribals for all the seats reserved for them".

As one of the general secretaries of the STWA at that time, I was also one of the signatories to this memorandum. Much of my time in 1984-1985 was spent on various activities of the Association, which was aimed at creating a general awareness of the basic issues of the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals in the State. As Bhandari was not in favour of any other organisation, particularly independent tribal organisations, coming up in the State, the STWA did not receive much patronage from the government. Almost all tribal legislators kept themselves away from the STWA. But this did not deter us. Most of those who played a leading role in the STWA worked for genuine communal harmony in the State based on mutual respect and trust.

We did not make any new demands but wanted to safeguard and strengthen whatever was already provided for us under the Constitution of the country. Most conscious tribals were aware of the importance of seats in the Assembly being reserved for the Sikkimese as a whole as had been done in the past. This meant that they also wanted seats to be reserved for the majority Sikkimese Nepalese as well.

In the *Spotlight on Sikkim* and *Sikkim Observer*, I constantly highlighted the need for fresh delimitation of Assembly constituencies for genuine tribal representation in the Assembly. Sikkim is a small place with a population of only about 4.50 lacs of which only three and half lacs would be safely categorized into the 'genuine Sikkimese' group. Though the Sikkimese Nepalese were in the majority in Sikkim, due to increasingly influx of outsiders, they would ultimately be reduced to a minority community just like the BLs. It is in the interest of Sikkim and the Sikkimese, and in the greater interest of the country at large that political rights should be fully restored to the Sikkimese. This would ensure genuine communal harmony and genuine peace in the region.

The second issue of the SOS dated August 1983, was entirely devoted to the seat reservation issue. My in-depth

analysis of the issue showed that seats were reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese as far back as 1925 when the then Sikkim Council had three representatives from this community. This arrangement continued to stay on even after Sikkim became a part of the Indian Union. Changes in the Assembly seat arrangement were brought about only prior to the 1979 elections. The facts represented in the SOS became a basic document for various organisations, including the SSP, to press for their demand for restoration of seat reservation in the State Legislative Assembly for all Sikkimese.

In the editorial of the second issue of the SOS, I pointed out: "Underlying the demand for reservation of seats for Sikkimese Nepalese in the Assembly, is the fear that if this demand is not conceded, even the majority community of today will one day be reduced to a minority. This will eventually lead to the gradual extinction of the distinct cultural and historical identity of the people of Sikkim, which has been preserved down the centuries.

This fear is justified when one considers the phenomenal rise in the population of Sikkim during the last ten years. This is mainly due to the sudden influx of outsiders into Sikkim after the merger of Sikkim into the Indian Union in 1975. The population rose from 2.10 lacs in 1971, to 3.16 lacs in 1981, showing a record increase of about one lac in a decade. The population of Sikkim was approximately 60,000 in 1901, and rose steadily to about one lac in 1931. After thirty years, it reached 1.60 lacs in 1961".

In the editorial of the *Sikkim Observer* dated December 4-10, 1988, on seat reservation for Sikkimese Nepalese, I wrote: "There are certain misconceptions regarding the seat reservation demand and the political parties have not been able to convince the authorities about the genuineness of this demand. The demand is for restoration of seats, which were kept for the Sikkimese, irrespective of which community they come from.

The Sikkimese Nepalese may be in a majority today but if

proper safeguards are not made for them today, who will be able to stand up for them when they are reduced to a microscopic minority in the near future? To say that the Sikkimese Nepalese are immigrants from Nepal is not only a distortion of history, it is also a blatant attack on the unity of the Sikkimese people, who, despite occasional infighting, have been living peacefully in these hills for centuries. A section of those hailing from the Nepali community in the State may be recent settlers in Sikkim or are residing here on a temporary basis, but the majority of the simple-minded and peace-loving Nepalese are Sikkimese and they deserve reservation in the Assembly just as the minority Bhutia-Lepchas. Sikkim is the homeland of all these three ethnic communities, who thirteen years ago, were brought into the mainstream".

When I sensed that the tribal Association was going on the right path and was able to stand on its own feet, I quietly opted out from the executive body, and my name did not figure in the executive committee list after the elections of the office-bearers of the Association held in November 1985. I was literally forced into the Association when some of the office-bearers of the Association were unable to perform their duties and involve themselves in organisational work due to ill health and old age. Many tribals feared being harassed by the ruling party if they associated themselves with the STWA.

Though the STWA was not a political organisation, the issues raised by it and its influence on the State's tribal populace, had political connotations. Bhandari realised this and took preventive measures to halt the onward march for a strong, united and genuine tribal organisation in Sikkim. In his view, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad was the only voice in Sikkim representing the hopes and aspirations of all sections of the people. Any new organisation in Sikkim, which came up with its own agenda and did not acknowledge the authority and supremacy of the SSP, was viewed as 'anti-people', and was to be done away with.

Sometime in June 1986, the STWA activities came to an

abrupt end with a section of the tribal leadership in the State, who were under the influence of the ruling party, rejecting Pazo's leadership and forcefully and undemocratically dissolving the STWA. A meeting held in Hotel Tashi Delek in Gangtok on May 16, 1986 by some pro-SSP tribals made attempts to dissolve the executive body of the STWA headed by Pazo and called for fresh elections. The meeting, unlike other meetings of the STWA held under Pazo's leadership, was attended by ruling party ministers, MLAs, senior government officials and tribal representatives, who were close to the SSP. Also present in the meeting were some executive body members of the STWA and the former president and vice-president of the STWA, Sonam Dorji and Dorji Dahdul, respectively.

The meeting, which I personally witnessed, was pre-planned, and the main aim was to discredit the activities of the STWA led by Pazo, who was dubbed as a "self-styled president". Even those who were earlier with Pazo and spoke during the meeting, including Dahdul, did not make any mention of him and his contributions for the tribals. Both Dorji and Dahdul sat on the dais, along with other VIPs, and maintained a conspicuous silence. It was Dahdul, ex-chief secretary of Sikkim, who personally requested Pazo to take charge of the Association in 1984-85. He himself made a mention of this to me personally on several occasions. Unfortunately, Dahdul did not make any mention of this during his address in the meeting. Dorji, who had earlier resigned from the presidentship on health grounds, also kept mum and said nothing on the occasion.

It was obvious from their silence that they sided with the ruling party's involvement in the affairs of the STWA. Their failure to speak the truth and defend the STWA's independent existence at such a crucial moment, proved that they had stabbed Pazo and the tribals in the back. It was a sad and sorrowful experience to observe how some of our people sold their dignity and identity for their own survival and selfish interests. Perhaps, this was the way the Sikkimese people sold

their country to its protecting power.

The rebellious instinct in me wanted to expose the rot within, but as I neither had the *SOS* nor the *Sikkim Observer*, and was not even a member of the STWA, I could not do anything concrete to expose the farce that I was witnessing. The only thing that I could do was to send a long article to the *Telegraph*, which unfortunately and surprisingly, was not carried in the paper. The suspicion that there was a conspiracy to install persons favourable to the ruling party in key posts of the Association, and to halt the formation of a strong and bigger tribal body, was well established.

The elections of the new body of the STWA took place on May 23, 1986, just a day before the second anniversary celebrations of the ruling party. The office-bearers of the newly-formed executive body of the STWA were all ruling party members or supporters. This proved that the SSP was unable to find other tribal leaders to run the organisation apart from its own tribal legislators. It also reflected the poor hold the ruling party had among the tribals in Sikkim.

Ram Lepcha, the Deputy Speaker, was elected the new President of the STWA, with Bhandari becoming its Chief Patron. Thukchuk Lachungpa, Forest Minister, was elected as the General Secretary, while Chamla Tshering, Finance Minister, became the Treasurer. Other members of the newly-formed executive body were S.M. Limbu (SC/ST Minister), Karma Topden (MP), and Namkha Gyaltzen (Sangha MLA). Several State Government secretaries, who were close to the ruling party – Passang Namgyal, Tashi Topden and Sonam Wangdi – were also included in the executive body of the STWA.

Till today, the STWA continues to be dominated by ruling party ministers and MLAs, and the tribal body, which once was an independent and credible organisation, is now regarded as

one of the frontal wings of the SSP. The elected tribal representatives had not only failed to represent the tribals in the Assembly and elsewhere, but they succeeded in suppressing the voice of independent and democratic tribal organisations in the State for their own petty gains.

CHAPTER 10

The CBI Scare

"Steal a little they'll throw you in jail. Steal a lot and they'll make you a king".

Bob Dylan

"This Governor, who lives under the shadow of Bofors, is not fit for the job and is bought over by Bhandari. He talks nicely but doesn't do anything. When we come to power, he will be out".

Lal Bahadur Shastri, November 1989

"Systems cannot provide justice, only individuals can by rising above the law".

Anon

The charges of corruption against Bhandari by his own Congress (I) legislators took an interesting turn after he came back to power in March 1985. Although the CBI had already registered several corruption cases against Bhandari soon after his ouster from chief ministership in May 1984, the Centre failed to take appropriate action against him during the President's Rule in Sikkim, which lasted till his comeback in March 1985. After the SSP's landslide victory in the Assembly elections, the Centre was reluctant to go against Bhandari as it

felt that it may lead to political disturbances in the sensitive border State. It decided to keep Bhandari's corruption cases perpetually pending.

The decision to register criminal cases against Bhandari came during a meeting held in the former Chief Minister, Bhim Bahadur Gurung's residence at 8.30 p.m. on May 19, 1984. The resolution passed during the meeting, which was attended by eight Cabinet members, alleged that Bhandari had acquired properties disproportionate to his known sources of income in his name and in the name of his second wife, Dil Kumari Bhandari.

The resolution stated: "The Cabinet and the state Government unanimously resolved that the Central Bureau of Investigation shall take up and start investigation and the state government hereby approaches the Central Government to direct CBI to investigate, institute complaints/file criminal cases preferably outside Sikkim. Shri Bhandari earned/acquired crores of wealth by illegal means that he will definitely tamper with evidence and witnesses in Sikkim and he has number of anti-social hooligans with him. It is, therefore, resolved that such criminal cases and complaints be filed outside Sikkim by CBI as soon as prima facie cases will be established after investigation".

Less than two weeks after the imposition of President's Rule in Sikkim, the CBI, on June 2, raided Bhandari's residence in Gangtok and made detailed inventory of articles in his building. Bhandari's four-storeyed building was built at the premises of 'Primula Cottage', which was his residence before becoming the chief minister in October 1979. The CBI team, which raided Bhandari's building (popularly referred to as the 'mini-palace'), consisted of two superintendents of police and three inspectors, and was headed by a deputy inspector general.

On June 15, 1984, Bhandari was granted anticipatory bail by the division bench of Calcutta High Court comprising Justice P.C. Borooah and Justice Sukumar Chakraborty.

Bhandari's counsel, Dilip Kumar Dutta, a senior advocate, said his petitioner was apprehending arrest in connection with charges of corruption and misappropriation of funds.

Meanwhile, perhaps to appease the Centre, Bhandari offered an olive branch to the Congress (I) government at the Centre by publicly stating that he was willing to re-enter the Congress (I) if his political demands were met. However, his re-entry was bitterly opposed by a section of the Congress (I) leadership in Sikkim, including the former chief minister, L.D. Kazi, who merged his Sikkim United Council with the Congress (I) in June 1984.

The Union Minister of State, P. Venkatasubbaiah, at a Press conference held at the Raj Bhavan on July 8, 1984, refuted Bhandari's contention that he had asked the Chief Minister to withdraw his political demands when he last visited Gangtok in May 1984. An official release of the State Government, referring to Venkatasubbaiah's statement at the Press conference, said: "Bhandari was making anti-national speeches to further his own personal interests and was making various demands, which he had never given in writing". Venkatasubbaiah said he had "never discussed these demands" with Bhandari, and his claim that he was asked to compromise on his demands was "totally false". During his earlier visit to Gangtok in May 1984, the Union Minister, who was also the AICC(I) observer, told newsmen in Gangtok that one of the reasons why Bhandari was removed was because a majority of his legislators had lost confidence in him against whom several corruption charges had also been levelled.

A newspaper report dated July 17, 1984, reported that the CBI had unearthed a racket of unauthorised sale of imported cement worth about Rs. 15 crores and registered a case against Karma Topden, the former Sikkim Rajya Sabha MP, then the Managing Director of the State Trading Corporation of Sikkim (STCS), based in Calcutta, for allegedly conspiring to cheat the chief controller of imports and exports. The cement scandal was another case which was being investigated by the CBI

after Bhandari's ouster.

According to the report, "the first information report registered by the CBI on June 21, 1984, intimation of which had been sent to the Chief Metropolitan Magistrate, P.R. Thakur, the crime was committed during 1982-83." The report alleged that Topden, while working as the Managing Director of the STCS (Calcutta) and Messers. Byford Private Ltd., allegedly conspired with some people at New Delhi, Gangtok and other places to obtain licences for the import of cement under the 'actual users' category. The report said that the STCS had submitted an application to the chief controller of imports and exports on April 8, 1983 for the issue of licences for importing 2,58,000 tonnes of cement by falsely mentioning that the cement required by it was for actual users. It said, two import licences for Rs. 4,20,88,065 and Rs. 10,78,82,521 were issued in favour of the STCS.

On November 7, 1984, Justice J.D. Jain of Delhi High Court granted another anticipatory bail to Bhandari in a case relating to certain malafide contracts. These contracts related to water supply schemes in rural areas. The allegation was that Bhandari had given the contracts to certain favoured parties in 1982 without calling for tenders. Bhandari's counsel, S.M. Ashri, pleaded that the case was politically-motivated and had been registered to humiliate the petitioner and arrest him before the poll.

Bhandari's landslide victory in the election to the lone Lok Sabha seat in Sikkim held on December 29, 1984, may have forced the Centre to go slow on him with the CBI cases. With Mrs. Indira Gandhi's sudden death in October 1984 and Bhandari's impressive victory in the Lok Sabha polls, the Congress (I), both at the Centre and in Sikkim, was placed in a very awkward situation. Bhandari defeated his nearest Congress (I) rival and former Congress (I) MP, Pahalman Subba, by a margin of over 35,000 votes. He won from 29 of the 31 Assembly segments, which excluded the Sangha constituency, trailing only in Gangtok and Kabi-Tingda in north Sikkim. Surprisingly,

inspite of Bhandari's impressive victory and the confusion within the Congress (I), the Centre chose to have the Assembly elections in Sikkim in March 1985. The State unit of the Congress (I) blamed the State Governor, Kona Prabhakara Rao, for siding with Bhandari and advising the Centre for early Assembly polls.

In February 21, 1985, less than two weeks before the Assembly poll, the Delhi High Court granted another anticipatory bail to Bhandari in another corruption case. Delivering the order, Justice H.C. Goel, said Bhandari should join the investigation of the case as and when required by the CBI. Justice Goel also said Bhandari would not be allowed to leave India without the prior permission of the court.

A report in the *Indian Express* of March 18, 1985, said that despite Bhandari again becoming the Chief Minister of Sikkim, the CBI would continue investigating the cases registered against him on corruption charges. The paper, quoting CBI sources, said that the investigating agency was not concerned about the position held by Bhandari. The report said the CBI had almost completed the investigation and the opinion of legal experts was being sought on various aspects of the investigation and how far the case would stand judicial scrutiny. The CBI was to send a report on the charges to the Sikkim Governor, who was to decide whether Bhandari was to be prosecuted or not. Apart from the cases relating to the sale of imported cement, cases against Bhandari related to the allotment of contract works for monetary gains, issue of licences to cigarette manufacturers to set up dummy factories in Sikkim to dodge tax, and the building of a palatial building in Gangtok during his tenure as Chief Minister.

Surprisingly, Bhandari again expressed his willingness to join the Congress (I) after the Assembly elections. He said the Congress (I)'s rout in the elections was not because the people were against its policies, but they were against the people who were leading the Congress (I) in the State. The Congress (I) leadership in the State consisted mainly of

Bhandari's former colleagues in the Sikkim Janata Parishad, which merged itself with the Congress (I) in 1981.

Shortly after Bhandari's comeback to power with a thumping majority in March 1985 elections, he visited New Delhi and struck a deal with the Congress President, Rajiv Gandhi, enabling his wife, Dil Kumari Bhandari, to be elected uncontested to the lone Lok Sabha seat from Sikkim. Much against the wishes of the State unit of the Congress (I), the party high command in Delhi decided not to put up a candidate against Mrs. Bhandari, who was elected unopposed to the Lok Sabha on April 4, 1985.

In a letter to Rajiv, Bhandari said his party wanted to maintain close understanding and cooperation with the Congress (I). Bhandari said he would cooperate with the Centre to promote the cause of national unity and integration. Newspaper reports covering Bhandari's Delhi visit during this period, said the SSP would soon merge with the Congress (I). It also reported that Bhandari "is understood to have agreed to the merger on the condition that the corruption charges filed against him by the CBI were withdrawn" (*Telegraph* 2.4.1985).

A report in the *Telegraph* from Delhi said: "The Congress (I) is believed to be willing to withdraw the charges in order to bring Mr. Bhandari back into its fold. The party will also not put up a candidate against the chief minister's wife, Mrs. Dil Kumari Bhandari, in the Lok Sabha by-elections in Sikkim". The report added: "the CBI had completed its investigation into the corruption charges against Mr. Bhandari. It has not yet put up the chargesheet, and it is likely that it will be asked to withdraw the cases after the by-elections".

My own report in the *Telegraph*, published on April 18, 1985, said: "He (Bhandari) is also reported to have requested the Centre to withdraw the corruption charges against him despite making public statement saying that he wanted the CBI investigation to continue. This is being viewed as one of the major conditions for the proposed merger. Mr. Bhandari now seems to be following the same ploy he used in mid-1981

when he merged his Sikkim Janata Parishad with the Congress (I) – first arousing regional sentiments to get elected and then joining the mainstream for economic gains”.

Unfortunately for Bhandari, the Centre viewed things differently. While the Congress (I) at the Centre was willing to cooperate with Bhandari, the Union Government refused to compromise on the corruption issue. A report carried in the *Indian Express* dated April 5, 1985, reflected this: “The attitude of the Congress (I) and the Central Government towards the Sikkim Chief Minister, Mr. Nar Bahadur Bhandari, appears to be on two different wavelengths. While the party high command has decided not to set up any candidate against Mrs. D.K. Bhandari, the Chief Minister’s wife, in the Lok Sabha by-election, the Union Home Minister, Mr. S.B. Chavan, has said that the Government would go into the merits of CBI case against Mr. Bhandari before it was withdrawn. It looks as if the party was conciliatory towards the Chief Minister but the Government was not thinking along the same line”.

Chavan reportedly remarked, “Just because somebody has become Chief Minister does not mean that the case against him will be withdrawn... it will depend on the merit of the case”.

However, a report in *India Today* of March 31, 1985 said: “Either way Bhandari wins. If he rejoins the Congress (I), it is hardly likely that the ruling party is going to insist on charge-sheeting him. If he doesn’t, he still has the option of stopping CBI proceedings against him. Said a Home Ministry official: ‘It’s a heads-I-win, tails-you-lose position for Bhandari’. What is perplexing is Bhandari’s obvious desire to rejoin the Congress (I). ‘All that has happened in the past is a closed chapter’, he declares, ‘now that Sikkimese people have elected me as their representative I do not see why I cannot return to the Congress’”.

Bhandari knew full well why the people of Sikkim were against the Congress (I) and did not want the party to take roots in Sikkim. His desire to join the Congress (I) did not, therefore, reflect the wishes of the people. It was obvious to

everyone that his latest stand was just a ploy to save himself from the clutches of the CBI. Bhandari felt that if he was in the Congress (I), his sins would be pardoned. It would also ensure his continuance in office.

By October-November 1985, the CBI had completed its investigation in a case relating to contracts on water works. In this case, the CBI found enough evidence to launch a prosecution against Bhandari and had informed the government about it. Referring to the CBI cases against Bhandari, the *Indian Express*, on December 1, 1985 reported: "Though it is over a month since the CBI had informed the Government about the completion of investigation into one of three cases registered against Sikkim Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, on corruption charges, and sought the permission to prosecute him, the Government has not been able to take a decision because of the political implications involved".

The report added: "The political leadership at the Centre is caught in a difficult situation. It had removed Mr. Bhandari and brought Mr. Gurung, his Finance Minister, to replace him. Mr. Gurung says that the Cabinet had passed the resolution (on charges of corruption against Bhandari) at the instance of the Centre as these were serious charges against Mr. Bhandari and the Centre wanted to go into these. In the recent elections to the Sikkim Assembly, Mr. Bhandari has come back with a thumping majority, getting 30 of the 32 seats. If the Centre moves against Mr. Bhandari, it will have political repercussions and the people of the State who have brought Mr. Bhandari to power may not like it. Sikkim is a border State and the Centre realises its sensitiveness.

The permission to prosecute Mr. Bhandari would have to be given by State Governor T. Rajeswar. He will be guided by the advice of the Centre. Political circles have a feeling that the Government ultimately may not accord sanction for Mr. Bhandari's prosecution and keep the matter pending".

A report in the *Hindustan Times* in December 1985, said the Law Ministry reportedly examined the evidence gathered

by the CBI in the water works case and recommended it to the Home Ministry as fit for trial. Before the case came up for hearing, it would require the Home Ministry's direction to the Sikkim Governor to the effect that persons responsible be proceeded against.

In February 1986, the CBI sought legal opinion in the second case registered against Bhandari relating to construction of a house in Gangtok. Bhandari said the house belonged to his wife and was built with her money. The CBI asked its legal cell to examine the matter thoroughly and find out whether it would be connected with Bhandari's income. The Indian income tax laws were not applicable in Sikkim and, therefore, it was difficult for the income tax authorities to assess Bhandari's income. The case on water works was till then still pending with the Government.

On November 13, 1986, the Union Minister of State for Home, P. Chidambaram, told the Rajya Sabha that the report of the CBI on cases of corruption against Bhandari "on the first allegation in the fourth case is being processed. In respect of the second allegation investigation has since been completed by the CBI and its report is being processed".

After the CBI issue came up in the Parliament, Bhandari realised how serious the Centre was over the issue and decided to act on it. Earlier, he boasted of being clean and appeared ready to face any consequences and challenged the Centre to prosecute him. "Let them do what they want but I will not ask for withdrawing the investigations", he told newsmen after he came back to power in 1985. However, after the matter came up in the Parliament, Bhandari's response was different.

In the first week of January 1987, Bhandari succeeded in transferring the State Chief Secretary, K.M.L. Chhabra, who was in Sikkim as a nominee of the Centre. Chhabra became the target of Bhandari's wrath because he was reportedly connected with the CBI enquiry against him. Chhabra, a senior IAS officer belonging to the Tamil Nadu cadre, was sent to Sikkim

as chief secretary by the Central Government in 1983. His services were requisitioned from the Tamil Nadu Government because of his earlier experience in the Home Ministry in-charge of the North-East.

When Bhandari was dismissed; the Gurung Ministry decided to register criminal cases against Bhandari and hand over the investigation to the CBI. The then Director of the CBI, J.S. Bawa, had specially flown to Gangtok for this purpose. Chhabra was then the Chief Secretary of Sikkim.

Realising that the Centre may prosecute him at an opportune moment, Bhandari played it safe and resorted to legal measures to defend himself. Despite the tough posture adopted earlier, Bhandari finally had to withdraw permission given to the CBI to investigate into his corruption charges.

The Sikkim Government in its Gazette notification of January 7, 1987, stated: "It is hereby notified for information of all concerned that all consents of or on behalf of the State Government given under Section 6 of the Delhi Special Police Establishment Act, 1946 for investigation of offences by the Delhi Special Police Establishment (CBI), are hereby withdrawn and stand cancelled with immediate effect". This finally put an end to the charges of corruption against Bhandari, and technically, the Centre had no legal right to prosecute Bhandari.

On May 2, 1987, a delegation of the SPCC(I) led by its newly-elected President, L.S. Saring, ex-MP, and Gurung met Chidambaram and Rajeswar in New Delhi and submitted a memorandum and urged them to sanction Bhandari's prosecution "without further delay" as the matter "assumed a new dimension following the withdrawal of consent given by the State Government earlier." The 12-member delegation included Madan Chhetri, P.M. Subba and R.B. Subba.

A note submitted to Chidambaram and the AICCI(I) General Secretary in-charge of Sikkim, A.K. Antony, carried transcripts of Bhandari's speech in Rongpo, east Sikkim, of April 26, 1987, where Bhandari is believed to have stated that

the very persons, who had brought the CBI charges against him, were now faced with the "pay off charges". This was a direct reference to the Fairfax and Bofors scandal that had rocked the nation in which many Congress (I) stalwarts, including the Prime Minister and Central Government officials, were reportedly involved.

When the delegation met Chidambaram on April 9 in Delhi, they were told that the Centre was likely to take a decision on the CBI case during the following week when the State Governor visited Delhi. It was after this that the delegation met the Sikkim Governor in Delhi on April 27, 1987 and asked him to grant sanction for Bhandari's prosecution. Rajeswar is said to have told the Congress (I) delegation that he would examine the constitutional validity before taking any decision. On May 5, 1987, the delegation met the Prime Minister and urged him to give his approval for Bhandari's prosecution. Rajiv told them he had already asked the Governor to submit a report.

Bhandari, who was also in Delhi in the first week of May, raised the sensitive and controversial issue of Sikkim's merger with India, obviously with a view to blackmailing the Centre, which has always felt very uncomfortable whenever this matter came up. During his meeting with Rajiv, Bhandari told him that those who voted for the "merger" through the "referendum" held in April 1975, had been left out of the list of those who were granted Indian citizenship when Sikkim became a part of India in April 1975. Bhandari seemed to be in a belligerent mood and told newsmen in Delhi that if the "stateless persons" in Sikkim, the majority of whom were Nepalese, were not granted Indian citizenship, Sikkim's accession to the Indian Union would be questioned. "I told the Prime Minister that those who are considered stateless had voted in the referendum of 1975 in favour of joining the Indian Union", Bhandari told newsmen in Delhi.

Bhandari's sudden outburst was definitely a tactical move to corner the Centre on the 'merger issue' with the motive of

forcing the Centre to keep the CBI cases against him pending. "Let them tell me that the demand cannot be granted. I can then decide what steps are to be taken to get the legitimate demands of the Sikkimese people conceded. Our leaders have forgotten Sikkim. Not a single leader has come to the State in the last two years, not to speak of the Prime Minister," Bhandari told newsmen.

However, despite the aggressive stand in Delhi, during the third anniversary celebrations of the SSP at the Paljor Stadium in Gangtok on May 24, 1987, Bhandari pledged his support to Rajiv Gandhi and urged all democratic people to do the same. He said his party and the government had decided to support Rajiv in maintaining the unity of the country. Bhandari also said the Centre should not do anything in Sikkim to cause discontentment among the people in the sensitive border State. Whether Rajeswar submitted his reports to the Centre regarding corruption cases against Bhandari in mid-1987, as reportedly demanded by the PM, still remains a mystery. Despite concerted attempts by the Congress leaders and the CBI to get Bhandari prosecuted, the wily Chief Minister continued to get New Delhi's support to stay in power.

It is worth noting here that the governors of Sikkim, all along, played a major role in freeing Bhandari from the clutches of the CBI. If Homi J.H. Taleyarkhan, Sikkim's second Governor, was over-enthusiastic in being New Delhi's man in Sikkim, his successors seemed more and more reluctant to involve themselves in the controversy and come into open confrontation with the State Government. Some of them even seemed somewhat hesitant to perform their constitutional role for fear of being involved in a controversy. Taleyarkhan's dealing with Bhandari evoked widespread criticism from the media on the role of governors in State politics. His successors preferred to live quietly in the Raj Bhavan, aloof from the day to day political life of the State. Perhaps their seclusion from the people may be due to the fact that they had their own personal interest in the continuance of the Bhandari Government.

Under Article 371F(g) of the Constitution, the Governor of Sikkim has "special" responsibilities in matters relating to "peace and for an equitable arrangement for ensuring the social and economic advancement of different sections of the population of Sikkim". The rights and responsibilities of the Governor must, therefore, be viewed with these factors in mind.

The former Andhra Pradesh minister, Kona Prabhakara Rao, who succeeded Taleyarkhan in June 1984, was believed to have been close to Bhandari. Rao stayed in Sikkim for a year and left only in June 1985 to become the Governor of Maharashtra. He, perhaps more than any other governors after Taleyarkhan, had the power and the necessary political atmosphere in the State to sanction Bhandari's prosecution. Rao arrived in Sikkim when the State was already under President's Rule, which lasted till Bhandari formed the government in March 1985. He could have sanctioned Bhandari's prosecution but did not. Instead, much of Rao's initial period in Sikkim, was spent in trying to prepare grounds for the grant of citizenship to the 'stateless persons' and reservation of seats in the Assembly for Sikkimese Nepalese, which were two major demands of the ruling party.

Soon after Bhandari's comeback, the *Eastern Express* in its front page of the issue dated March 25, 1985, revealed that Rao was to be shunted out from Sikkim because he was in favour of Bhandari returning to the Congress (I) fold: "The fate of Bhandari's supporters in the Congress (I) is best illustrated by the manner in which the Governor of Sikkim, Kona Prabhakara Rao, is being shunted out of the Gangtok Raj Bhavan. Rao had visited New Delhi and met some senior leaders of the Congress (I) to campaign for the re-entry of Bhandari into the Congress (I)".

Whether or not Rao had a soft corner for Bhandari can be gauged from what happened to him when he was in Maharashtra. In Bombay, Rao was accused of exploiting his position to get the former chief minister of Maharashtra,

Shivajirao Patil-Nilangekar's son and son-in-law admitted to post-graduate medical courses in two Bombay colleges, after admission rules were flouted by the University authorities. Rao was the Chancellor of Bombay University during that period.

It also found that Rao had secured a seat for his granddaughter, Kona Padmaja, in the MBBS course at the prestigious Jawaharlal Nehru Institute of Post-graduate Medical Education and Research (JIMPER) in Pondicherry in 1985, under the quota allotted for tribal candidates in Sikkim. It has been the practice in the JIMPER to reserve fifteen seats annually for MBBS course for students nominated by the Union Government. In July 1985, Rao reportedly got the Sikkim Government to recommend his granddaughter's name to the Union Government for admission to JIMPER.

Admitting to charges that he was able to influence the Sikkim Government to get a seat for his granddaughter through the Sikkim quota, Rao told *India Today* in March 1986, when he was still the Maharashtra Governor: "Sikkim is a small place, a state without any professional colleges so it is allotted a certain number of seats in different colleges in the country. When I was coming away from Sikkim because the altitude and climate did not suit me, the chief minister approached me and said you have done so much for the state but I haven't done anything in return for you. My granddaughter applied some time in June or July after I had left the state and got the seat. In any case, nobody in Sikkim was denied a seat because of her".

Before Rao was sent to Sikkim as the State's third Governor, he was the Lt. Governor of Pondicherry. This was after he was edged out of Andhra politics when he lost to a Telegu Desam candidate in 1983. As Finance Minister in Andhra Pradesh, Rao was accused of leaking the budget. He was also involved in the case of 'bouncer cheques', when the cheques he gave for a flat bounced. In 1981, Rao gave a clean chit to the former Maharashtra chief minister, A.R. Antulay, when he was sent there to look into the Antulay scandal relating to a trust which he floated. Later, the Bombay High Court passed

strictures against Antulay, who had to quit from chief ministership.

Rao finally resigned from the governorship of Maharashtra on March 27, 1986 after he was censured by the Bombay University senate for his involvement in the marksheet scandal involving Patil-Nilangekar's daughter.

Bhishma Narain Singh, succeeded Rao when the latter left Sikkim at the end of May 1985. After Rao left, no one was appointed in his place on a full-time basis, and Singh, who was then the Governor of Nagaland and Assam, was given additional charge of Sikkim until the Lt. Governor of Arunachal Pradesh, T.V. Rajeswar, was appointed the Sikkim Governor in November 1985. An ex-director of the IB (Intelligence Bureau), who retired from the post only in 1982, Rajeswar was earlier in Sikkim in the mid-sixties as the AD (Assistant Director) of the SIB (Subsidiary Intelligence Bureau). He, unlike others, had the necessary experience of working in Sikkim. Rajeswar was in Sikkim nearly as long as Taleyarkhan, which was about three years and three months. He, however, kept a low profile and functioned more like an intelligence officer than a Governor. Everything was very secretive about the Raj Bhavan during his tenure.

Rajeswar came to Sikkim at a time when the Union Law Ministry had already examined the evidence gathered by the CBI on the water works case in west Sikkim and recommended it to the Home Ministry as fit for trial. For the hearing of the case to start, it required the Home Ministry's direction to the Governor to accord sanction to prosecute Bhandari and others who were involved in the case.

It was during this period (December 1985) that Gurung was camped in Delhi and pressurised Central leaders to take a political decision in giving clearance for Bhandari's prosecution. Unfortunately for Gurung and the Cong(I) in Sikkim, the Centre failed to act against Bhandari and kept the matter pending.

According to a report in April-May 1986, the Sikkim Gover-

nor had sent his report to the Centre on the state of the administration in Sikkim. In an article in a national magazine in early 1986 (April-May) entitled "The rot in Sikkim", the renowned columnist, Kuldip Nayar, said: "The State Governor has written to the Centre many a time that the situation is not good. He favours suitable arrangements among the various communities in Sikkim to ensure "social and economic advancement". But first he wants to curb Bhandari's way of administration. In a recent report, the Governor has written: 'The squandering of Plan and non-Plan funds, creation of so many posts of chairman or public sector corporations and posts of secretaries, the neutralisation of the Public Service Commission, the constant reports of misuse of funds and corruption, etc. have all underscored the inherent weakness of the constitution.' But New Delhi's problem is that it sent out the previous Governor, Homi J. H. Taleyarkhan, when he clashed with Bhandari, on latter's 'unconstitutional acts'. Will it show more grit, in facing again the same situation, particularly when anything said or done against Bhandari is taken as an affront by the Nepalese, the majority in Sikkim?"

By the time Rajeswar left Sikkim to be the Governor of West Bengal in the third week of February 1989, it was too late for the Centre to act against Bhandari. The Assembly elections in Sikkim were just round the corner and it would be politically inadvisable for the Centre to sanction Bhandari's prosecution. Moreover, Rajeswar's successor, S.K. Bhatnagar, who was sworn in on March 3, 1989 as Sikkim's sixth Governor, had his own inherent weaknesses, which Bhandari fully exploited.

Bhatnagar had retired in 1988 as Defence Secretary as his name figured in the controversial HDW submarine deals as well as the Bofors kickback case. Bhandari took full advantage of this and questioned the Centre's moral rightness to take action against him on the CBI cases, when many Central leaders themselves were reportedly involved in the Bofors scandal that had rocked the nation. Moreover, Bhandari had also withdrawn the sanction of the State Government for CBI inves-

tigation in Sikkim in January 1987 and was on safe footing.

In the November 1989 Assembly elections, Bhandari set a record by capturing all the 32 seats in the Assembly amidst widespread charges that he had massively rigged the elections to come back to power. There were strong rumours that the entire ballot boxes were changed. Even in the 1974 elections, the Kazi's pro-merger Sikkim Congress could win only 31 of the 32 seats in the House. Bhandari set a new record, which perplexed everyone, including his close associates.

It was now virtually impossible for the Centre to take any action against him on the CBI charges. Bhandari was all-in-all in Sikkim and his influence extended to New Delhi, where many Congress leaders were also close to him. While it was convenient for the Centre to control Sikkim through Bhandari, it was also in the interest of many Central leaders not to dislodge him. It was easier and safer for New Delhi to keep watch over Sikkim through one man, particularly with the help of the CBI cases, than to hand over the reins of power to someone over whom New Delhi had no control.

CHAPTER 11

Sikkim For Sikkimese

"I have fought against white domination and I have fought against black domination. I have cherished the ideal of a democratic and free society in which all persons live together in harmony and with equal opportunity. It is an ideal which I hope to live for and to achieve. But if needs be it is an ideal for which I am prepared to die".

Nelson Mandela

"Perhaps history will look back to this era and recall this period as Sikkim's 'finest hour'. Bhandari will then not be remembered for the wrongs he has done but for the things he hoped to do and for the dreams that he set out to fulfill".

"Spotlight on Sikkim", July 1984

I started the *Sikkim Observer* shortly after I got married in mid-1986. Marriage did not hinder me in my profession as has been the case with many people, particularly when the job one is doing is time-consuming and involves great risks and heavy responsibilities. On the contrary, it enabled me to build on the foundation I had laid. The inaugural issue of the *Observer* appeared in the first week of August 1986.

This was less than three months after I got married, and

my wife, Tshering Tsomo Shenyentsang, was a great help to me in my work. In 1990, she got the stringership of the *Times of India* and in the following year, she started filing reports for the *Navbharat Times*, a sister-publication of the *Times*. I resigned from *Telegraph* in 1986, and since the beginning of 1987, to date, I have been working for the *Statesman*. For me, journalism became a full-time job from the very beginning of my career in 1983. After my marriage in May 1986, I actually became more involved in the Press.

Sometime in the beginning of 1986, I came to know that my landlord in Nam Nang, where my press was located, was facing pressures from higher authorities to have me vacated from his place. By then, I was very much aware of how the system functioned in Sikkim. The authorities, through various agencies and individuals, kept a watchful eye on anyone who was associated with 'anti-government elements'. If such persons were identified, they would be quietly told to sever their connections with the concerned person or face the consequence. All those who were categorised as 'anti-government' were also dubbed as 'anti-people' and made to suffer. By singling out unwanted elements and making them face economic hardship, the government was able to scare the rest of the people into submission.

My landlord happened to be one of my relations from Lachen, and I didn't want him to suffer in any way because of me. He had earlier, on several occasions, indicated that I should shift the press to some other place. But I didn't pay much attention to him as I didn't feel that he was under any pressure on my account. But the moment I came to know the situation he was in, I decided to shift the press to some other place. I told him, "You should have told me about this earlier. I thought you wanted me to shift to a better place for my own sake. I would be the last person to cause any trouble to you. I'll try to find some other place and shift the press as soon as possible". I meant what I said and immediately started looking out for another place.

I was lucky to find a suitable place nearby in New Market where I had kept a place reserved for the *Observer* office for almost a year without making much use of it. It was a much better place – more central and spacious. By April 1986, I got the press shifted to the ground floor of the newly-constructed Kesangee Building in New Market, located at the Mahatma Gandhi Marg. The new place was not only more convenient for the workers as well as for myself, it also gave a new image to my establishment. The two establishments – the press and the paper – functioned from separate buildings but were next to each other. It was an ideal situation and I was happy and felt proud of my new establishment.

I was supposed to start the *Observer* sometime in 1985, but because of circumstances and the absence of the right political atmosphere in the State, it was delayed. However, the main reason why I did not start the paper in 1985 was because I did not feel deeply about it. I never venture into anything new and big if I do not feel strongly and passionately about it. Even if everything is okay but my heart is not in it, I would keep a matter pending. And so it was the case with the paper even though I did a lot of homework on it and even made a feasible project and was ready to get it started.

Another problem was finance. To start a paper I needed at least some capital in the initial stages, which I lacked. Nobody would help me financially even if they wanted to for fear of incurring the wrath of the powers-that-be. I didn't want to involve anyone if they got into trouble because of me. Even banks were unwilling to finance my newspaper. In short, the system was against me as it felt that I was against it.

In a small place like Sikkim, it was important for the paper to be completely free and independent in its outlook and function. It was because of this that I was determined to be the owner of the press as well as the paper. Being the editor and proprietor of the paper, and getting the paper printed in my own press, had a great advantage. I had a free hand in running the show which I greatly needed. I wanted the paper to have a

firm foundation before it made its presence felt in the State. It was partly because of these reasons that the publication of the *Observer* had been delayed.

But things changed in 1986. In June 1986, I had a very strong urge to start the paper and my main motivation came from an article in a magazine on the book "*Passion for Excellence*" by Tom Peters and Nancy Austin. Earlier to this, I had a strong desire for a long period to launch the paper. I prepared the project and worked on the size, content and lay-out of the paper, but waited for the right moment. And finally, the first issue of the *Sikkim Observer* hit the newsstand on August 9, 1986. It was a simple four-page tabloid. I was lucky to get a good lead story. It was on the police crackdown on the dreaded 'Commandos' of the ruling party. It sold quite well for a start and made its presence felt in the market straightaway. I was finally able to give birth to my own newspaper after three years in the profession.

The paper covered local, regional, national and international news, besides having a section on sports and business. The few English papers in Gangtok failed to have an editorial page, and in the *Observer* I made it a point to have a strong editorial page. By and large, the content and get-up of the paper have remained the same, although since 1990, the paper has been printed on off-set press instead of on letter press.

With a view to emphasise on the need for a regular weekly in Sikkim, in the 'Letter from the Publisher' column of the first issue of the *Observer*, I mentioned: "People are eager to know about what goes on around them and are hungry for information on important events and things of general interest. Besides presenting facts as they are, there is also the need for depth, objectivity and wholeness in presenting these facts. The duty of the Press is to place facts in a manner which would give the whole story while leaving the readers to come to their own conclusions... the need for a weekly paper in the State is greatly felt by many, who have personally expressed the desire

for a consistent paper covering important events and issues relating to the people of the State and the country. It is with this in mind that the initiative to start a weekly newspaper has been undertaken."

My concept of a democratic system, where the Press has a vital role, has always been very strong and deep. In an article on the "Role of the Press in a Democracy" in the editorial page of the first issue of the paper, I stated: "There is the need to preserve the independence of the media from political interference and to recognise their role in informing the public of current events. On the other hand, the media is duty-bound to achieve balance and must be prepared to recognise the possible social effects of their reporting. But the problem is accentuated today because the politicians need the media so desperately.

The role of the Press in a free country is, therefore, vital. One of the important factors of democracy which distinguishes it from dictatorship and other forms of government, is the freedom to express a view different from that of the majority or the ruling party. The media today wields tremendous power in building public opinion and swaying the minds of the people... Where there is no recognition of people's right to know and the right to free speech, there can be no democracy".

With these views on the editorial of the first issue, I had set the standard for my paper. I wanted the government to know where I stood and what their responsibilities were, and what, we as newsmen, expected from them. Luckily for me, the government gradually came to accept the existence of the *Observer*. It had to. There was no alternative, particularly when I was the only journalist around, who actually was a local Sikkimese. I was now being called for the Chief Minister's Press conferences, and government handouts also reached my desk regularly. This was not the case previously when the government, perhaps because of my association with the *Eastern Express*, completely ignored me. But now they were forced to change their attitude and acknowledge my existence. I had

won.

One of the main reasons for the government's new approach towards me has been the fact that I was not what they thought I was. The *Observer* was fair to everyone. It carried reports of all political parties, including the ruling party. Sometimes the reports went against the government and the ruling party, but at times it was in their favour. This was but natural to any newspaper. I had no axes to grind and had no links with any politician or political party. The *Observer* was not a businessman's paper, nor did it belong to any politician, political party or ideological group. It was fully and wholly owned by me and was basically a newsman's paper. I felt proud of this fact.

The *Spotlight on Sikkim*, which was shelved for the time being, dealt with only a few important issues, and I could not give much coverage to other matters. Most of the time, Bhandari fared badly in my analysis in the SOS. May be, that was why the authorities bracketed me as an 'anti-Bhandari' newsman.

But the *Observer* changed this perception, as the paper, week by week, carried news and views of the State as objectively as possible. By and large, I was fair to everyone and the authorities must have realised by then that the people were aware of this through the pages of the paper. Even if it had been convenient for a certain section of the administration to dub me as anti-Bhandari and ignore me, it was not possible for them to convince the people of this charge. The *Observer* was there as a proof to justify the fact that the paper was fair to all.

But the fact remains that I was consistently critical of the government and the ruling party. The paper viewed Bhandari's and his party's performance from an in-depth angle, and was not prepared to take things at face value. While fairness in reporting enabled me to keep an open line with everyone, the uncompromising and independent stand of the paper, kept me from coming into close contact with those in influential positions. It has been my policy to maintain a respectable distance

from the administration and politicians, including those from the opposition camp. I honestly feel that every journalist should follow the same line to maintain balance and objectivity.

But apart from setting a high standard for myself in my work, I tried to maintain a high degree of professionalism. This is difficult in a small place like Sikkim, where most people tend to react to newspaper reports on a personal level. The role of the media in a democracy is vital, and particularly in a place like Sikkim. I wanted the *Observer* to shoulder greater responsibilities even if it meant taking calculated risks occasionally. Throughout this past one decade, I have always been mindful of the fact that what I was involved in was not just the setting up of a printing press and publication of a newspaper, but the establishment of an institution called the Press, which is a vital component in a democracy. Despite my sincere efforts to build such an institution in Sikkim, I have not been able to make much headway.

I must admit that if the socio-political atmosphere remains the same, the chances of a healthy growth of the Press are very dim. People ought to know that the Press alone cannot fight social evils. Conscious citizens and democratic institutions must contribute their share also. Unfortunately, most people in Sikkim are fence-sitters and are used to being spoon-fed. They depend on the government, the opposition, and the Press to do everything for them. They have been used to a life of ease and non-detachment. While they expect great things to take place, they themselves want to sit idle and get the benefits without being involved at any level. The system has made the people static and completely useless and dependant on others. Under such a situation, democratic institutions such as the Press have been forced to redefine their place in society.

Despite the fact that we are functioning in a democratic set-up, the people in Sikkim, by and large, are still not used to the democratic way of life. People's participation in the daily events of life is virtually non-existent in Sikkim. The main

reason is the fact that 'democracy' was thrust on us from above and was not the outcome of a combined effort. The fires of freedom and democracy must first burn in the heart of individual citizens before they can be spread around. People must freely experience the process of ushering in a democratic set-up. The Sikkimese people were deprived of this vital opportunity. As a result, they are unable to speak up and remain victims of power-hungry politicians. 'People power' can only be exercised if the people themselves have truly experienced the strength and power within. Paid-supporters and propped-up leaders cannot usher in a democratic atmosphere and bring genuine changes in society.

I don't subscribe to the view that democracy came to Sikkim only after 1975 when Sikkim became a part of the Indian Union. At best, it can be said that democracy came in form, and the foundation of a democratic set-up was laid when the Sikkimese people accepted the Constitution of India. Prior to 1975, we had our own elected government and an independent judiciary. Though newspapers were few, their quality and influence were much better than those of today. Many national dailies had their representatives in Sikkim, and at times, representatives from the international media also visited the Himalayan kingdom and gave extensive coverage.

The lifestyle of the people of Lachen and Lachung in north Sikkim and their administrative set-up under the 'Pipon system' is far more effective and democratic than the present panchayat system. This type of an open democratic society in north Sikkim has endured the tests of time. The Lachenpas and Lachungpas have, down the centuries, maintained their unique democratic system, which has also enabled them to preserve their ancient cultural heritage.

No matter what others say, *Sikkim Observer* will continue to speak loud and clear on major issues that concern Sikkim and the Sikkimese. The paper has taken a strong stand on this and will do the same in the days ahead, irrespective of how many temporary closures we have to go through. While

the Press and the establishment have different roles, they can and must work for the larger interest of the people in the State and the country as a whole.

I strongly believe that writers and journalists cannot bring radical changes in society no matter how much they may want to. Only the people can do this – individually or collectively. However, we can make our own contributions by being responsive to the real needs of the people. Our writings must reflect the reality that we see around. People's reaction to what we write is important but it is not everything. Our inspiration should come from within. But if we write the truth, we will get the right response.

"Sikkim for Sikkimese" is an oft-repeated slogan in most political organisations in the State these days. The politicians never fail to raise and emphasise on such issues, particularly during elections. But the ground reality is that I'm yet to come across a single individual, who has for a considerable period of time, worked sincerely and consistently in his own field for the genuine cause of Sikkim and the Sikkimese. The ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad claims that it is the only party representing the hopes and aspirations of the Sikkimese. If this is true, then why have its representatives kept themselves aloof from those, individuals and groups, who represent the same sentiments?

Sometime in 1987, my uncle, Ugen Paljor, told me that if I give up journalism and join the government I would be given a good post in the administration. My uncle had apparently met Bhandari, and the outcome of the meeting was conveyed to me. He, a former Councillor in the Chogyal's Sikkim Council and one of the leading figures of the Sikkim Janata Parishad, was initially very close to Bhandari. But soon after the Parishad merged with the Congress, they broke up and never came together on the same platform again.

He came home late one night and told me that Bhandari was eager to take me into government service if I left the Press. Apparently, he had just come down from Mintokgang, where he had met the Chief Minister. I found the proposition rather

ridiculous and insulting. I never really wanted to join government service even though I had applied once.

My answer to my uncle was clear and precise: "Please tell Bhandari that I'm not interested in government service. I prefer to stick to the Press. Even if I'm offered the post of a secretary I'd reject it. I do not accept the allegation that I'm anti-Bhandari. I have been fair to everyone. I'll be the first person to support him if he sincerely works for the interest of Sikkim and the Sikkimese and genuinely implements the 'sons of the soil' policy".

I don't know whether my message to Bhandari was conveyed to him or not, and I never cared to check this out. But the fact remains that until December 1991, I never came into direct and personal contact with the man in Mintokgang, who claims to champion the cause of the Sikkimese people. It seems strange that the two of us, irrespective of being quite open and vocal about our feelings for the local Sikkimese, have not met for so long. It would be good to come to some kind of understanding and work for the betterment of the people while respecting each others interest in our own particular field. But the sad thing is that we never really met in the real sense. Facing each other and shaking hands is important, but moving together towards the same direction is far more important. Something was definitely wrong somewhere.

Perhaps the only person at the top who initially tried to do something for the local Sikkimese is Bhandari himself. He, too, had to function within a given situation, and much of his efforts to speak up for the Sikkimese in his earlier days in power, were met with stiff resistance from the Centre and a section of the people in Sikkim. After the Parishad-Congress (I) merger in 1981, it was almost certain that Bhandari was heading in another direction. Being in power had its own temptations, and gradually the Parishad batch drifted apart and went their separate ways. The politics of opportunism and corruption then took a deeper root and Bhandari soon lost touch with his own friends and colleagues, who had struggled for so

long throughout the '70s.

In 1986, I asked the former Speaker, Lal Bahadur Basnet, who won from the Parishad ticket from Gangtok in the 1979 Assembly elections, whether it was possible for the original Parishad team to forget the past and come together and work for the interest of the people as they had once set out to do. His immediate reply was, "Bhandari has now reached a point of no return". Many others, who were earlier with Bhandari, felt the same way.

After Bhandari's fall in May 1984, I devoted an entire issue of the July 1984 issue of the *Spotlight on Sikkim* on him. Entitled "The Rise and Fall of Nar Bahadur Bhandari", I stated: "Though Bhandari has long abandoned the cause of the people, his final departure from the post of leadership symbolises the end of an era, which can best be described in the words of Tennyson: "To strive, to seek, to find, and not to yield". Perhaps history will look back to this era and recall this period as Sikkim's 'finest hour'. Bhandari will then not be remembered for the wrongs he had done but for the things he hoped to do and for the dreams he set out to fulfill".

My views on political developments in Sikkim after the merger and before the first Assembly elections in 1979 was clear: "The victory of Bhandari's Sikkim Parishad in 1979 elections symbolised the triumph of anti-merger forces, whose main objective can best be expressed in three words – "Sikkim for Sikkimese'. Thus, Bhandari was not important in himself but what he represented. The disintegration of his party and his personal loss of credibility stems from the fact that he had drifted far beyond the people's wildest expectations from the stand that the Parishad had initially taken.

Their Election Manifesto promised: "This party, if returned to power, is committed to giving the Sikkimese people back their self-respect and sense of dignity", is now just another dream. The Parishad also swore that it would, if given the chance, punish the corrupt regime of the Kazi Government for all its 'corruption, favouritism and nepotism practised since

1974'. Ironically, corruption was one of the major factors that led to Bhandari's downfall. Even some of his genuine supporters acknowledge the fact that even under the Kazi Government, corruption had not reached such a height as is prevalent today".

I added: "The 'sons of the soil' policy formulated and propagated by the Bhandari Government has not made much headway. Selling of reserved seats for Sikkimese students to non-locals, indiscriminate allocation and distribution of building sites and trade licences, discrimination regarding grant of scholarships to students, refusal to allot work for local contractors on tender basis, favouritism and red-tapism concerning jobs in the Government service, and back-door leverage for non-locals to share in the State's administrative and economic development plans are a few examples of the Bhandari Government's various activities, which do not reflect the 'sons of the soil' policy they so passionately propagated before coming to power.

Over the years, Bhandari gradually lost the support of his own party colleagues. They claim that they were Bhandari's genuine supporters, who were with him 'through thick and thin' during his political wilderness experience when he was constantly harassed by both the Central and State governments for his anti-merger stand. It was these people, with the help of a few others, who later formed a nucleus that ultimately influenced the formation of a dissident group within the Cong(I) fold to knock down Bhandari.

Although Bhandari's "Sikkim for Sikkimese" slogan and de-merger promises attracted a large following in the last election, many people did not believe that things would be as simple as the promises that were made. But one thing they did not anticipate was Bhandari's betrayal on certain basic issues concerning the people. The oft-repeated phrase 'Kazi sold the body, Bhandari sold the soul' has some relevance to the gradual erosion of the distinctive character of the Sikkimese way of life".

I then summed up: "Bhandari is still very young and will no doubt try to come back to power. His abrupt dismissal from the post he so dearly coveted does not necessarily mean the end of his political career. He has the potential of making a comeback provided he learns not to overdo things. However, he cannot hope to regain his pre-'79 status to ensure future electoral victories.

Try as he may, Bhandari will never again win back the respect and love of the people of Sikkim, which he so freely and fully received in ample measure during the 7-year period of the merger controversy. Never again will he hope for the same from the people, for he, he alone knows that he has miserably failed to prove his worth to the people, whose cause he so dearly championed and for whom he sacrificed so much.

In the final analysis, it is the Central Government that has come out victorious in destroying the anti-merger forces, which played a predominant role in the last election under the leadership of Nar Bahadur Bhandari. There never was a man, who could so successfully unite all sections of the population under one banner as Bhandari had done, and there never will be another such man for a long time. Never have the Sikkimese people bestow so much faith and confidence on one man in such a short time. Bhandari's failure to fulfill their innermost hopes and aspirations for a strong, stable, and united Sikkim within the borders of India, is his greatest tragedy and the Government of India's biggest achievement.

Looking back in retrospect, one sees enough evidence to justify the fact that Bhandari and his colleagues unconsciously became victims of circumstances and political intrigues that finally broke them into pieces and shattered every hope of them coming together on the same plank they once stood so unitedly".

The Sikkim Sangram Parishad, formed after Bhandari's ouster in May 1984, still tried to cling to pro-local sentiments, but was utterly incapable of championing the rights and interests of the real Sikkimese. Some of those who had genuine

concern for the people either remained in the Congress (I) or joined other parties. Most of Bhandari's men in the SSP were politically baseless and incapable of reaching out to the people and speaking up on their behalf. They merely echoed what Bhandari said and did what he wanted them to do, irrespective of whether it was in the interest of the people or not. The Congress (I) had its own drawbacks. Lack of direction and infighting within the party, coupled with excessive dependence on the Centre, rendered the party ineffective.

Somehow many people turned to the Press, and particularly to the *Observer* and myself, to side with them and take a bash at the establishment. I did the best I could within the limitations imposed upon me by my profession. In the editorial of the *Observer* in June 1989, I wrote: "There is only one remedy to fight the anti-Sikkimese forces, and that is for every Sikkimese to fight for themselves and for Sikkim. If we do not have "Sikkimese for Sikkim", there cannot be a "Sikkim for Sikkimese"."

While I expected others to do their part, I, too, was deeply aware of my responsibilities. Despite opposition and difficulties, I did not for once waver from the stand that I had taken almost ten years ago. In fact, the *Observer* stood firm and shone when we were hardest hit. The stand I had taken in mid-1991 reflected this spirit. In the editorial of the *Observer* on July 1991, I stated: "This issue of the *Sikkim Observer* marks the completion of one year of the publication of the paper since it resumed publication after closure of the paper for seven months last year due to suppression of the freedom of the Press, leading to complete ransacking of the *Observer* printing press unit in January 1990 and threat to the life of the editor, who is also the proprietor of the paper.

'Let the people know the truth and the country will be saved', wrote Abraham Lincoln; and we at the *Sikkim Observer* have just been doing that. We have experienced and demonstrated the fact that "The freedom of the Press illustrates the commonplace that if we are to live progressively, we must

live dangerously". There is now no easy way out; there is no easy road to freedom. If we have acted courageously in any manner, if we have shown any dedication in our work to inform the people about the truth, irrespective of consequences, then it is because of our conviction borne out of our experience that if one has to contribute something concrete to society, one must have the courage to go against the current".

CHAPTER 12

"We Shall Not Be Submerged"

"We have been merged; we shall not be submerged".

Nar Bahadur Bhandari

"Let every nation know, whether it wishes us well or ill, that we shall pay any price, bear any burden, meet any hardship, support any friend, oppose any foe, in order to assure the survival and success of liberty".

John F. Kennedy

Sikkim's absorption into the Indian Union and its integration with the mainstream has always been a touchy and a very controversial subject. This chapter will not deal with every aspect of the 'merger', but will mainly focus on certain important issues of the 'terms of the merger' under which the tiny Himalayan Kingdom became a part of the Indian sub-continent almost two decades back. It will also reflect on the general mood of the people in the post-merger era, and reactions of those who played a leading role in what many perceive as the annexation of Sikkim.

Rustomji, a noted author and authority on the eastern Himalayas and the North-Eastern region of India, in an article in the *Literary Supplement* of the *Sunday Statesman* of July 22, 1984, wrote: "I had not met the Kazini of Chakung for

several years, and recently called in at her home in Kalimpong on my way from Sikkim to Shillong. It had not been my intention to discuss with her or with her husband, the former Chief Minister of Sikkim, the politics of the country, but the options were not open to me. I had barely stepped out from my car into her brightly-spangled parlour before she burst out with her dramatic confession".

And what was Kazini's dramatic confession? As reported in the article, Kazini told Rustomji, "You and the Chogyal were absolutely right. It has all been a terrible mistake".

Surprisingly, Kazini, in a letter to the editor of the *Statesman*, denied having stated this to Rustomji. Unfortunately for Kazini, very few people would be convinced that Rustomji was lying and that she was telling the truth. Even her own husband, who after having lived for years under her shadow, has been making startling statements over the outcome of the merger of which he was its chief architect. If Kazini had confessed that merger was a mistake, then Kazi has stated that the Sikkimese people have not benefited from it.

Five years after her reported confession to Rustomji, Kazini made another similar confession: "I have made mistakes and I regret many things I have done". This confession, even more dramatic than the previous one, made in April 1989, was to be her last few words to the people before her death. Her candid admission that she made mistakes and regretted them, was made in her residence in Kalimpong in the presence of her husband, friends, relatives and two journalists from Sikkim, who had come to see her after she survived a critical liver complication.

Upon learning that Kazini had survived another attack, Ranjit Devraj, UNI (United News of India) representative in Sikkim, and I rushed to Kalimpong to see her and to find out about her views on her long and chequered semi-political career. It was to be a historic moment for us and we didn't want to miss this chance. After waiting in the parlour over a cup of tea for a while, we were finally ushered into Kazini's

bedroom. There were already some guests present in the room when we got in. More followed after we entered the room. Everyone was aware of the significance of the moment.

The room was quiet and I could feel that the atmosphere was quite tense even as the 85-year-old lady, who had once led a vigorous life in the hills, lay sick and helpless on her bed. I had never met her personally, but Kazi, to my pleasant surprise, later told me that she was quite fond of me. I think she got to know me through my writings, which appeared in numerous local and national publications. She took a careful look at us when we entered the room and then asked us to come closer towards her. And while everyone in the room waited with bated breath for her to say something of historical significance, she finally spoke up.

"Jigme, you write so well", were her first few words. She asked me to sit beside her. The compliment was quite flattering and totally unexpected. I just stood there quietly beside her without uttering a word. Although I must admit that I was quiet flattered by what she said, I had not come all the way from Sikkim to hear a few kind words from the old lady about myself. I expected more from her.

When she saw the notebook in my hand and realised that we had come to her for more than that, she re-adjusted herself and finally spoke up, loud and clear for all to hear. Besides being the wife of the former chief minister, Kazini was also a journalist in her younger days. She actually took a live interest in the *Himalayan Observer*, an English weekly published from Kalimpong, which virtually became the mouthpiece of the Sikkim Congress led by Kazi. Having been a journalist and perhaps being aware of the role of the media in her life, she must have instinctively realised why we had come and the importance of what she spoke.

"I would like all the people in Sikkim to be sustained, to live together, and to have a common destiny", was Kazini's first statement. The fact that the Government of India had, in the past, used her and her husband to cause divisions among the

three ethnic groups in Sikkim, with the sole objective of weaning Sikkim closer towards India, was an open secret in Sikkim. Kazini knew full well that the people were suspicious of her own role and her party's activities in Sikkim, particularly between April 1973 to April 1975, when political upheaval, which began in early April 1973, finally led to Sikkim's merger two years later. The division between the minority Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas and the majority Hindu Nepalese reached its peak during this period, enabling Kazi's Sikkim Congress to grab the seat of power with the tangible backing of the Indian Government.

It was Kazi's Sikkim State Congress (SSC) in 1953, which demanded "acession" of Sikkim to India, and eventually it was his Sikkim Congress, which put an end to the Chogyals' 333-year rule, and made Sikkim a constituent unit of India in April 1975. Instead of maintaining its international status and framing its own Constitution for a more democratic set-up, Sikkim was made to accept the Constitution of another country. No wonder Karma Topden, till recently Sikkim's Rajya Sabha MP and formerly the Chogyal's ADC, reportedly commented during the merger period: "Everything comes to us ready-made from India these days, even constitutions."

After painfully witnessing what was taking place in Sikkim in the one and half decades since the kingdom's entry into the Indian Union, and having been a party to the total disintegration, destruction and division amongst the Sikkimese, Kazini finally yielded to her long-suppressed emotions and accepted defeat. She actually acknowledged her devious role in Sikkim politics, admitted her mistakes, and expressed regret. And then, perhaps seeing a ray of hope, advised the people of Sikkim to "live together and have a common destiny". She, however, did not specify what she really meant by a "common destiny", and left it for posterity to interpret. Realising the state she was in, we refrained from asking further questions. That Kazini attained political maturity at this late stage after so much of damage and so many bitter experiences is regrettable. The

only guidelines she left for the people was to ask them to learn from her past mistakes.

The next solemn confession made by Kazini to all of us in the room concerned her past activities in Sikkim. "I have made mistakes and regret many things I have done", she declared. I realised that while she was speaking to us, she was not just making a quiet confession about herself and her work, but her words came out quite spontaneously and there was an air of confidence and conviction in how she delivered her statement. She was not just talking to us, but seemed to be declaring something important to all in the room in her rather commanding and authoritative voice, so that posterity could take a note of it and remember how she lived and died. If Kazini had acted mischievously in the past and let down the Sikkimese people, she at least had the courage and the decency to actually come to terms with herself and the people, and admit her mistakes. It certainly takes a rare courage for anyone to admit, in the last hour of one's life, that whatever was done in the past, was a mistake and, therefore, regrettable.

And finally, her last few words concerned her beloved husband, who was beside her when she made the statements. "Anything I have done which has upset my husband, I regret", is how she put it. In the final days prior to the merger, Kazini made a last-minute bid to save the separate political entity of the kingdom. But she was unsuccessful, and the events of the day overtook those who tried to outmanoeuvre New Delhi's men in Sikkim. According to some Sikkimese, what Kazi really wanted in Sikkim was a more democratic set-up and closer ties with India, while maintaining Sikkim's distinct personality as separate from India. The merger was, therefore, unnecessary and a mistake. It was, to borrow Jawaharlal Nehru's phrase, like "killing a fly with a bullet".

In just forty two words, Kazini summed up how she felt about her life, her husband and the people of Sikkim. "I Regret" should really have been her epitaph.

I carried Kazini's statement on the front

Observer dated April 10, 1989. Headlined, "I have made mistakes and regret it: Kazini", I wrote: "It was the Kazini, more than any other person, who was the driving force behind the events that finally led to Sikkim's merger in 1975. But the Kazini's candid and solemn admission that she made many "mistakes" in the past, confirms the widely-held view that what the majority of people in Sikkim wanted was not merger with the world's largest democracy, but "full-fledged democracy", while retaining Sikkim's separate political entity." The report further added that what Kazini hoped to establish in Sikkim was "a constitutional monarchy headed by the Chogyal".

There was no reaction from Kazini over my report, which was also carried in the *Statesman*. There were too many witnesses in the room, who heard her speak and who would certainly bail me out if ever she denied what was reported as she had done with Rustomji's article. Her silence confirmed my report. She died soon after this meeting, which incidentally, was my first and last encounter with the lady, who claimed acquaintanceship with the likes of China's Chow-Enlai and Maharajah Mohan Shumshere Jan Bahadur Rana of Nepal.

Kazi's adopted son, Nar Bahadur Khatiwada, perhaps the most vocal advocate of the merger, created a sensation in political circles in Sikkim and elsewhere, when he, in 1977, openly admitted that the merger was "illegal", "unconstitutional" and "against the wishes of the Sikkimese people."

In a memorandum submitted to the then Prime Minister, Morarji Desai, in 1977, by the Sikkim Prajatantra Congress (SPC) led by Khatiwada, it stated: "Neither the Kazi nor the Sikkim Congress nor we as leaders had the mandate of the people to seek for the merger of Sikkim with India or to change the political status or to perpetuate the kind of constitutional relationship with India into which we find ourselves today. Their mandate was for establishment of a full fledged democracy on the basis of one man one vote and a written constitution, whereby the Sikkimese people can enjoy basic human rights. All these promises to our innocent masses has

been thrown to the wind and people have been sadly deceived and we deprived of our country".

The covering letter to the memorandum stated: "We regret that under pretext of ushering in democracy to fulfil 'the wishes of the people', India's action in Sikkim seems to have been motivated solely with the object of annexing it, and making it a part and parcel of India... The methods used by them were the age-old methods of the imperialistic and expansionist nations of divide and rule, propagating false propaganda, creating an illusion that democracy was being introduced and democratic institutions were being strengthened for the benefit of the Sikkimese people, whereas, in reality, the trust of the simple and innocent people was being deceived, exploited and betrayed".

The memorandum, which contained the signatures of four Sikkim Prajatantra Congress MLAs, including Khatiwada, requested the Government of India to "review" the status of Sikkim and restore to the Sikkimese people "the right to manage our affairs".

Desai's reaction on the 'merger issue' came two years later in early 1979, when he told an American journalist that he did not approve of the manner in which Sikkim was merged with India. The matter was raised in the Indian Parliament and it created a furore. Desai, however, stuck to his stand: "I have expressed my views on the manner in which the merger was affected. I did so at the time of merger and I have done so ever since. I have always believed that even desirable objectives should not be accomplished in a manner which would arouse needless criticisms and suspicion". This statement was given in the Lok Sabha. He was, however, quick to add that Sikkim's fate was a "settled fact" and, therefore, "there can be no question of unsettling it".

During the Prime Minister's visit to Sikkim in April 1979, he reiterated that he had opposed the manner in which Sikkim was made a constituent unit of India. While Desai admitted that the 'merger' was a 'fait accompli', he assured the people

that the rights and interests of the three ethnic communities of Sikkim would be fully protected. He further urged the people to reap the benefits of the merger.

The Chogyal's letter to Rustomji, written soon after Desai's visit, reflected the mood of the people prior to the first elections to the Assembly after the merger, which were held in October 1979. His letter, dated August 14, 1979, stated: "Here the Assembly has been dissolved, as there was going to be a vote of no confidence brought against the Lhendup Dorji Government which would have been carried, followed possibly by a resolution against the merger of Sikkim with India. Now with President's rule the Kazi is also out and Lal (Governor) is all in all. Lhendup Dorji is definitely not going to come back and we hope that the next election will be held soon. Whichever Government comes it will be better than the one that sold away Sikkim".

Ten years after his controversial move to declare 'Prince' Wangchuk the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim, Bhim Bahadur Gurung admitted that he had always felt uncomfortable and somewhat guilty at having been a party to the 'selling of Sikkim'. Gurung saw the Chogyal's death and his funeral on February 19, 1982 as a god-sent opportunity to expiate himself of the sins he had committed, and made attempts to ventilate his true feelings. In 1975, Gurung moved a resolution in the Assembly, abolishing "the institution of the Chogyal" and declaring Sikkim to be a "constituent unit of India", thereby paving way for Sikkim to become the 22nd State of the Indian Union.

"The guilt of having participated in the process of the merger has left a very deep and painful scar in my heart", Gurung confided with me at his residence in Gangtok one afternoon in mid-1992. "By publicly acknowledging Prince Wangchuk to be the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim, I wanted to exonerate myself and get rid of this guilt", Gurung explained. He revealed that he, then legislative leader of the Opposition, and his MLAs had made a controversial move in openly accepting Wangchuk as the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim on February 19,

1982 and thereby acknowledging the traditional process by which the Chogyals succeeded to the throne. If in 1975, Gurung was a party to the abolition of the Chogyal's institution, in 1982, he more than made up for his past misdeeds by publicly acclaiming Wangchuk to be the 13th consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim and acknowledging the continuance of the Chogyals' hereditary succession.

Wangchuk's response to his 'crowning' more than satisfied Gurung, who was ready to pay any price for his action, which was of great historical significance. In an interview in *India Today* after he was proclaimed the 13th Chogyal of Sikkim, Wangchuk stated: "It is not for me to proclaim myself the new Chogyal. It is for the people to accept and acknowledge me as the new Chogyal and you can see for yourself the support I have been shown by the people... We do have the custom of automatic succession that on the death of the Chogyal, the heir apparent becomes the new Chogyal".

"I was all prepared to face any consequence and was even ready to get arrested and face jail sentence", Gurung pointed out to me, and added, "Even my family members were conscious of what I was doing and were prepared to face any eventuality". Referring to Wangchuk's "enthronement", Gurung said the people expected Bhandari, who was then the Chief Minister, to back him. "But his handling of the situation showed that Bhandari's patriotism was superficial", Gurung explained.

Gurung boasts that unlike some other MLAs, he stuck to his stand and refused to compromise and withdraw his signature from the historic document submitted to Wangchuk on February 19. Datta-Ray in his book – *"Smash and Grab – Annexation of Sikkim"*, describes Gurung as a "leading architect" and "prominent" among those who bartered away the Kingdom's independence. Referring to Gurung's opportunistic tendencies, the book adds: "In the distant past, Gurung had enthusiastically defended his King's demand for independence; but he had recanted his loyalty to become one

of New Delhi's most loyal adherents in Sikkimese politics".

Gurung's nationalistic feelings surfaced when he was one of the three Executive Councillors of the Chogyal's Sikkim Council way back in 1967, when the demand for revision of the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950 by the Sikkimese, was worrying New Delhi. A joint statement on the Treaty revision issued by the three Executive Councillors – Netuk Tsering (Sikkim National Party), Nahakul Pradhan (Sikkim State Congress) and B.B. Gurung (Sikkim National Congress) – on June 15, 1967, stated: "Since Sikkim signed the treaty with India, surely it is within her sovereign rights to demand a revision of the treaty as one of the signatories. In fact Sikkim gained her Sovereign Status on the 15th August, 1947, when India achieved her independence from the British rule. Every country has its inherent right to exist and maintain its separate identity and, therefore, to review and revise its treaty obligations in the wake of changing circumstances".

Though Gurung's political actions in the past may have been motivated by occasional nationalistic feelings, his confession about his attempt to atone himself of the political sins he had committed during the merger era, reflected the painful experience and the burden of guilt that all merger veterans have had to live with.

Twelve years after Desai's statement in the Parliament on Sikkim's merger, Kazi, who was quietly living in self-imposed exile in Kalimpong, apparently unable to merely become a mute spectator over the deteriorating political and economic situation in Sikkim, met several influential Central leaders in New Delhi on January 1991, and apprised them of the sad state of affairs in Sikkim.

He drew the attention of the authorities and the public at large through a Press statement in New Delhi, which stated: "The Sikkimese people decided to merge with India in 1975 when they were convinced that the rights and interests of the various sections of the people in Sikkim would be fully protected by the Government of India". "Unfortunately", the

Press statement went on to say, "the democratic aspirations of the people, to a great extent, have not been met" and the "rights of the people are gradually being eroded". Kazi, who once promised to usher in an era of political stability, communal harmony and economic prosperity in Sikkim, painted a "dark future" for the people of Sikkim. Since then, he has openly admitted that the "fruits of democracy" have not reached the Sikkimese people, who are now living in "fear and insecurity".

Despite public confessions over their role in the merger and its outcome, neither Kazi, Khatiwada, or Gurung have been able to capitalise on the 'merger issue' and reap political benefits. Kazi could never complete his term in office; Gurung was out of the chief minister's *guddi* in less than a fortnight after he succeeded Bhandari in May 1984; and Khatiwada, for all his contributions to Sikkim's merger, could not even become a Cabinet minister.

Attempts to rake up the merger issue by merger veterans proved futile. Explained a member of the Royal Family of Sikkim, "The Kazi has no right to talk about de-merger of Sikkim. It is he who sold away Sikkim. But if Bhandari raises the issue, it is quite understandable as he and his party fought against the merger". This view is generally shared by many people in Sikkim, who have still not forgiven the *Batisay Chor*, meaning the '32 thieves' (32 members of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly), who are considered the *Desb Bechowas* (sellers of the country). This is perhaps the main reason why the Congress (I) has not been politically successful in Sikkim, where the party is yet to win a single Assembly or Parliamentary election since the merger.

After heavily banking on the people's sentiment against Sikkim's merger to come to power, Bhandari's Sikkim Janata Parishad shed its lofty ideals after capturing power in the October 1979 Assembly elections. The Parishad took the cue from Desai on the merger issue and declared that merger was a closed chapter even though it opposed the manner in which

Sikkim was absorbed into the Indian Union. For a party which promised 'de-merger', its stand that the merger was a 'fait accompli' was a virtual betrayal of the people's trust.

Commenting on Bhandari's Sikkim Janata Parishad victory in the 1979 Assembly elections, Das in his book says: "The anti-merger forces led by an ex-Kazi supporter, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, took full advantage of Kazi's predicament with the support of Bhutia-Lepchas or people disillusioned with Sikkim's economic and political ills consequent to her merger with India. Every economic issue was fully exploited and the blame for inflicting indignity on Sikkim was laid on the Kazi's doors. It was a unique case where the ruling party lost every single seat and an unregistered party under Bhandari's leadership called the Sikkim Janata Parishad fighting as "independent", emerged as the new ruling group identifying and supporting the nationalistic sentiments towards Sikkim's separate personality distinct from India".

Kazi and his party's humiliating defeat in the 1979 Assembly elections proved to the world, beyond any shadow of doubt, that the people of Sikkim did not approve of Sikkim's take-over by its protecting power. Reporting on the election results, the London *Daily Telegraph* wrote: "A party inspired by the Chogyal (King) of Sikkim, whom Mrs. Gandhi deposed when India occupied the Himalayan Kingdom in 1974, yesterday swept to a clear victory in the current elections to the State Legislative Assembly. The Janata Parishad party, which made it plain in its election campaign that it stood opposed to the merger of Sikkim into the Indian Union won 17 seats in the 32 member Assembly and thus secured the right to form a government. It has no alliance with the National parties in India and is purely a local grouping."

"Apart from the Janata Parishad's spectacular win, another indicator of a strong local Sikkimese sentiments was reflected in the fact that the only other party to do well was the newly formed local Revolutionary Congress Party. The Revolutionary Congress is neither allied to Mrs. Gandhi's Congress Conven-

tion party or to the official Congress party. It won 11 seats and became the official opposition".

The paper added: "The implications of the Janata Parishad's victory on Sikkim's relation with the New Delhi government are now the subject of considerable speculation. The Parishad has given some indications of its acceptance of the merger as a fait accompli, but it is almost certain it will press hard for greater autonomy for Sikkim rather than secession, which would rake up animosity with India".

It may be noted that if the Centre had not brought last-minute changes on the Assembly seat arrangement in 1979, which saw the abolition of all the 15 seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese, the Parishad could definitely have got more than 17 seats. Because of the changes in the Assembly seat arrangement, the Sikkimese people were once again divided into two camps on ethnic lines. The Parishad captured nine of the 13 seats reserved for the BLs and the Sangha, indicating that the minority BLs were with Bhandari. Poudyal's pro-Nepali Congress (Revolutionary) fully exploited the seat reservation issue and made it the main election issue during the elections and won 11 seats. It challenged the abolition of the seats kept for the Sikkimese Nepalese. While Bhandari's Parishad exploited the people's sentiment against the merger, Poudyal attacked the Centre for failing to keep its commitments to the Sikkimese people made during the merger. Even Khatiwada's Sikkim Prajatantra Congress, which opposed the merger and asked for a review of Sikkim's status, won four seats.

In a letter to the members of the Indian Parliament in July 1979, Poudyal stated: "Following the amendment of the Representation of People Act 1950/51, Sikkim has not gone to the poll and we are at a loss to understand as to how the proposed amendment Bill has been brought to the Parliament without the knowledge and concurrence either of the Sikkim Assembly or that of the State Cabinet. The proposed amendment is an attempt to invalidate and nullify the sacred commit-

ments given to the Sikkimese people prior to the merger".

The letter further added: "By seeing the ratio of the influx of the people from other States for the past six years, we have come to the conclusion that be it a majority community or minority community, we the Indian Sikkimese of Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepali origin will not be able to send our adequate representatives in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim within a few years of time unless our seats are reserved".

Ironically, the "*Desb Beshowas*" and the "*Desb Farkowney*" (those like Bhandari, who promised de-merger) are now placed in the same category by most Sikkimese. In fact, the Sikkimese people feel more hatred and bitterness towards those who opposed the merger but failed to keep their promises once they came to power. By and large, the Sikkimese people feel a sense of betrayal not only by those who initially sold away the kingdom, but by those who failed to genuinely fight for the existing rights of the Sikkimese people as enshrined in the Constitution and thereby preserve whatever has been left of Sikkim's unique socio-cultural heritage.

In the three Assembly elections that followed the merger, Bhandari has, rightly or wrongly, been able to highlight the regional sentiments of the people without actually raising the de-merger issue. Emphasis on the merger issue largely ceased to be the main issue after the 1979 elections, but preservation of the distinct identity of Sikkim, within the framework of the Constitution, became a dominant political theme after this period. The Parishad's party manifesto declared: "It shall be the constant endeavour of the Sikkim Janata Parishad to promote the over-all interest of the Sons of the Soil and to safeguard the regional interest of the State".

After Bhandari's comeback to power with the newly-formed Sikkim Sangram Parishad in 1985, I wrote an editorial in the *Spotlight on Sikkim* under the headline – "People's verdict on merger issue". It stated: "The triumph of the anti-merger forces under the leadership of the present Chief Minis-

ter in the 1979-80 Assembly and Parliamentary elections reflected the will of the Sikkimese people, who were never at ease with what took place ten years ago. Fortunately or unfortunately, those who stood together and opposed the merger, are now divided among themselves and desperately fighting against each other. This itself is a significant change in favour of New Delhi. Although merger sentiment does play a vital role in the present political development, it has lost much of its punch and genuineness of the '70s. But the issue continues to hover around, making a comeback when the situation demands".

While the Sikkimese people fear being completely annihilated in the near future and want to protect whatever has been left, the emphasis on preservation of the distinct identity of Sikkim, within the Union, has its basis on the 'terms of the merger'. The Indian-backed phony revolution in Sikkim, which began in early April 1973, led to the signing of a historic agreement in the following month on May 8, between the Government of India, the Chogyal of Sikkim, and leaders of the three major political parties in Sikkim. While this Tripartite Agreement finally led to the Kingdom's ultimate absorption into the Indian Union in 1975, it also formed the basis of Sikkim's merger with its Protectorate.

Among those who signed the 1973 Agreement were Palden Thondup Namgyal, the Chogyal of Sikkim, Kewal Singh, Foreign Secretary, Government of India, Kazi Lhendup Dorji (Sikkim National Congress), Krishna Chandra Pradhan, B.B. Gurung (Sikkim Janata Congress), and Netuk Tsering (Sikkim National Party). The Agreement envisaged the establishment of a fully responsible government with a more democratic constitution, guarantee of fundamental rights, rule of law, an independent judiciary, and legislative and executive powers to the elected representatives of the people.

Referring to the Assembly elections, the May 8 Agreement called for "a system of elections based on adult suffrage which will give adequate representation to all sections of the people

on the basis of the principle of one man one vote".

The 'systems of elections' in Sikkim and 'seat representation' in the Sikkim Council were two major issues that dominated the political agenda in Sikkim prior to 1973. But with the introduction of the 'one man, one vote' system in 1974, the only major issue left unresolved was the Assembly seat arrangement for the three ethnic groups in Sikkim. One of the major demands made by the Sikkim National Congress and the Sikkim Janata Congress in early 1973 was the abolition of the 'parity system' in the Council. The Nepali-dominated Congress parties rejected any formula which equated the minority Bhutia-Lepchas on the same level with the majority Nepalese. The demand for a 'more democratic' system in Sikkim actually meant that the Nepalese, being the majority community, should have greater say in the running of the country.

The 'parity system', which existed even after the 1974 Assembly elections, was initiated during an all-party meeting in Sikkim in May 1951. The constitutional Proclamation of the Maharaja on March 23, 1953, which was based on the all-party agreement on the seat formula, mentioned the number of seats allotted to different communities in Sikkim in the State Council, the supreme legislative body of Sikkim. Thus, a system based on communal representation, was introduced in the Council, which initially had 18 members of which six seats were kept for the Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepchas and six for the Sikkimese Nepalese. Six seats, including the President (Dewan) of the Assembly, were nominated by the Chogyal. While there have been minor changes on seat arrangement in the Council, the 'parity system' remained intact till the Council elections in 1973 and the Assembly elections in April 1974. It actually remained undisturbed even after Sikkim became a part of India, and were altered only in 1979 prior to the Assembly elections.

During the second general election in 1958, the Maharaja, Sir Tashi Namgyal, was quite clear about his intention on introducing the 'parity system'. By then, due to increasing influx of

Nepalese and others, the Nepalese had become the major community in Sikkim. Those who lived in Sikkim since 1946 were declared 'Sikkim subjects' under the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961. The drafting of the Regulation actually began soon after the signing of the Indo-Sikkim Treaty in 1950, but somehow this controversial subject was kept pending till early 1960. It may be mentioned here that the majority of the Sikkim subjects were Nepalese and the *Durbar* formulated a system of seat arrangement in the Council which gave equal weightage to the two major communities in Sikkim – the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Sikkimese Nepalese – and thus maintained communal harmony amongst the people.

The Maharaja, through his constitutional Proclamation of 1958, emphasised the need for the government to be "carried on equally by the two major groups of Bhutia-Lepchas and Nepalese respectively, without the one community imposing itself or encroaching on the other. It is to this end that His Highness has endeavoured always to direct his Government; so that, with a Constitution based on equality and justice, the communities should live in harmony with each other and that such harmony may be always maintained for the good of all his people".

The seat reservation issue remained one of the most vital political issues even when it seemed that Sikkim was fast slipping into the Indian sphere of influence. To take-over a country was one thing, but to maintain the ethnic balance and to keep the people together, proved to be a difficult task. The Tripartite Agreement took a serious note of the importance of maintaining some sort of harmony and balance between the three ethnic groups in Sikkim.

The May 8 Agreement clearly reflected the *Durbar's* views on the Assembly seat reservation issue. Article 5 of the Agreement stated: "The system of the election shall be so organised as to make the Assembly adequately representative of the various sections of the population. The size and composition of the Assembly and of the Executive Council shall be such as

may be prescribed from time to time care being taken to ensure that no single section of the population acquires a dominating position due mainly to its ethnic origin, and that the rights and interests of the Sikkimese of Bhutia-Lepcha origin, and that of the Sikkimese of Nepali, which includes Tsong and Scheduled Caste origin, are fully protected".

The emphasis in both the Maharaja's Proclamation of March 1958 and the May 8 Agreement of 1973 is equality between the two major communities, so that no one acquired a dominating position. It may be mentioned here that maintenance of ethnic balance through seat distribution on equal basis between the two communities, was progressively enlarged to cover the entire gamut of the administration. Equal representations of the two communities were reflected in the appointment of Executive Councillors of the Chogyal's Sikkim Council, and subsequently in the State Cabinet, and also in the choice of State Government secretaries.

Article 5 of the Tripartite Agreement led to the formation of a new arrangement in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim, which had all the 32 seats reserved for the Sikkimese of Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha origin. Thus, 15 seats were reserved for Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepchas, 15 for Sikkimese Nepalese, one seat each for the Sangha and the Scheduled Castes. This constituted communal parity as the Sangha seat basically represented the BLs and the SC seat the Nepalese.

Referring to the formulation of the new seat arrangement in the Assembly, Das, then President and Speaker of the Assembly in 1973 and also the Chief Executive of the administration, in his book states: "The May Agreement provided for a thirty member Assembly. According to the parity formula, fifteen seats were allotted to the Bhutia-Lepchas and the remaining fifteen to the Nepalese including one for the Scheduled Castes. Soon, both the sides demanded separate seats for the monks, the Scheduled Castes and a caste called the Tsongs, who though Nepalese in origin, claimed to be of different ethnic group. Swaminathan (the then Chief Election Commis-

sioner of India) had endless discussions with all the parties including the Chogyal but no agreement could be arrived at. As a compromising formula, we decided to offer a package deal. There would be thirty-two members instead of thirty in the new Assembly with two reserved seats – one for the Scheduled Castes and the other for the monasteries. This maintained the parity, the Scheduled castes being of Nepalese origin and the monks coming from the Bhutia-Lepcha group. The offer was finally accepted by all the parties. We rejected the claim of the Tsongs as they had always been a part of the Nepalese. Our action in increasing the number of seats was technically wrong unless a fresh tripartite agreement was signed to modify the May Agreement. But, under the prevailing circumstances, the technicalities had no relevance. Later, this was rectified under the new Constitution approved by the Sikkim Assembly".

General elections under the above formula were held in Sikkim in April 1974 under the supervision of the Election Commission of India. Kazi's Sikkim Congress (formed after the merger of Sikkim National Congress and the Sikkim Janata Congress) captured 31 of the 32 seats. Kazi, who was its President, became the first Chief Minister of Sikkim after the elections.

Das, in his inaugural address of the newly-formed Assembly on May 11, 1974, while referring to the May 8 Agreement, stated: "While the objectives before us are clear, it is my duty as the President, to add a word of caution. Any elected body has to work with a particular framework which has a legal sanction. The fundamentals and the legality of the system have been clearly defined by May 8 Agreement of 1973. No doubt, the details of procedure and business of the House have not been spelt out in details, but this will have to be a gradual evolutionary process guided, if necessary, by expert advice. This is not a difficult task, so long as the parameters of our functioning are defined, which the Agreement already contains".

Kazi, too, relied on the May 8 Agreement for the estab-

lishment of a more democratic set-up in Sikkim. In his motion of thanks to the President's address in the Assembly, he stated: "There is no denying the fact that the establishment of democratic rule in Sikkim will be on the broad basis of the historic May 8, 1973, tripartite Gangtok Agreement to which the political parties, the Government of India and the Chogyal of Sikkim are signatories. In all fairness, the terms of his Agreement should be honoured and abided by the parties concerned". Kazi further added, "We are confident that a fully responsible government will be established in Sikkim and that all the signatories of the May 8, 1973, Gangtok Agreement will work towards the fulfilment of the provisions embodied therein".

A resolution passed during the inaugural session of the House stated: "The Assembly requests the Government of India to safeguard in particular the rights and interests of all the different ethnic groups in the political, economic and social welfares of Sikkim... this Assembly resolves and hereby requests the Government of India to examine the modalities of further strengthening Indo-Sikkim relationship as already agreed to in the Agreement of May 8 1973, signed between the three parties, and to take immediate steps for Sikkim's participation in the political and economic institutions of India".

Soon after the elections, the Sikkim Assembly initiated a move to bring Sikkim closer to India, and on June 20, 1974, it passed the Government of Sikkim Bill, 1974, which contemplated giving more powers to the elected members of the Assembly and intended making the Chogyal a titular head. The controversial Bill, which asked for closer social, economic and political ties with India, was again passed in the Assembly on June 28 and finally on July 3, amidst widespread opposition and strong rumours that Sikkim was becoming a part of India. The Chogyal, who expressed his reservation over certain provisions of the Bill, was finally forced to give his assent to the Bill on July 4, 1974.

The Government of Sikkim Bill, 1974, after receiving the

Chogyal's assent and the Lok Sabha's approval in September 1974, changed the status of Sikkim from that of a Protectorate to an Associate State of India. The Act, besides making the Chief Executive of Sikkim (an Indian representative nominated by the Government of India) the *ex-officio* President and Speaker of the Assembly and the head of the administration, with full legislative and executive powers, also made provisions for representations of two Sikkimese representatives in the Indian Parliament.

The Act, however, did not alter the seat arrangement in the Assembly and the 'parity system' was kept intact when Sikkim became an Associate State of India. It may be noted that the 1974 Act begins with the words "in pursuance of the historic agreement of 8 May 1973", and was, therefore, enacted with a view to establishing a "fully responsible government in Sikkim", bearing in mind the traditional ethnic representations and reservation of their seats in the Assembly.

Referring to the seat reservation issue in the Assembly, Section 7(2) of the Act stated: "The Government of Sikkim may make rules for the purpose of providing that the Assembly adequately represents the various sections of the population, that is to say, while fully protecting the legitimate rights and interests of Sikkimese of Lepcha or Bhutia origin and of Sikkimese of Nepali origin and other Sikkimese, including Tsongs and Scheduled Castes, no single section of the population is allowed to acquire a dominating position in the affairs of Sikkim mainly by reason of its ethnic origin".

Sikkim's Associate State status did not last for even a year. The political situation in Sikkim continued to remain unstable since the April agitation in 1973, and particularly after the passing of the Government of Sikkim Bill, 1974. The Chogyal and the majority of the Sikkimese were convinced that the fast-moving events would ultimately lead to Sikkim becoming a constituent unit of the Indian Union and losing its separate political entity. But they were helpless and unable to withstand the pressures exerted by New Delhi. Section 30(c) of the Act,

which was viewed by many as the first major step towards Sikkim's eventual merger, sought for "participation and representation for the people of Sikkim in the political institutions of India". Santosh Kumar Rai and Leonard Solomon Saring later represented Sikkim as MPs in the Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha respectively.

The political situation in Sikkim took a dramatic turn soon after Sikkim became an Associate State in September 1974. In an emergent session of the Assembly on April 10, 1975, the Sikkim Assembly passed a resolution abolishing the institution of the Chogyal and declaring Sikkim to be a constituent unit of India. The resolution was placed before the people and a 'referendum' (it was actually called the 'special poll') was carried out on April 14, resulting in what is generally believed to be the people's approval of the merger. Official figures show that 97 per cent of the voters voted in favour of the resolution. Subsequently, the resolution, along with the result of the 'special poll', was placed before the Indian Parliament for consideration. The Parliament then passed the 36th Constitution (Amendment) Bill, 1975, making Sikkim the 22nd State of India with effect from April 26, 1975.

The passing the Constitution (36th Amendment) Bill, 1975 led to the insertion of Article 371F in the Indian Constitution making special provisions in respect to the State of Sikkim. Section (f) of Article 371F deals specifically with the seat arrangements in the Assembly and reflects enactments and agreements made by the previous governments in Sikkim on the issue.

Article 371F(f) of the Constitution reads: "Parliament may, for the purpose of protecting the rights and interests of different sections of the population of Sikkim make provision for the number of seats in the Legislative Assembly 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".

Assembly seat arrangements remained the same even after Sikkim became a part of the Indian Union. Ordinarily, there should have been fresh elections to the State Legislative Assembly after the 36th Amendment Bill was passed. Unfortunately, Sikkim was deprived of this opportunity. Apart from anything else, the elections would reflect whether the merger really had the approval of the people as claimed by Sikkim Congress leaders. During the 'special poll', there was widespread confusion as to the real objective of the poll. While some interpreted the poll as a referendum for the people to choose between democracy and monarchy, others saw it as a choice between maintaining the independent status of Sikkim or merging with India.

Khatiwada, in his memorandum to the Prime Minister, while referring to the so-called 'referendum', stated: "The events of the 1973 uprising were fresh in the minds of the people when elections to the Sikkim Assembly in April 1974 were announced. After months of electioneering, the elections were held on April 15, but hardly 37 per cent of the total electorate exercised their franchise. Yet when the "special poll" was held within 72 hours of announcement, surprisingly enough it was claimed that over 65 per cent of the voters voted."

"All polling booths were managed by Indian personnel assisted by the CRPF (Central police). The polling for the few that turned up at the booths was done by the CRP on duty. Those of the voters who tried to be smart and tried to cast their votes themselves were beaten up in the booth itself, and ordered to cast the vote in the "red box" – the so-called box of the people". He goes on to add: "At the time of the "special poll" the authorities informed the people that the poll was being held to find out the people's wishes as to whether they still wanted the autocratic rule of the Chogyal or full democracy under Kazi. At no stage were the people told that the "opinion poll" was taking place to settle the merger issue. The Sikkimese were thus befooled and deceived, and so were

the hon'ble members of Parliament and the people of India as a whole".

Those who were elected to the Assembly in April 1974, prior to Sikkim becoming an Associate State of India, continued to remain in power even after the merger. The amendment to the Representation of the People Act, 1950/51, brought about five months after Sikkim became the 22nd State of India, approved the existing seat formula (15+15+1+1 – i.e. 15 seats for Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepchas, 15 for Sikkimese Nepalese, one each for the Scheduled Castes and Sangha) in the Assembly, and maintained that seats in the Assembly could only be reserved for the Sikkimese of Bhutia, Lepcha and Nepali origin.

Unfortunately, four years after Sikkim joined the mainstream, the Parliament introduced Bill No 79 in the Lok Sabha on May 18, 1979, seeking to make amendment to the Representation of the People Act 1950/51 to provide readjustment of the Assembly seats in Sikkim. This amendment, for the first time in Sikkim's legislative history, drastically altered the whole pattern of seat reservation in the Assembly. The Sikkimese Nepalese were the worst hit. Except for the two seats kept for the Nepalese Scheduled Castes, no seats were reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese. Their 15 seats reserved earlier were abolished. The Sikkimese Nepalese could now contest the elections only through the 17 seats, which were declared as 'general seats'. For the Nepalese, who eagerly looked to the Government of India for full legislative and economic protection, the new arrangement in the Assembly was seen as a great betrayal. Although the Sikkimese Nepalese are still in the majority, due to increasing influx, this community is likely to go the BL way and be rendered a minority in the not too distant future.

The amendment also reduced the seats reserved for the BLs from 15 to 12, thereby creating further insecurity among the minority community. Compared to the Sikkimese Nepalese, the BLs fared better, but it may be noted that seats in the

Assembly were now not reserved exclusively for the Bhutias and Lepchas but included other tribals in the State. This was seen as a virtual assault on their distinct identity and it genuinely hurt their pride. The Scheduled Tribes Order of 1978 made Bhutias and Lepchas as the Scheduled Tribes in the State. However, the definition of 'Bhutia', as given in the Order, was not confined to the original and generally accepted definition of the Sikkimese Bhutias, but included Chumbipa, Dophapa, Kagatay, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopa and Yolmo. Although the cultural and religious identity of these communities are closer to the Sikkimese Bhutias than any other group in Sikkim, they are not regarded as the real Bhutias of Sikkim. Many of these Bhutia tribals do not possess the Sikkim Subjects Certificate, which is the only authentic document to prove one's identity as a genuine local Sikkimese. Instead of the BLs getting more seats reserved due to inclusion of more communities in the BL fold, their reserved seats were decreased from 15 to 12, while their population increased substantially.

Like the Nepalese, the BLs, too, resented changes in the seat allotment and felt betrayed by New Delhi. Many of them saw in these changes a subtle and systematic move by New Delhi to erase the distinct identity of the Sikkimese and to cause further division amongst the two dominant groups, who have living in complete amity in the past so many centuries. Within four years after the merger, except for three seats (Sangha and Scheduled Castes), all other seats hitherto reserved for the Sikkimese were struck down. All of a sudden, the fulfilment of the demands for 'one man, one vote' and full-fledged democracy, became totally meaningless.

The new adjustment in the Assembly seat arrangement was a great injustice done to the Sikkimese as a whole. Seeds of division and insecurity deepened after the changes were brought through the amendment. The demand for more power to the elected representatives, made prior to the merger, was meaningless if the Sikkimese were deprived of their right to

even get themselves elected to the Assembly. Due to Sikkim's small population (4.50 lacs) and the largely unchecked inflow of outsiders into Sikkim, there is every possibility of non-Sikkimese being elected to the Assembly in due course and thereby capturing positions of influence and power.

This will ultimately not only take away the rights of the Sikkimese, it will also hamper their interests in many fields and thus gradually lead to the total disintegration of the Sikkimese way of life, which has been carefully preserved down the ages. If the Sikkimese are deprived of their right to get elected to the Assembly, who will then look after their interests? Non-Sikkimese, if elected to the Assembly, cannot really look after the interest of the Sikkimese as their loyalties would be divided. Even under three and half centuries rule of the Chogyals, the identity of Sikkim and the Sikkimese survived and flourished; it will be a sad day for democracy and for the Government of India if Sikkim and the Sikkimese became non-existent in less than a quarter of a century after becoming a part of the world's largest democracy.

Somehow Bhandari, more than any other politicians in Sikkim, has been chiefly responsible for keeping the 'merger issue' alive in the past one and half decades. "We have been merged; we shall not be submerged" had been his unflinching stand during his first few years in office to counter outside forces aiming to further destroy the unique identity of the Sikkimese.

The seat reservation issue has been the main political issue of all major political parties in Sikkim in all the three Assembly elections since 1979. Besides Bhandari, leaders of other political parties and social organisations have continually reiterated their demand for restoration of Assembly seats for all Sikkimese, including the majority Sikkimese Nepalese. The parity system of the Chogyal, which existed even after the merger, and which was earlier rejected by the Nepali-dominated political parties in Sikkim, has now found general acceptance amongst all sections of the people in Sikkim. Seat

reservation for all the three ethnic groups, under the parity system, is now seen as the only way to foster communal harmony, preserve Sikkim's distinct cultural identity, and ensure that Sikkim continues to be ruled by the Sikkimese.

The ruling SSP, of whom Bhandari is its President, has maintained that the Centre, by abolishing the reserved seats of the Sikkimese Nepalese, has betrayed the Sikkimese people and failed to abide by the terms of the merger. Reacting against the abolition of seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese, the SSP in a resolution adopted during its annual anniversary celebrations on May 24, 1988 stated: "The abolition of seats was done in the most arbitrary manner through an ordinance without consulting any public opinion. Such things do not happen in a democracy. It was against the very spirit of merger of Sikkim with India. Hence it was a case of great betrayal of the Sikkimese people".

The people of Sikkim are convinced that restoration of reservation of seats for the Sikkimese would not only ensure preservation of the regional identity of Sikkim, but would also "accelerate the process of unity and national integration". But the Centre has failed to see this point and has continually ignored the sentiments of the people. Knowing full well that Sikkim was annexed for India's security interests, it is difficult to tell whether the people will further submit to Delhi's dictates and accept the gradual disintegration of the Sikkimese society as a 'fait accompli'. It would do a lot of good to the nation if the Centre took note of what the *Hindustan Times* said during the merger. Criticising the Centre's method and motive in Sikkim's take-over, the paper in 1975 warned: "Security depends on people, not territory". If the Centre fails to get the trust and confidence of the Sikkimese, Sikkim's absorption into the Union will be of little value.

Referring to the spirit behind Sikkim's merger with India, the Government of Sikkim in a booklet on the basic political issues of Sikkim stated: "Parliament has thus been cast with the sacred duty of protecting the rights and interests of different

sections of the population of Sikkim in the manner of allocation of seats in the State Assembly. It is with this tacit and sacred understanding that the Sikkimese people decided to join the mainstream of national life and Sikkim became a part of the Indian Union on 26th April, 1975. This demand for seat reservation has been the main plank of all political parties in the State during elections... The people of Sikkim know that abolition of seats of the Sikkimese Nepalese was most unjust and unconstitutional and it would cut at the very root of amity, peace and harmony existing between the various communities in the State". The fulfilment of the demand on seat reservation, the booklet stated, "will not only help preserve their identity" but will also accelerate the process of bringing the people of this sensitive border State into the "mainstream of national life".

Bhandari's competence and readiness to raise the "merger issue" once more to meet his political ends, and Kazi's threat of a "new thinking" in Sikkim if the Centre continues to violate the terms of the merger, coupled with Chamling's call for "restoration of freedom and democracy" in Sikkim, along with the general mood of frustration and fear among the people regarding their uncertain future, may lead to a new political development in the former Himalayan Kingdom in the coming days.

It will, indeed, be a terrible mistake if New Delhi continues to remain unrepentent and unresponsive to the sentiments of the Sikkimese people. Admitting mistakes and confessing regrets when the situation goes out of hand will then be too late. The nation will then be forced to pay a heavy price for the "terrible mistake" in Sikkim.

CHAPTER 13

Rising Up From The Ashes

"A government that cannot or does not protect the humblest citizen in his right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, should be reformed or overthrown, without delay".

Frederick Douglass

"To submit, to yield and to surrender to the forces of oppression is to give ourselves to despair. But to act, to resist, no matter how puny the resistance, still preserves for us a hope that we stand erect".

Benigno S. Aquino Jr.

"Mediamen and newsmen have relevance only in a democracy, their relevance is lost if the ballot is replaced by the bullet".

V. P. Singh

Ram Chandra Poudyal is not a man who gives up easily. In fact, he has always displayed enormous energy, enthusiasm and determination in his political life, which dates back to 1973, when he started a hunger strike on the Palace lawn that sparked off a political turmoil in the kingdom, which ultimately ended in its absorption into the Indian Union in 1975.

In 1988, after several years in political wilderness, Poudyal (locally referred to as "RC") made a comeback and emerged, once again, as the number two contender for the race to Mintokgang. RC, who has generally been looked upon as a highly pro-Nepali and anti-tribal politician because of his blatant bias towards his own community, suffered much. But he had learnt his lessons well. He realised that dabbling in communal politics did not pay. He now wanted to portray himself as a more balanced politician and wanted his party to reflect this image. He chose several leading political figures from the minority Bhutia-Lepcha communities, gave them responsible positions, and formed a new regional party – the Rising Sun Party (RSP).

Although his party was given a new name, it was basically a revival of his old party, the Congress (R), which actually merged with the Congress (I) in 1984, prior to the Assembly elections in Sikkim. However, the party flag with its green, white and orange colours and the rising sun symbol remained the same. It was still very much a Nepali party and most people referred to it as *Jhulkay Gham*, meaning the 'rising sun'. RC's efforts to give a new image to his party without losing its Nepalese base was quite successful. Unfortunately for RC, majority of the tribals had already made up their mind on him. Many tribals preferred to back the Congress (I), while others stayed with Bhandari.

By mid-1989, it was clear that the RSP was emerging as a viable alternative to the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad. For almost a year, the party concentrated its activities in the rural areas, and by the time the November 1989 Assembly elections approached, Poudyal's popularity and his party's influence among the people, particularly the Nepalese, was clearly visible. The majority of the Nepalese wanted another Nepalese to replace Bhandari, who was becoming increasingly unpopular. RC was their natural choice. And as the elections drew nearer, it was evident to everyone that Poudyal was the most popular figure among the opposition to replace

Bhandari.

Despite having far better candidates for the polls as compared to the RSP and the SSP, the Congress (I) was not able to turn this into an advantage, due mainly to internal dissension and bickering within the party leadership. What made matters worse was the critical condition of the SPCC (I) President, Madan Chhetri, who was believed to have been suffering from acute liver complications and was hospitalised just before the polls. Lack of direction during the poll hampered the party's poll prospects, and it was only in the latter stages that the Congress (I) was able to project itself as an alternative to the Bhandari Government. As compared to the 1985 elections, the distribution of party tickets was much better in the Congress (I), and, by and large, the right candidates were selected.

However, the party faced a setback initially when two of its candidates – the former chief minister and veteran Congressman, B.B. Gurung, and former MLA, Tenzing Dahdul of Mangan in north Sikkim – were disqualified from the race after their nomination papers were rejected on technical ground. Both the candidates had pretty good chances of winning in the elections. But despite this setback, the party was expected to win at the least 6-7 seats in the 32-member Assembly. The opposition had a far better chance of defeating Bhandari if they put up a joint fight against the SSP. Finally, much to the disappointment of the ruling party, the Congress (I) and the RSP came to some kind of electoral understanding just before the polls.

Though the SSP had a well-knit party unit, its candidates were less influential and far weaker as compared to the Cong(I) candidates, many of whom were ex-ministers and MLAs, and had the needed political experience and base. More Congress (I) candidates were expected to win if supported by the RSP. Financially, too, the Congress (I) was in a better position than the RSP, though the SSP candidates had everything at their disposal – money manpower and the government machinery. Though the RSP had a large number of staunch and

dedicated supporters, due to financial constraints, the party's organisational work suffered a lot. However, good sense prevailed at the end. The two opposition parties finally came together to pave way for Bhandari's downfall.

Seat adjustment between the two parties enabled the RSP to support the Congress (I) candidates in at least six constituencies, thus placing the Congress (I) in a better position than the RSP. In turn, the Cong(I) was expected to help the RSP financially and support RSP candidates where help was needed. This arrangement, reached just prior to the polls, definitely added a new dimension to the whole election scenario, and the ruling party was placed in a tight spot. What Bhandari was fearing was a united opposition during the polls to dislodge him and this was exactly what was happening.

The other regional party, Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC), boycotted the elections in protest against the alleged defects in the voters list. But its supporters, who were mostly tribals, were expected to support the Congress (I). By and large, the SSP retained its old guard, dropping only two prominent faces – the Speaker, Tulsi Sharma, and the Forest Minister, Thukchuk Lachungpa. It was said that Lachungpa, a prominent tribal leader and a Bhandari loyalist, decided not to contest on his own accord. In the event the opposition had a chance to form the government, a section of the SSP candidates, who were close to Poudyal, were ready to back the RSP to stake their claim to form the government. Many SSP ministers and MLAs, who were in fray, were ex-MLAs of RC's Congress(R) party. They, including P.L. Gurung, Ram Lepcha, Chamla Tshering, Dorji Tshering and K.N. Upreti, gradually defected into the ruling party after Bhandari formed the government in October 1979.

With the rejection of Gurung's nomination papers, it was clear that in the event a coalition government was formed, Poudyal would be the likely choice for the post of the chief minister. However, there were other contenders for the post in the Cong(I) camp. While the SPCC(I) President, Madan

Chhetri, contested from Central Pandim constituency in east Sikkim from his hospital bed, Dil Kumari Bhandari, while contesting the lone Lok Sabha seat from Sikkim as the Congress (I) candidate, also made efforts to contest the Assembly elections from the Melli constituency in south Sikkim.

Mohan Sharma, the Congress (I) candidates from Melli, filed his nomination papers on November 2, the last date for filing of nominations. Surprisingly, Mrs. Bhandari also filed her papers from the same constituency. Sharma withdrew his papers on November 5, one day before the last date of withdrawal of candidates from contesting the elections, leaving only one Congress (I) candidate in the fray – Mrs. Bhandari. Gurung, who was made the SPCC(I) Working President during the polls, was highly suspicious of Mrs. Bhandari's moves and alleged that the ruling party was behind what Poudyal termed as the "Melli conspiracy".

When the AICC(I) observer, Hiteswar Saikia, discovered the mischief that was taking place in Melli, he at once asked Mrs. Bhandari to withdraw her papers. On November 6, Mrs. Bhandari flew back to Sikkim from Delhi and went straight to Namchi, the south district headquarters, to withdraw her papers, which was done at the last hour. Gurung, who wanted to get back to the Assembly in the event the SSP was defeated, saw that Mrs. Bhandari did not enter the Assembly. In this way, Gurung was able to ensure his safe return to the chief minister's chair, which he held for 13 days in May 1984. In the event the opposition fared well in the elections, Gurung would stake claim to form the government. He was confident of entering the Assembly through a by-election from his Chakung constituency in west Sikkim. A coalition government in which the Congress (I) had a dominant role was clearly foreseen by most political observers in the State. Even the Speaker, Tulsi Sharma, who was expelled from the ruling party just before the elections, predicted that Sikkim would have a coalition government after the polls.

In an article in the *Observer* entitled "A coalition govt

seems a distinct possibility" published ten days before the polls, I wrote: "Going by general observations, the tilt is very much in favour of the Opposition and if these parties are able to get somewhat an equal number of seats, a coalition government seems a distinct possibility. Both the leaders of the RSP and the Cong(I) opposed joining hands with the SSP to form the government even though a good number of SSP candidates are reportedly with the RSP".

In the final week before the polls, opposition parties managed to forge a united front to dislodge Bhandari. The mood within the opposition just before the polls, scheduled for November 25, 1989, was upbeat. At least 20 seats were expected to be taken by the opposition, leaving the SSP with only 12 seats. The only apprehension was the possibility of unfair practices during the polls by the ruling party. Fear psychosis had already gripped the State and this favoured the ruling party, which was determined to stay in power for five more years. For the first time in Sikkim, campaigning for the elections was turning out to be violent, and opposition supporters and candidates were the main victims.

The veteran Congress (I) leader, Kalzang Gyatso, who contested from Kabi-Tingda constituency in north Sikkim, alleged that voters in the Sikkim Armed Police (SAP), who belonged to his constituency in north Sikkim, were forced to cast their votes in favour of the ruling party candidate by the Adjutant Officer of the SAP. Their votes were cast in advance as they had to go on election duty. Apprehending illegal practices during the polling day, Gyatso demanded the army and CRPF forces to man all polling stations in the State.

Saikia appealed to the Chief Election Commissioner (CEC), R.V.S. Peri Shashtri, for the holding of a free and fair elections in Sikkim. In a letter to the CEC dated November 16, 1989, Saikia stated: "The political situation in Sikkim is very tense. Till now 12 vehicles used by Congress (I) have been damaged by the volunteers of Sikkim Sangram Parishad. One Congress worker has been killed. Assaults, intimidation, etc.,

have become day-to-day affair. I do not think we can expect free and fair elections unless you intervene and take appropriate measures. I think, to maintain law and order and to bring back confidence among the citizens, CRPF should be deployed. Extra forces should also be sent to Sikkim". A copy of this letter was also sent to the Union Home Minister, Buta Singh.

Realising the gravity of the situation, the SPCC(I) demanded immediate imposition of President's Rule in Sikkim to ensure free and fair elections. "The Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee (I) has been reported from all the constituencies by the candidates and the people of respective areas about the deteriorating law and order situation in all the constituencies. Anti-people, anti-social and anti-national activities of the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad Party and its workers, the innocent voters and public of Sikkim State have lost faith in Bhandari's government and his party. Posters, banners, buntings of the Congress (I) party removed and destroyed daily by the workers of the ruling Sangram party has not been stopped inspite of reports lodged with the Superintendent of Police, East and the Chief Electoral Officer, Government of Sikkim. The authorities have failed to protect the fundamental right of the people of Sikkim. Therefore, the Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee(I) urges His Excellency the Governor of Sikkim, who is also the Constitutional Head of the State, to take immediate steps to stop deteriorating law and order situation in the State. It is also demanded for immediate imposition of Presidential Rule in Sikkim for the safeguard of innocent, peace-loving and law-abiding people", stated the Congress (I) Press statement dated November 12, 1989.

The RSP, too, was fed up with the Governor's inaction amidst widespread violence and fear among the people. The Governor's silence prompted the RSP Vice-President, Lal Bahadur Basnet, to give a Press conference, where he stated that the Governor, S.K. Bhatnagar, failed to provide defence experts to investigate into the causes of the explosion in Rum-

tek, which killed eight persons. An angry Basnet blasted the Governor at the Press conference held on November 11: "This Governor, who lives under the shadow of Bofors, is not fit for the job and is bought over by Bhandari. He talks nicely but doesn't do anything. When we come to power, he will be out".

With a view to keeping the readers abreast of the latest happenings, the *Observer* turned bi-weekly from October 21, 1989, about a month before the polling day. In a short article in the *Observer* in the second week of November, I appealed to the voters to express their rights freely and fearlessly: "And as the final countdown draws nearer by the passing of each hour, the main issue seems to be whether the people can rise up to the occasion and demonstrate for themselves the courage of their convictions through the secret ballot, or whether they will sell out and submit themselves to the might of the power-that-be. Sikkim cannot be sold if each Sikkimese do not sell their soul for a few pieces of rod and a few bags of cement".

In the final article in the *Observer* dated November 25 under the caption "Let The People Decide", I wrote: "The main issue here is not who forms the government after the elections on Sunday. The main issue is also not the overthrow of the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad and the defeat of the Chief Minister, Mr. Nar Bahadur Bhandari, no matter how dictatorial he may be. In the final analysis, the main issue and the most vital factor is whether the people of Sikkim, who joined the world's largest democracy in the middle of last decade, can elect a government that reflects the will and aspirations of the people."

My personal feeling during this period was that the people had enough with Bhandari and it was time for him to go. However, I believe that elections are a celebration in a democracy and that we ought to respect the verdict of the people no matter how it turns out to be. The point that I was emphasising was that the people should be given a chance to decide things for themselves. After all, this is what democracy



The traditional 'Pangtoek' dance being performed at the Tsuklhakhang monastery in Gangtok.



Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim.



Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari, has ruled Sikkim for 14 years.



Former chief minister and merger architect, Kazi Lhendup Dorji Khangsarpa.



Lok Sabha MP, Dil Kumari Bhandari.



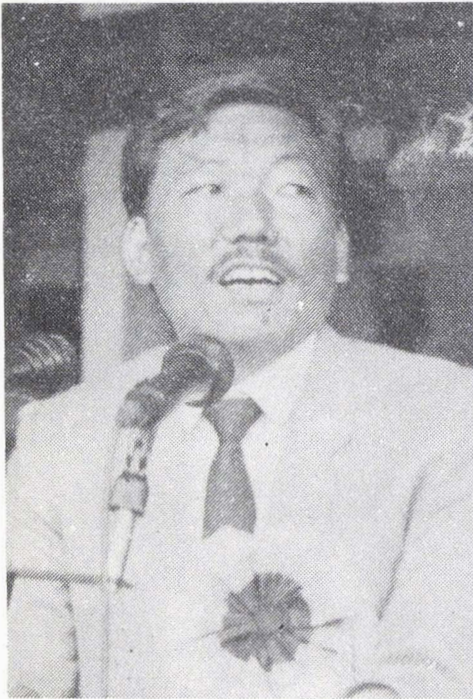
Former Rajya Sabha MP, Karma Topden.



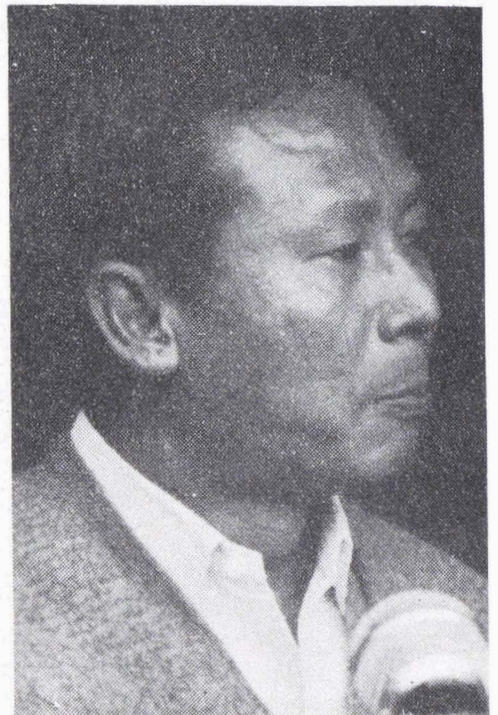
Ram Chandra Poudyal



Bhim Bahadur Gurung



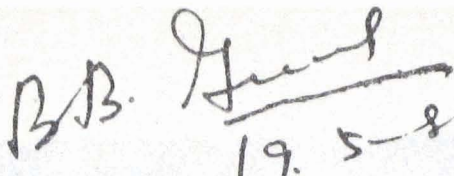
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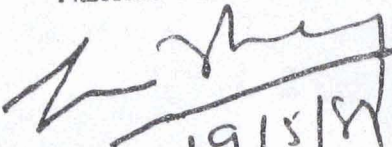
Ashok Kumar Subba

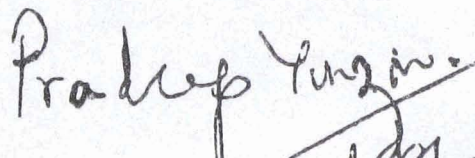


The Big Three: Former Governor (right), T.V. Rajeswar, Chief Minister, N.B. Bhandari (middle), and former chief secretary, P.K. Pradhan.

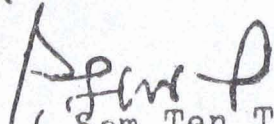
1. 
19. 5-84
(B.B. Gurung)
Chief Minister.

2. 
(Athup Lepcha)
Minister.

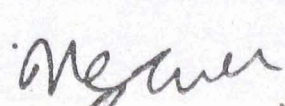
3. 
19/5/84
(Sonam Tsering)
Minister.

4. 
(Pradeep Yonzoh)
(Minister)

5. 
(Lachen Gomchen Rimpoce)
Minister.

6. 
(Sam Ten Tsering)
Minister.

7. 
(P.M. Subba)
Minister.

8. 
(I.B. Limboo)
Minister.

The B.B. Gurung Ministry on May 19, 1984 passed a resolution during an emergent meeting of the Cabinet, requesting the CBI (Criminal Bureau of Investigation) to investigate into charges of corruption against N.B. Bhandari. The above list shows the names and signatures of those who passed the said resolution in this meeting.



Pawan Kumar Chamling, President, Sikkim Democratic Front, during a public meeting of the party in Sikkim.



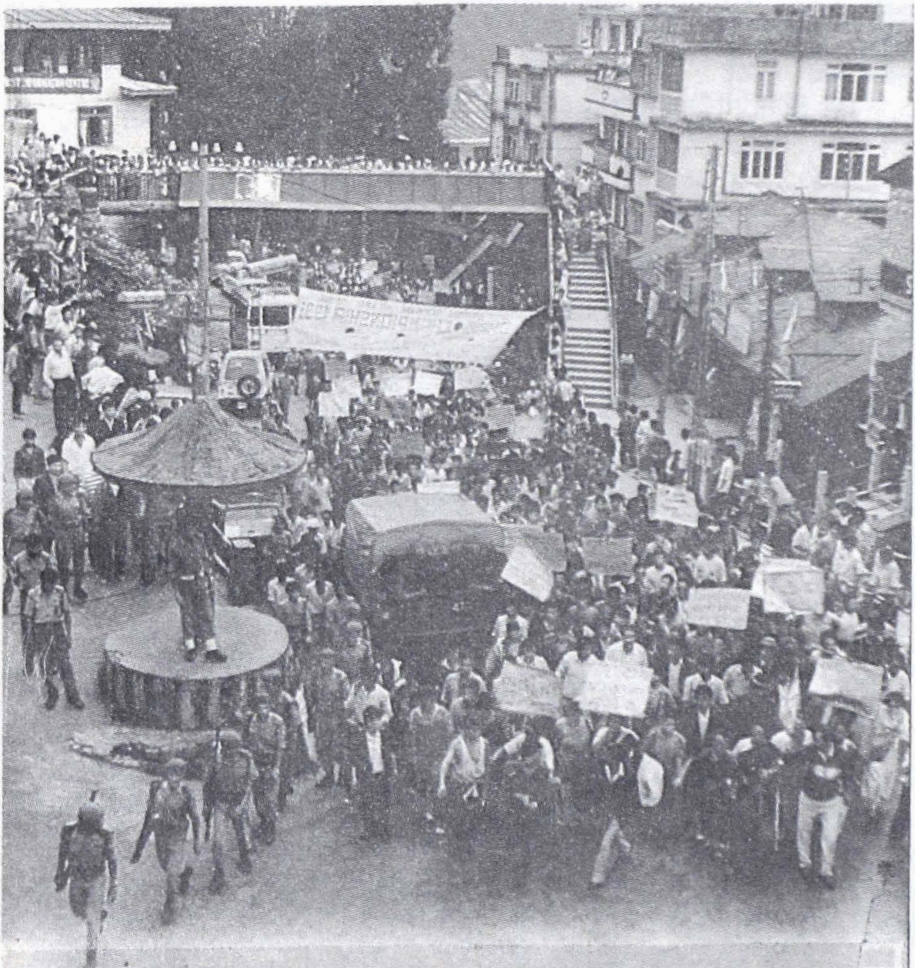
Garzaman Guring, Vice-President, Sikkim Democratic Front, at the party's first public meeting in Jorethang on April 18, 1993.



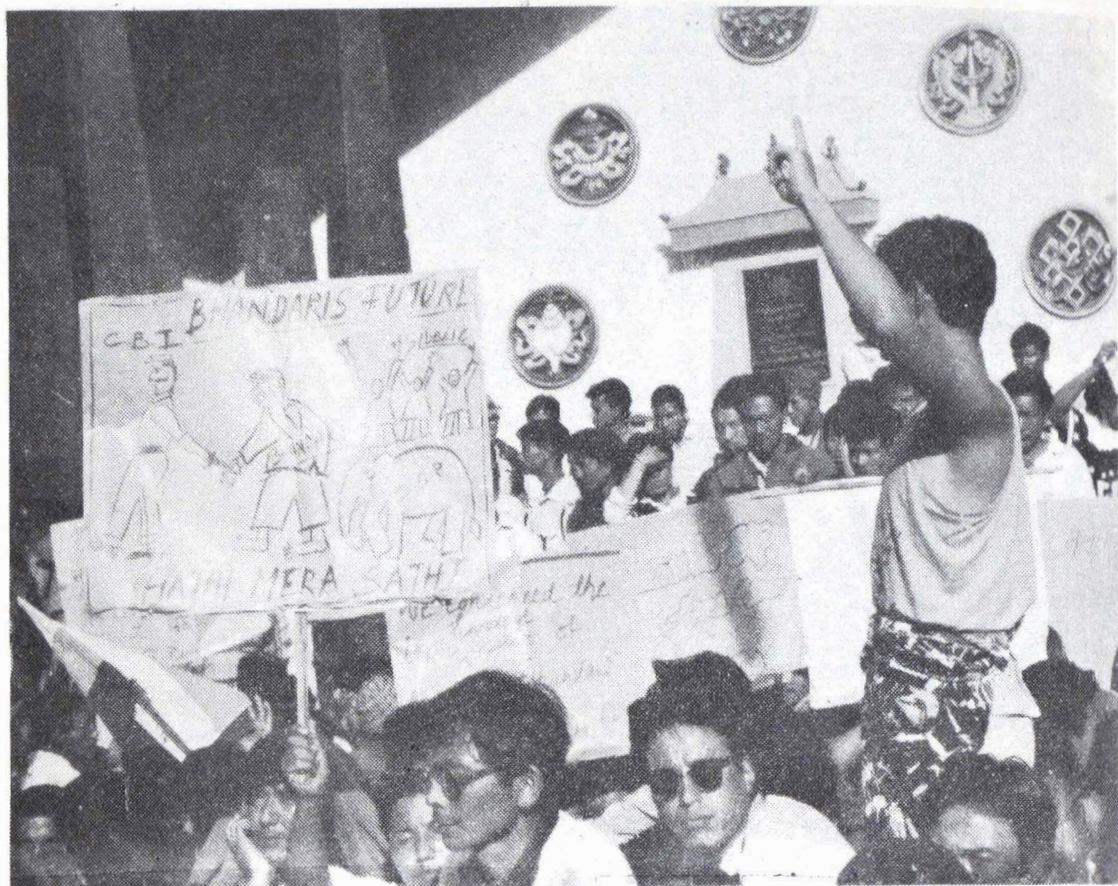
Biraj Adhikari, General Secretary, Sikkim Democratic Front, at the party's public meeting in Pakyong in east Sikkim.



Marching for freedom and democracy: Chamling leading his supporters in east Sikkim.



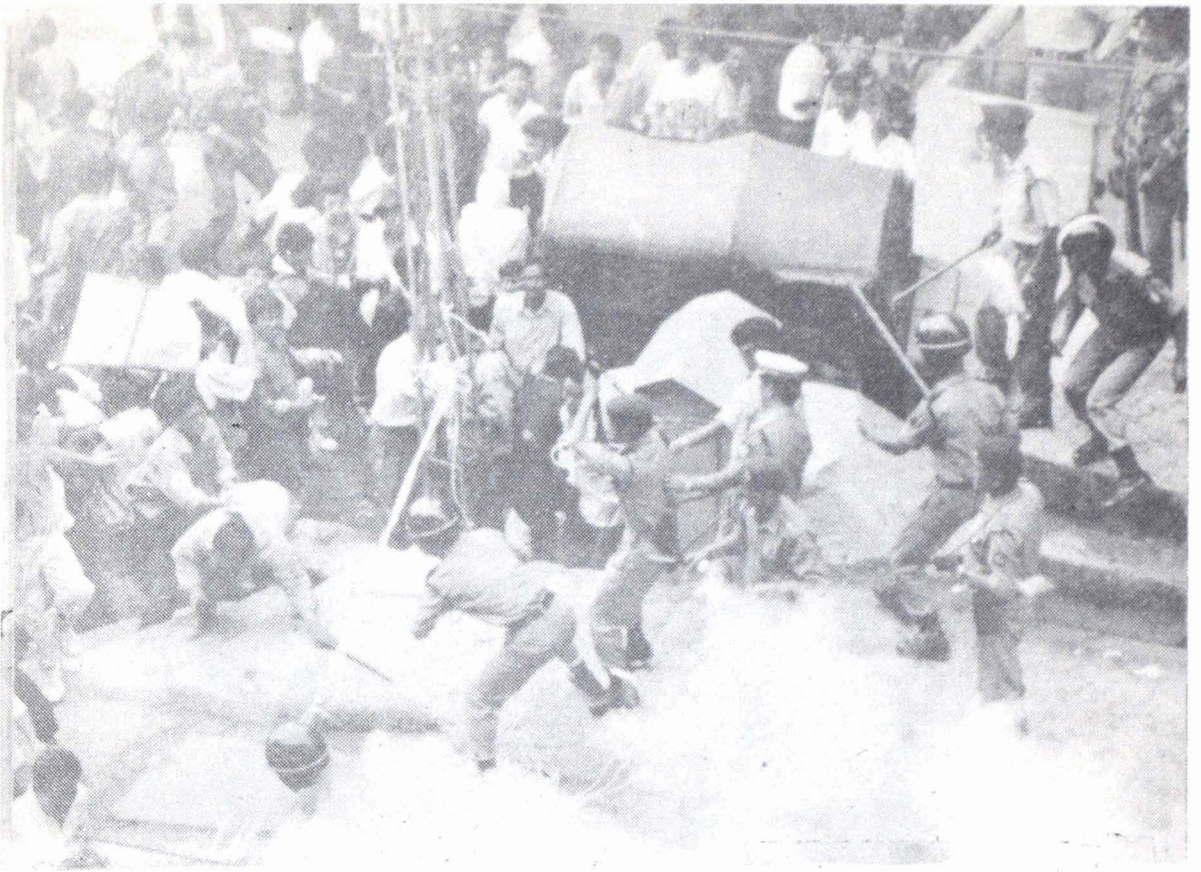
Sikkim Democratic Front's pro-democracy, anti-Bhandari rally in Gangtok on June 21, 1993.



Revolt in Sikkim: Sikkim Democratic Front rally in Gangtok.



Sikkim Democratic Front Vice-President, P.T. Luksom, arrested by Sikkim police after police crackdown on pro-democracy activists in June 1993.



Police crackdown on Sikkim Democratic Front rally in Gangtok on June 23, 1993.



An anti-Bhandari graffiti at an opposition rally.

SDF wave worrying SSP

Chamling strikes back

By J. S. Dasgupta



Standing addressing a public meeting of the SSP in Darjeeling (left).

The SSP has not lost three weeks' time in getting the members of the cabinet... The cabinet members have had a complete freedom to... The cabinet members have had a complete freedom to... The cabinet members have had a complete freedom to...

...the cabinet members have had a complete freedom to... The cabinet members have had a complete freedom to... The cabinet members have had a complete freedom to...

State Day CM warns govt officials

By J. S. Dasgupta



K. B. Bhattacharya

Chief Minister K. B. Bhattacharya... The Chief Minister has warned government officials... The Chief Minister has warned government officials...

...the Chief Minister has warned government officials... The Chief Minister has warned government officials... The Chief Minister has warned government officials...

"SSP dissidents plotted against Bhandari" Names of MLAs to be disclosed in Geyzing

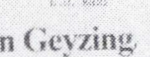
By J. S. Dasgupta

...the SSP dissidents plotted against Bhandari... The names of MLAs to be disclosed in Geyzing... The names of MLAs to be disclosed in Geyzing...

Corrupt leaders will be exposed, says Kazi

By A Staff Reporter

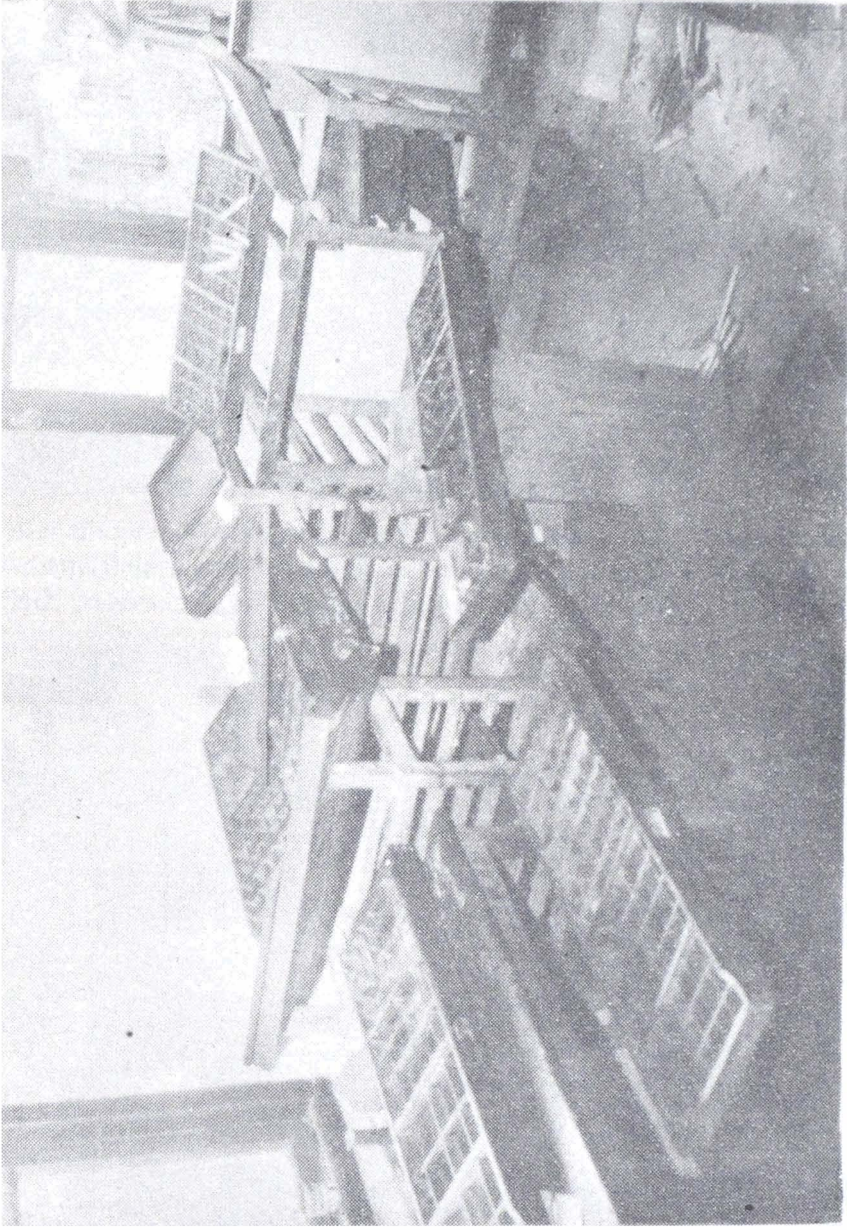
...corrupt leaders will be exposed, says Kazi... The corrupt leaders will be exposed... The corrupt leaders will be exposed...



K. B. Bhattacharya

...the corrupt leaders will be exposed, says Kazi... The corrupt leaders will be exposed... The corrupt leaders will be exposed...

Facsimile of the front page of the Sikkim Observer on May 19, 1993. The Observer printers refused to undertake printing of the paper after the May 19 issue. The publication of the paper has been suspended since then.



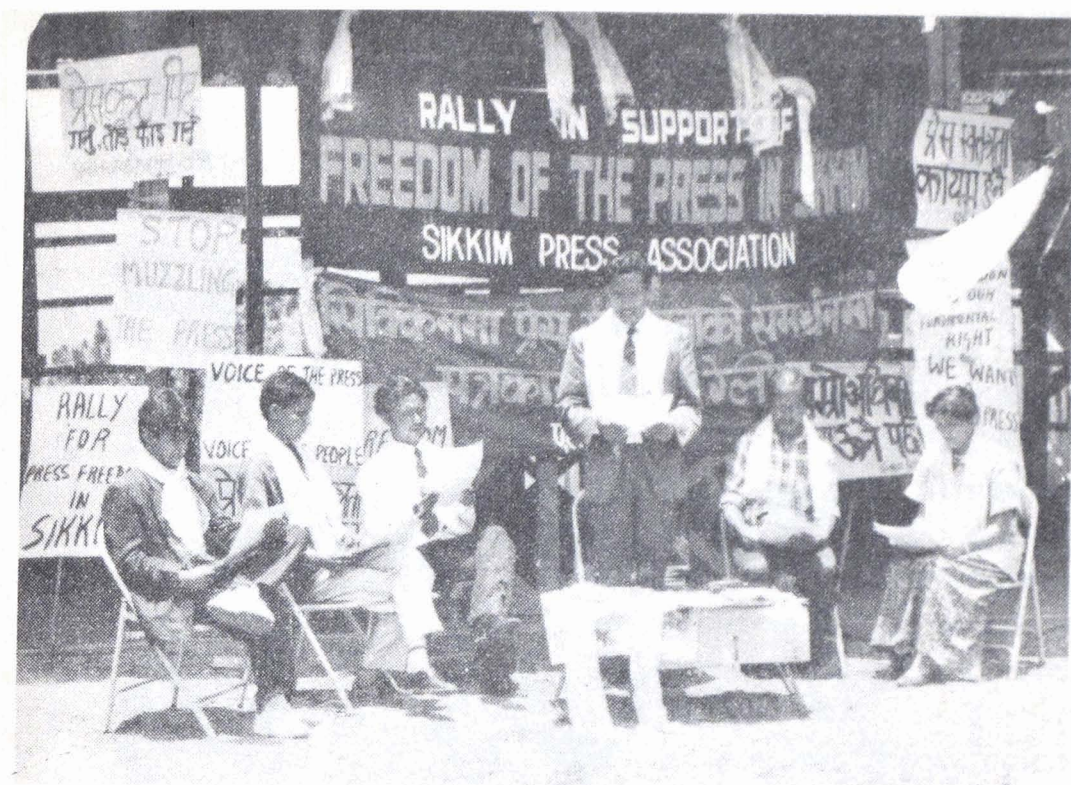
The *Sikkim Observer* printing press was ransacked in January 1990, resulting in considerable loss to the establishment and temporary closure of the paper.



His Holiness, the Dalai Lama, addressing a Press conference during his visit to Gangtok in April 1993. The author is seated at the front row (left) with his wife, Tshering T. Namgyal (*The Times of India*) and Prabol Chakraverti (UNI).



The author at work.



Above and Below: Local journalists stage a rally in protest against suppression of the Freedom of the Press at Paljor Stadium in Gangtok on June 19, 1993. The author (seen standing in above picture) is reading his message on the occasion.





"Stop Muzzling the Press": angry local journalists stage a protest rally in Gangtok on June 19, 1993. (L to R) Joseph S. Lepcha, Govind Sharma, Deependra Khati, Tshering T. Namgyal and Jigme N. Kazi.

is all about. My apprehension was that if the elections were not free and fair, there was every possibility of the wrong men holding the seats of power and working against the interest of the people once they were firmly established in influential positions.

My appeal to the people was, therefore, strong and clear. Two quotations were distinctly placed above my last article to convey my message to the people. The first one by Benigno S. Aquino Jr. read: "...I believe no life is worth a lie. Things are either right or wrong and life is worth living only if one acted with some consistency. To submit, to yield and to surrender to the forces of oppression is to give ourselves to despair. But to act, to resist, no matter how puny the resistance, still preserves for us a hope that we stand erect".

The second quote was even more blunt: "A government that cannot or does not protect the humblest citizen in the right to life, liberty and pursuit of happiness, should be reformed or overthrown, without delay" (Frederick Douglass).

There was no easy option for the *Observer*, and I knew that I had to take a firm stand for the paper in the interest of freedom, democracy and the people of Sikkim, who were gradually losing faith in democracy and in the electoral process. This was indeed a sad and dangerous trend. I did a thorough job in preparing myself for the elections and by the end of October 1989, the *Observer* was ready and eager to play its legitimate role in feeding the readers with the right stuff and moulding public opinion.

My first hurdle proved that I was heading for trouble. Suddenly and surprisingly, all the workers of my press failed to turn up after the *puja* holidays in October 1989. I had already announced in the paper that I would be bringing out the paper twice a week from October 25 during the election period. The workers at the press were also instructed to come back promptly after the holidays. They had agreed to do so and even took some advance for the *puja* celebrations. However, no one turned up after the break. I was in a fix for a

while. But soon I reconciled myself to the hard reality and decided to carry on with the paper. I was determined to stick by my word and continue with the paper – come what may.

In the five weeks beginning from October 21 and ending on November 25, we were able to bring out exactly ten issues of the paper, which was indeed a remarkable achievement considering the situation that we were faced with. None of the workers turned up even after the last issue of the paper, which came out just before the polls. But I was lucky. Besides engaging other local press workers on a part-time basis, my own family members were a great help in the press.

The ten issues brought out prior to the elections were, in my opinion, some of the finest issues that I have done. The entire family was at the press every evening for a month and went home only around ten every night. No matter what the outcome of the elections were, I as a journalist and as an editor and publisher of the *Sikkim Observer*, performed my role honourably and responsibly and did my best. For me that was all that I cared about.

I was convinced that my workers, on their own, could not have let me down and deserted me at the last moment, particularly when I needed them so desperately. Higher-ups were definitely behind them. Because of the lack of time and the prevailing political situation, I was not able to find out who were behind them. However, I was highly suspicious that the sudden and unjustified boycott by my press workers was politically-motivated.

Leaving aside the press and the paper, my own life was in danger. UNI's Ranjit and I were on the SSP hit list. We were told that some GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) boys from Kalimpong were sent to fix us. I was also told that my name was above the hit list. As my residence was located just below the national highway I was not at all safe. We were also told that the top brass of the SSP had informed the Chief Minister that if the ruling party failed to make a comeback, it would be because of "two journalists", meaning Ranjit and myself. We

were unnecessarily made targets and dragged into a controversy. If they had lost the elections, it would be because of their own performance, not ours. Politicians always like to put the blame on the Press for their own follies.

We took precautions and asked for adequate security from the police. In a letter to the Director General of Police, A. Gathak, dated November 22, 1989, we requested the police to provide us with adequate security as we apprehended trouble. Two days had passed and there was no word from the police. I felt quite jittery. I was quite confident that local boys would not touch me, but if hired *goondas* from outside the State were sent to finish me, I had to take necessary precautions.

One evening, I phoned the officer in-charge of the Sadar Thana to enquire about my request for security arrangements. The East District Superintendent of Police, A. Negi, picked up the phone. I told him that I had asked for security but was not provided with it. "We are short of manpower", was his reply. This was a lame excuse and so I asked, "Is this your personal view or an official response to my request?" He abruptly put the phone down.

There was no word from him after that. No one was sent to guard my residence. By then, it was clear to all that the official machinery was least concerned with the growing lawlessness in the State. A climate of fear and uncertainty certainly benefited the ruling party. Providing security for us was out of the question. So we had to take our own precautions. It's a risk that we journalists have to take at times, and I accepted the harsh reality that was part of my job. I always wanted a tough fight. And if necessary, I was prepared to fight all alone against the whole world. I'm often reminded of the saying "Beware of what you want, for you will get it". Perhaps in a very unique and dangerous way, I was having my way and my dreams were coming true.

The extensive coverage of the polls in the *Observer*, my reports to the *Statesman*, and my own feelings and observations of the elections all tallied. While the opposition's

prospects in the polls improved considerably as the final day drew nearer, there was every possibility of the ruling party resorting to unfair means to come back to power. I was very suspicious of certain officials, who were given responsible jobs for the polls. Ranjit, also the General Secretary of the Sikkim Press Association, and I had predicted that in the event the SSP made a comeback, several government officials would certainly be rewarded for their mischievous role in the polls. As predicted by us, one of them became a secretary straight after the elections.

The *Statesman* had sent Mihir Mukherjee, a senior journalist, to cover the elections, and the two of us did a good story on it. "Bhandari treading on thin ice" was the way the *Statesman* captioned our combined piece, which was carried on the front page as anchor story of the issue dated November 24, the day before the polls. Our report, perhaps one of the best pieces on the elections in the national media, stated: "Both the Congress (I) and the RSP leaders complain about misuse of official machinery and intimidation of their supporters by the ruling party. They alleged tearing of their posters, beating of their workers and damage to their vehicles by the SSP hoodlums brought from outside... Mr. Hiteswar Saikia, the AICC (I) observer for seven north-eastern States, told a recent Press conference that nowhere in these areas had there been so many complaints against the ruling party as in Sikkim. He said that a fear psychosis had gripped the State and doubted whether a free and fair election would be held here".

The initial enthusiasm among the opposition camp died down even as reports of massive rigging during the polling reached the State capital. The counting began on November 27 morning in the indoor gymnasium at the Paljor Stadium in Gangtok, where all the ballot boxes were kept. The counting of the polls were delayed by a day due to re-poll in RC's own constituency of Losing-Pachekhani in east Sikkim. The SSP candidates, including the Chief Minister, opposition candidates and their agents, were all assembled inside the counting hall during

the counting.

When the opposition candidates realised that the result of every constituency announced in the initial stages was a landslide victory for the SSP, their worst fears had been confirmed. The elections had been massively rigged and the opposition's main complaint was that none of the ballot boxes had the seal marks of the Cong (I) and RSP candidates. The returning Officer, Karma Gyatso, the East District Collector, reportedly refused to listen to the opposition candidates' request to withhold counting of the votes as they were suspicious of the authenticity of the ballot boxes.

The Congress (I) lost no time in registering its protest. They at once boycotted the counting and walked out of the counting hall in protest. Realising that the official machinery in the State was totally against them, the Congress (I) made complaints to the Centre. In a telegraphic message to the Chief Election Commissioner in New Delhi, the AICC (I) observer and senior advocate of the Supreme Court, Jaya Narayan, stated:

"Reference Shri Saikia's telephonic conversation with you. Demand for re-poll in the entire Parliamentary constituency and all the Assembly constituencies made before the Returning Officer on the following grounds and request for stopping the counting made this afternoon. Grounds: One – Sikkim CM seen inside the strong room two-thirty a.m. today. Two – Police vehicle Maruti Gypsy No. SKM 9169 seen taking new ballot boxes after the ballot boxes brought from polling booths had already been deposited yesterday. Three – when counting started, Returning Officer requested to stop counting as ballot boxes did not contain seal marks of Congress (I) and Rising Sun candidates not present on any of the ballot boxes but the Returning Officer refused to entertain or stop and opened the boxes and continues counting. On counting boycott by the Rising Sun and the Congress parties. Their volunteers including the Rising Sun President R.C. Paudial badly beaten and arrested by Sikkim police. Congress (I) M.P. and candidate

Smt. D.K. Bhandari at dharna at the police station in protest against those police officers are responsible. Shri Hiteswar Saikia has also proceeded to the police station".

The Congress (I) also condemned the blatant misuse of the government machinery by the ruling party. A Press release issued by the party, while carrying somewhat the same message as in the above telegram to the CEC, stated: "It is clear that the ruling party SSP, with the collusion of the official machinery and the poll staff, at the instance of the chief minister, has not only intimidated voters and supporters of the Congress (I) and the Rising Sun but has made a mockery of the election process by wholesale change of ballot boxes containing ballot papers only in support of the ruling SSP".

It added: "There is the evidence of eye witnesses carrying ballot boxes to the strong-room in a Maruti Gypsy Police vehicle No. SKM 9169 after the actually used ballot boxes had been deposited. The Chief Minister was also seen in the strong-room where ballot boxes were kept at about 2.30 a.m. in the morning today. It is a case where in the interest of fair play and justice the Election Commission should order a re-poll in the entire length and breadth of Sikkim in all the Assembly and the lone Lok Sabha constituency".

No one in New Delhi heard the Sikkim Congress (I)'s frantic plea. Along with the elections in Sikkim, general elections were also being held throughout the country. Unfortunately for the opposition in Sikkim, the Congress (I) lost at the Centre. The Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi of the Congress (I) conceded defeat and was replaced by V.P. Singh, the Janata Dal leader, who formed the National Front government after the polls. The Congress (I)'s defeat, both at the Centre and the State, had a demoralising effect among the entire opposition camp in Sikkim.

In Sikkim, the SSP set a new record by capturing all the 32 seats in the Assembly. The SSP candidates won by huge margins in almost all the 32 constituencies in the State. Not even the Kazi's Sikkim Congress, despite the alleged massive rigging

in the 1974 Assembly elections, could capture all the seats in the Assembly. The lone Lok Sabha seat also went to the SSP candidate, Nandu Thapa, who defeated the Congress (I)'s D.K. Bhandari and RSP's Poudyal with a convincing margin.

Despite the opposition's humiliating defeat, the ruling party found it difficult to convince the people that their spectacular victory was because of the party's popularity in the State. Instead of joy and excitement over the outcome of the elections, there was gloom and disappointment everywhere. The streets of Gangtok bore a deserted look and were devoid of the spirit of jubilation and excitement one normally witnesses after elections.

I was present in the counting hall when the counting of the votes was in process. There were also a few other journalists in the hall. All along, opposition candidates and their agents, who were in the counting hall, looked restive. We couldn't figure out what was going on. After the counting began, they gathered themselves in a corner and seemed to be involved in deep discussions instead of supervising the counting which was under process. Normally, they would be going around the tables and seeing how the counting was conducted but this wasn't the case this time. The crowd had gathered outside in the stadium with the opposition supporters on one side and the SSP supporters and others on the other side.

After the Congress (I) candidates made their exit from the hall in protest against alleged unfair practices, it was the RSP's turn to react. While leaving the hall, Mrs. Bhandari was heard saying, "Let the thieves have it" and walked out in disgust, clearly indicating that the ruling party had used unfair means to come to power.

No politician in Sikkim can to this day match RC's capacity for dramatisation of political events. When he was convinced of the foul play, he summoned all the RSP candidates who were present in the counting hall to one side and briefed them on what was taking place and what his party's reaction should be. I was just sitting some distance away from where

they were. After some time, RC beckoned to me and came towards me. He said, "We want to give a statement to the Press". I told him that it would be inappropriate to meet the Press in the hall and suggested that this should be done outside the hall. He agreed to my proposal.

A few minutes later, Poudyal and his colleagues marched out of the room and called us outside. This was about fifteen minutes after the Congress (I) had walked out boycotting the counting of the polls. By then, results of at least ten constituencies were announced and there was no point in staying back as I personally felt that the polls had been rigged and that there was no hope for any single opposition candidate winning in the elections. RC, who was a sure winner, was also defeated. Most of the journalists, who were inside, left the counting hall and followed RC.

I thought he was going to take us to a corner and tell us what was going on inside. But this wasn't the case. He walked on and on and we followed him until he reached the field and were in full glare of the public. And as he entered the ground, the angry crowd shouted "RC Poudyal Zindabad!" and rushed towards him. All of a sudden, the entire crowd and RC's supporters were on the playing field and they followed him. He seemed highly elated with the public response. The crowd was wild with anger and excitement. At this point, the police took over and made a lathicharge. In the process, RC was hit on his head by the police and forcefully put in a police vehicle and taken to the Sadar Thana. The crowd followed him to the *thana* where the Congress (I), led by Mrs. Bhandari and others, staged a *dharna* in front of the *thana* demanding Poudyal's immediate release. Everyone expected something dramatic to happen which favoured the opposition. But apart from the high-pitch drama, nothing concrete had been achieved.

In the few days that followed, the RSP and the Congress (I) formed a "joint front" to protest against the 'massive rigging' and demanded a re-poll. But the move to jointly demand a re-

poll and stage a statewide agitation until this demand was conceded, unfortunately, fizzled out. RC was hospitalised and the plan of action chalked out by opposition leaders in Mrs. Bhandari's residence failed to take shape. Close observers of the events were convinced that a section of the Congress (I) leadership, which favoured Bhandari's return, had sabotaged the move to hold a statewide agitation to protest against the alleged unfair practices during the poll.

Realising that the Congress (I) was unable to do anything, Poudyal's immediate reaction was to go to Delhi to inform the Centre of the developments in Sikkim. Before he left for Delhi, I met him at his Ranipul residence late one evening. A huge crowd had gathered around his residence to find out what the RSP leadership had decided regarding their future political strategy. "I'm going to Delhi to meet V.P. Singh and get his support before Bhandari reaches Delhi", RC told me. Since the Congress government at the Centre had been replaced by the National Front, RC felt that he needed the Centre's backing to dislodge Bhandari. He was quite close to some National Front leaders and expected them to back him. When I look back now, I feel RC should have stayed back instead of rushing off to Delhi. Our politicians have been too dependent on Delhi and that is one of the main drawbacks of most political parties in Sikkim.

Surprisingly, RC did not return to Sikkim for a long time. His partymen expected him to come back immediately but there was no word from him. Something had gone wrong somewhere. There were allegations that Poudyal had been bought over by Bhandari. RC's absence from Sikkim, where he was very much needed, justified this suspicion. Many felt that RC had ditched them when his leadership was vitally needed. The Congress (I) also failed to take the initiative. Gradually, the people realised that nothing could be done and accepted the continuity of the Bhandari Government. Opposition supporters, who were camped in Gangtok since the polling day, felt disillusioned and disappointed and left the capital to

return to their respective districts. Soon everything was normal as though nothing had ever happened.

I came to know much later on that some *goondas* had *gberaoed* Ranjit and threatened him. Since I was in south Sikkim after the election results, I didn't know what had happened. Escorted in an army vehicle, Ranjit was whisked out of Sikkim without having to face any unpleasant situation. He never actually returned to Sikkim after this incident. Much later, the UNI sent another man, Prabol Chakraverti, to replace him.

I was also facing my own battle. The results of the elections were bad enough, but what made it worse was the news of the death of my elder brother's son, Paljor (15). He died mysteriously all of a sudden on November 29 in Jorethang in south Sikkim. Instead of being in Gangtok and witnessing what was happening, I had to rush down to Jorethang along with my brother and others to attend the funeral which lasted for two days.

No new developments had taken place in Gangtok when I came back from Jorethang. There was no point in staying in Gangtok without bringing out the paper. Even those who helped us in the press before the polls would now not dare to associate themselves with us even if they wanted to for fear of being harassed and victimised. Without their help, it was impossible to bring out the paper. We finally decided to take a break and go to Lachen. We also wanted to perform *pujas* at our ancestral home for the one who passed away. All of us needed a big break. To get away to a quieter place – to relax and perhaps to reflect – seemed to be the ideal thing to do at that time. Lachen, was, therefore, the ideal choice.

We had a pretty rough time in Lachen, too. Though many of the lamas there are related to me, they refused to perform the *pujas* at our place for political reasons. Apparently, most of the Lachenpas, including my close relations, were pro-Congress and had supported the party during the elections. With Bhandari's comeback, no one wanted to take any risk,

and the lamas, for obvious reasons, kept away from us. One of them explained to me, "Agya, please don't misunderstand us, but the situation is like this".

I could understand their feelings and felt no resentment towards them. They, too, had to live and didn't want to place themselves in bad books of the authorities. But it was indeed a pathetic and sad experience for me. Even the brave Lachenpas, who in 1973 were ready to start a civil war in defence of their king and kingdom, had been bought over or cowed down. It was indeed a tragic situation. This was the kind of democracy we had to put up with.

While I was there, I received a wireless message from Gangtok in early January stating that my press had been ransacked. My wife and others in the family were quite worried after receiving the news but I was cool. I was happy over the fact that no physical harm was done to us. I wasn't terribly concerned with the printing press but my main worry was for my office, where I had kept all important files and documents. When I came down to Gangtok I was happy to find out that my office had not been touched. However, the printing press was in a mess. Almost all the types and other press equipment had been stolen. Nearly 400 kg of types were found missing and almost all the type cases were empty. At least 240 kg of 14 point type-faces, which I had purchased from Calcutta, had been stolen. The 10 and 12 point type-faces used for the *Observer* was nowhere to be seen. All heading types, except a few, had also been stolen. My suspicion was on my workers, but there must have been others behind them. I made a formal complaint to the police at the Sadar Thana and filed an FIR. Understandably, to this day, no action has been taken to trace out the culprits. Those politicians, who wanted to 'finish' me, had succeeded in the closure of the paper after the elections.

I kept a low profile for a few months. I also knew that I would face a lot of pressure if I continued with the paper. There was no way that I could take out the paper without the workers, who still failed to turn up. I saw one of them in the

town, but whenever we bumped into each other, he always tried to avoid me. I was disgusted with these fellows and didn't want to have anything to do with them. I felt sick even to take a casual glance at them.

I was not in any mood to compromise with the authorities, and instead of bringing out the paper, I decided to temporarily suspend its publication. There was no point in paying the rents and keeping the press locked up, and by March-April 1990, I left the place and shifted everything to my residence in Deorali. Luckily, we had enough space to store the remaining press equipment. I didn't have a place of my own to install the machines and nobody in Gangtok was willing to let me use their premises for my press. Fortunately, someone was looking for a printing machine at that time. Instead of keeping the machines lying on the roadside, I sold them to him. And for a while, that was the end of my dream of setting up an establishment of my own and bringing out a daily paper in Sikkim. However, I was determined to hold on even if I had to struggle for a few more years. The paper needed a firm foundation and I was prepared to stick on and take the punches.

The new situation made me restless and indecisive. For a while, I contemplated joining politics. I felt that I had the capacity to start my own political party, but the feeling that the time was not ripe for me to enter active politics was very deep. Poudyal reiterated his invitation to me after he returned from Delhi. "I'm looking for the right man", he told me and asked me to lead the minority Bhutia-Lepchas of the State, while he concentrated on the Nepalese. I told him that if I joined politics, it would mean changing my profession, which I was reluctant to leave. His answer was that the Press could not function under the present situation unless an "irresponsible man like Bhandari is thrown out". He said no responsible man can keep himself aloof and not take part in politics under the present circumstances when the people were deprived of their basic fundamental rights.

He had made a point but failed to see that the task of removing Bhandari or any other politician from power was basically the responsibility of political parties and not the Press. By leaving the Press, I would be doing a great injustice to myself and the people at large. I was convinced that my contribution for the people and for democratic values in public life in the past ten years far outweighed the contribution of most politicians and public figures in Sikkim. Many, who wanted to contribute something to the people, started off well but soon gave up when the pressure was on them. I kept on and fought along all the way, irrespective of whether I was winning or losing. Fighting and giving my best was all that mattered to me. I had this unflinching faith in myself that while I may face temporary defeats from time to time, in the long run I would turn out to be the victor.

I felt that Sikkim needed radical changes and a mere change of government would not serve any purpose for the long-term welfare of the people and the country's security interest in the region. Only time could do justice to Sikkim and the Sikkimese, and I felt that my time had not come to join politics. Moreover, a fiercely independent and responsible paper was still the need of the hour, and I was determined to stay on the same line and build up the Press, even if it took some more time.

Before the elections, the RSP offered me the party ticket to contest the Assembly polls from the Lachen-Mangshila constituency in north Sikkim. This was an ideal constituency for me as majority of the voters there were either my relations or known to me directly or indirectly. However, I did not accept the offer even though I realised that my prospects were better if the opposition formed the government. I was convinced that my place in Sikkim, for the time being, was in the Press and not in politics.

The prospect of joining politics was very tempting. I wrote in my diary in March 1990: "Whatever we do in Sikkim politically, we must do together. There can be no further divi-

sion amongst the people and the three ethnic groups – Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalese – must unite to achieve political success. For many and for myself, Poudyal represented the majority Nepalese, and to a great extent, he was the symbol of Nepalese aspiration in Sikkim. Although I do not consider myself to be more than just a journalist, many people feel that I'm a potential tribal leader. The minority must accept the majority and the latter must give adequate protection to the BLs. To join RSP is to join Poudyal and to shake hands with our Nepalese folks. We must live and work together. There can be no other way. So if I do join Poudyal I'd be telling my Nepalese brothers, "Let's hold hands and walk together". This is the way I see it and this is my main motive if ever I join Poudyal".

However, I wrote: "While the temptation of joining politics is great, I'm equally attracted and deeply attached to my present profession – journalism and writing". And for the next four months till mid-1990, I concentrated on writing and spent most of the time at home at my desk. My son, Tashi Rabden, was growing up and it was nice to be with the family all day long after a long time.

My plans to spend a year in Lachen were, unfortunately, cancelled as we felt that it was unsafe for us to settle there without performing the necessary *pujas*. Ever since my childhood, there have been so many deaths and other misfortunes in our family that we have almost abandoned our ancestral home, which all of us dearly love. Being back home in Lachen and looking after our house and property, and being with my people has been one of the greatest ambitions of my life, but somehow things did not work out my way. I had to wait for some more time.

Bhandari's comeback had an unhealthy effect on the local Press, which was basically pro-government. Unfortunately, a few journalists, in their eagerness to prove their allegiance to the ruling party and thereby derive maximum benefits, dubbed some of us, including myself, as "anti-government" newsmen.

They formed a new association called the Sikkim Journalists Association and made it into a pro-government Press body. I knew what they were doing was wrong but did nothing to stop them. They had their own right to express themselves freely.

During the SSP's sixth anniversary celebrations on May 24 1990, Bhandari claimed in his public address in Gangtok, that he had the support of every section of the population in the State, including the Press. The Press in Sikkim, he claimed, was divided into two groups – "Sangrami Press" and "anti-Sangrami Press". This was not only a great insult to the Press as a whole, but it clearly reflected his way of thinking which wasn't at all democratic and proper. Bhandari boasted of receiving a massive mandate from the people. In his view, the people had voted his party to power, and anyone who pointed a finger against the government or the ruling party were "anti-people" elements, who needed to be firmly dealt with. He wanted everyone and every organisation in Sikkim, including the Press, to acknowledge his presence and bow down to him. Those who did this, were richly rewarded. Others who refused to acknowledge him as the supreme ruler of Sikkim, were made to pay for their mistakes. Instead of becoming free citizens of a democratic country, the Sikkimese people were reduced to becoming mere subjects of a petty politician, whose excessive compulsion to interfere into every aspect of a citizen's life, knew no bound.

I was still the President of the Sikkim Press Association (SPA) during this period. Most of the journalists in Sikkim were SPA members and were aware of the problems I was facing. However, none had the courtesy to even find out what was troubling me. Reporting on the difficulties that I was facing in their respective papers and condemning the workers boycott and the large-scale theft at my place was out of the question. I knew what their difficulties were and did not at all feel resentful for their failure to react. But the activities of some of my colleagues were not only against me but against the interest of the Press in the State.

The prevailing political situation in the State and my own disgust at the way some of our newsmen were behaving during that period made me tender my resignation from the presidentship of the SPA on April 11, 1990. However, I wanted everything to go on record, and in my annual report placed before the members during the meeting held on May 10, 1990, I wrote: "The new executive body of the Sikkim Press Association was formed following resignations of its former President, Mr. R. Moktan and Joint Secretary, Mr. R.M. Pradhan, in August 1988. The newly formed executive body under the presidentship of Mr. Jigme N. Kazi, editor of *Sikkim Observer*, reaffirmed its avowed aim to work for the growth of the Press in Sikkim, as a non-partisan and professional body. At a time when there was much friction within the Press as well as opposition from without, the newly-elected President said, "There will be neither confrontation nor compromise, within or outside the body" and promised to maintain the neutrality of the Association.

Despite certain difficulties faced by the Association in the last one and half year, it has been able to project itself as a united, and to a certain extent, credible body in the State. The image of the Press, in the eyes of the public, has improved but it still needs to be developed. Today, the people depend a lot on the Press for much of the information which is usually not available to them. Much now depends on the integrity of individual journalists in the State if we are to expect the people to respect our profession and the role of the Press in a free society."

I further stated: "Our association with the State Government has been fairly good and we have, to a large extent, succeeded in establishing a healthy relationship with the government... Unfortunately, despite general improvement of things, journalists in the State, as in the past, continue to be victims of vested interests. Early last year, Mr. Jit Raikia, editor of a Nepali weekly, *Sikkim Samachar*, was brutally attacked in the night at Nam Nam. Prior to this, Mr. Frank Krishna of *Sik-*

ktm Express and correspondent of the *Telegraph* was similarly beaten up and suffered suspected brain damage as a result. Only very recently, the *Sikkim Observer*, an independent English weekly, was the latest victim. Its workers suddenly stopped coming to the press from November last followed by large-scale theft in the press premises, thus forcing the temporary closure of the press and suspension of the paper from publication."

I concluded the report, which was distributed to all members of the SPA, with an appeal: "One of our chief aims in forming the Association in 1967 was to work for the betterment of not only each individual member of the body but also to work for a free and independent Press in the State, which is an indispensable part of a society committed to the democratic way of life. It is our hope that despite obstacles and unpleasant circumstances which come our way from time to time, the Press should and must respond in a mature and responsible way, reflecting the best and highest ideals of our profession".

Personally, I did not harbour bitterness towards anyone, including Bhandari. As politicians, their job is to stay in power. Our job, as journalists, is not only to merely provide news and views to the people, but to also critically analyse the activities of those in power and keep a constant check on them. Reporters cover wars and get killed. It is one of our occupational hazards. Being beaten up at times and getting the press busted are risks that we as journalists have to take. It is a part of our job to live dangerously at times. There is no other way. And so I accepted things in my stride and was prepared to rise up once more and get going.

The situation after the SSP comeback to power in Sikkim was far from normal although on the exterior, everything seemed fine. There was no way that the Press could function freely in Sikkim. For some time, I thought of bringing out the *Observer* from Delhi. I was all set to take my family to Delhi and settle there for about a year until things improved back in Sikkim. But my plans changed again as I felt that Calcutta

would be a better place to take out the paper. It was an equally big city and nearer home and more convenient in every respect. Finally, I decided to try Siliguri in North Bengal and get the paper printed from there.

After the temporary closure of about seven months, the *Sikkim Observer* at last made its reappearance on July 14, 1990. The paper was published from Siliguri, where *Bharat Darpan*, a Hindi daily, was being printed. The stand of the *Observer* had not changed, and this was reflected in my first editorial under the caption "Let Freedom Reign in Sikkim", which stated:

"Free expression cannot survive without a free atmosphere; and where there is freedom, people are bound to act freely. The two are basically interlinked and are dependent on each other. And so it has been with the *Sikkim Observer*, an English weekly, which to many has become more than just a newspaper. For the past seven months, *Sikkim Observer*, the only newspaper in the State featuring in the latest list of the UNI's (United News of India) survey on upcoming newspapers in the country, failed to hit the news-stand despite determined efforts to resume publication of the paper since its abrupt closure in the last week of November last year.

The future of the paper still seems bleak and uncertain. But in the interest of the people and for the sake of freedom and democracy, a concerted effort is being made to give the paper a second birth. Unfortunately, even though public demand for the paper has still not diminished, the fact is that the survival and success of the paper depends much on those who are in positions of strength. We feel that the present situation in the State is still not suitable for the paper to be brought out from here. The reasons are obvious and need no explanation to those who are aware of the state of affairs in the State. For fear of incurring the wrath of the powers-that-be, very few people are willing to be associated with the publication of the paper. For instance, it is not only difficult but impossible to even get a place to house the printing unit on a rental basis.

The only alternative left for us is to either close down the paper for an indefinite period or make alternative arrangements to publish the paper from elsewhere. It is precisely for this reason that this issue of the *Sikkim Observer* is being printed in Siliguri. If this arrangement lasts, and if there is no pressure on parties responsible for the printing, then the paper, hopefully, will come out regularly from this month onwards. However, if the present arrangement fails, then we have to bring out the paper from some other place – may be from Calcutta or Delhi, and if necessary, from outside the borders of this country.

Established in 1986, the *Sikkim Observer* has consistently adhered to the best traditions of print journalism and has consistently made honest efforts to present news and views without fear or favour. Small and medium newspapers in the country do not normally have a smooth sailing, and despite politicians' lip-service on the importance of regional papers, these papers are often confronted with financial constraints, resulting in the closure of many promising newspapers.

Unfortunately, some papers face additional problems, including threat to life and property. And so it has been with the *Sikkim Observer* – always struggling and living on the edge of survival. The Prime Minister (V.P. Singh) recently made a pertinent point while addressing a gathering of distinguished journalists and others on the occasion of the 40th anniversary celebrations of the *Current* in Bombay. He said, "Mediamen and newsmen have relevance only in a democracy, their relevance is lost if the ballot is replaced by the bullet" ... We believe that Sikkim is part of that great democracy, and that the relevance of the Press in this the 22nd State of the Indian Union cannot and shall not be lost".

And for four months – from July to October 1990 – *Sikkim Observer* came out regularly from Siliguri, a major commercial centre in North Bengal, about 112 km from Gangtok. Because it was printed on an off-set press, the paper looked much better. I was able to carry lots of pictures and the

general get-up of the paper improved considerably. The editorial policy, however, remained the same. Fortunately, I didn't face any pressure from the government.

My residence became my office and I functioned from home. I worked hard on the paper the whole week and by Friday the entire four pages of the paper would be ready, leaving space for the headings, which were filled up at the press in Siliguri with the help of the computer. Instead of composing the matter in the letter press as had been done earlier, this was done on my electronic typewriter which I purchased from Calcutta.

I would drive down to Siliguri in my jeep every Friday with the four page dummy. I normally started around 12 a.m. and within three and half hours I was in Siliguri. After checking into the hotel I would head towards the press, which was about two kilometers away from the town. The work in the press, which normally began around 7-8 p.m., would be completed around 11-12 at night, and then I headed back to the hotel. I missed my dinner most of the time because the restaurant would be closed when I got back to the hotel. It was pointless going anywhere else as none of the restaurants would be open. By then, I was already too tired to move around. There were many occasions when I used to go back to the hotel at around 2-3 in the morning. Once, I spent the entire night at the press. We were fully engrossed in our work and when I completed the job and got ready to go back to the hotel to sleep, it was already morning!

I would leave the hotel every Saturday morning at about 8 a.m. after my breakfast. Sometimes I started off much earlier. There were times when I was forced to skip Friday night dinner and Saturday morning breakfast and have my lunch on the way back. The paper had to hit the news-stands every Saturday and so I had to get back home on Saturday. The *Observer* bundle was neatly packed and kept in the press ready to be picked up in the morning. On my way back, I used to hand over the paper to my agents, who were stationed on the

national highway. I was normally back home by mid-day or in the afternoon. The paper was then delivered to the agents in the market. Readers normally turned up at the news-stands in the evening to get the paper.

Taking out the paper from Siliguri was tough but fun, too. Throughout the four months period, I followed the same pattern of working without much changes. I was all alone most of the time. It was a job that had to be done and I enjoyed it thoroughly. My jeep was very helpful and did not give any problem except for one tyre puncture!

From November 1990 to October 1991, the *Observer* was printed in Gangtok. Luckily for me, one of the private off-set printers in Gangtok offered to print the paper. And for a year, the *Observer* was printed at the Prenar Press at Tadong, which is only five minutes drive from my place. This arrangement lasted until November 1991, when I was forced to temporarily suspend the publication of the paper due to political pressure.

The Congress (I) was quite active and vocal and the government adopted a tough posture. The Press was caught in the cross-fire, and in the process *Observer* became the victim once again. I tried to take out the paper from Siliguri, but this time, the printers there also refused to oblige me. Bhandari's influence had certainly reached beyond the bounds of Sikkim.

CHAPTER 14

The Ghost Of The Merger

"...the Centre must accept the fact that citizens of any country have the right to resist foreign domination, be it in the form of military aggression from without or mass infiltration to capture power from within. A country which aspires to follow the democratic principles in all fields of human development, cannot for long endure, if it encourages a government of foreign nationals, by foreign nationals, and for foreign nationals".

"Spotlight on Sikkim", July 1983

"We shall fight in the Assembly. We shall fight in the Parliament. We shall fight in the Court and in the Press. And if need be, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. Wherever we are, whatever we do, we shall fight. We shall never surrender".

"Sikkim Observer", August 1988

Did the 80,000 'left out' or 'stateless' persons residing in Sikkim, who were granted Indian citizenship in 1989, vote for Sikkim's merger with India in 1975? The results of the April 1975 'special poll', as claimed by the then government, showed that 97 per cent of those who participated in the 'referendum', voted in favour of the merger. The Kazi Govern-

ment claimed that of the 61,133 votes, 59,637 voted in favour of the Assembly resolution for merger, and 1,496 opposed it.

The voters' list for the 'special poll' in 1975 was based on the April 1974 electoral rolls, which was prepared for the April 1974 Assembly elections. The total number of electorate for this election was 1,03,495, and all the voters, according to official records, were *Sikkim subjects*, whose names were registered with the Sikkim Subjects Register under the provisions of the Sikkim Subjects Regulation, 1961.

In mid-1987, two and half years after Bhandari came back to power for the second time, the Chief Minister, perhaps tired of the delay regarding fulfilment of his party's three basic political demands, threw a challenge to the Centre. He told reporters in New Delhi that an Assam-type of situation would come up in Sikkim if the Centre failed to concede his party's three demands – grant of Indian citizenship to the 54,000 'left out' persons, Assembly seat reservation for Sikkimese Nepalese, and constitutional recognition of Nepali language.

The Chief Minister, who has the unique distinction of conveniently viewing things from the merger angle when he is in trouble, while referring to the citizenship issue, pointed out that the Centre would face serious problems if those who voted for the merger were not granted Indian citizenship. He insisted that names of a large section of those who were not included in the Sikkim Subjects Register but who voted for the merger, were deprived of their right to become Indian citizens when Sikkim became a part of India in 1975.

Referring to his meeting with the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, and Union Home Minister, Buta Singh, in the first week of May 1987, Bhandari told reporters in New Delhi that he had urged the Centre to grant Indian citizenship to those who voted for Sikkim's merger with India. "I told the Prime Minister that those who are now considered stateless had voted in the referendum of 1975 in favour of joining the Indian Union". He warned, "Unless this issue was resolved soon, it might in the long run lead to a situation as has prevailed in

Assam till recently".

One national daily reported: "Mr. Bhandari also hinted that if the stateless persons were not granted citizenship even the State's accession to the Indian Union in 1975 would be questioned". The report said Bhandari claimed that there were 54,000 'stateless persons' living in Sikkim and their "statelessness was a legacy of the Chogyal's rule when the subject status was given to the people on a discriminatory basis".

Bhandari's claim that many merger voters were deprived of their citizenship, not only confused many people, including concerned authorities, but created another controversy over the issue. While Bhandari insisted that the 'left out' persons had also voted for the merger, his opponents, including the Congress (I), pointed out that only genuine Sikkimese, who were declared *Sikkim subjects* and possessed the Sikkim Subjects Certificates, voted for the merger in 1975.

It may be mentioned here that for the purpose of holding the Assembly elections in 1974, the electoral rolls were revised with reference to December 1, 1973 as the qualifying date. Only those persons who were registered subjects of Sikkim and were 21 years of age on December 1, 1973, were registered as voters. The rolls, which were finally published on February 4, 1974, contained a total of 1,03,495 voters.

The eligibility of persons who were entitled to vote and be voted to the Assembly, was laid down in the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974, and one of the qualifications of those who wished to have their names included in the voters' list was that they must be registered *Sikkim subjects*. Section 10 (i) of the Act says: "The elections to the Sikkim Assembly shall be on the basis of 'one man one vote', that is to say, every person who on the prescribed date is a *subject of Sikkim*, is not less than twenty-one years of age and is not otherwise disqualified under this Act or under any law on the ground of residence, unsoundness of mind, crime or corruption or illegal practices shall be entitled to be registered as a voter at any such election".

The Representation of Sikkim Subjects Act, 1974, which came through a Proclamation dated February 5, 1974, while referring to the holding of elections to the Assembly and the qualifications and disqualifications of its members, stated: "A person should not be qualified to be elected to fill a seat in the Sikkim Assembly unless he – (a) was a *subject of Sikkim*".

A report on the elections to the Sikkim Legislative Assembly of 1979 and General Election to Lok Sabha of 1980 by the Office of the Chief Electoral Officer, Government of Sikkim, stated: "The election to the State Legislative Assembly was held in April, 1974 in accordance with the provisions" of the Representation of Sikkim Subject Act, 1974 and "on completion of the election, the Sikkim Assembly was constituted according to the wishes of the *Sikkimese Subjects*".

The opposition Congress (I)'s stand regarding those who voted for the 'referendum' is explicit. Reacting to Bhandari's claim that a large section of merger voters, who were not Sikkim subjects, were not granted Indian citizenship when Sikkim merged with India, the Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee (SPCC-I) General Secretary, Athup Lepcha, in a Press release dated February 8, 1988, stated: "The referendum was held on the 14th of April, 1975, and all the 61,133 voters who exercised their franchise were the *Sikkim Subjects*, who had exercised their franchise in the general elections in Sikkim in 1974. The then *Sikkim Subjects*, who exercised their franchise in the above mentioned elections, have become the citizens of India under the provisions of the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975".

"The names of voters (the then *Sikkim Subjects*, now the citizens of India) were recorded in the electoral rolls which were prepared and used in the general elections in 1974", the release added.

The Congress (I), while making its stand on the 'referendum' voters clear, alleged that Bhandari's reference to the referendum voters, while raising the citizenship issue, was "extremely misleading and confusing". Lepcha, the Sikkim

Janata Parishad candidate, who defeated Kazi in the 1979 Assembly elections from the remote Dzongu constituency in north Sikkim, and other Congress (I) leaders, who were earlier with Bhandari in the Parishad, knew the Chief Minister's ability to use the merger issue for his own political gains. The Congress(I) not only maintained that Bhandari, by associating the citizenship issue with merger voters, was trying to say that the merger was "illegal and unconstitutional", but said such a stand adopted by the Chief Minister would come in the way of resolving the citizenship issue.

The Centre was certainly faced with a dilemma on the citizenship issue. If it failed to grant Indian citizenship to non-Sikkim subjects, who reportedly voted for the 1975 'referendum', on the ground that they were not genuine Sikkimese, Bhandari may raise the issue that since the Centre failed to recognise a section of merger voters as genuine citizens of Sikkim, merger would then be termed illegal and unconstitutional. On the other hand, if the Centre officially recognises a section of the population in Sikkim as 'genuine Sikkimese', whose names were 'left out' from the Sikkim Subjects Register on various grounds, and grants them Indian citizenship, it would prove its acceptance of the fact that names of these persons were not registered with the Register. And if it is proved that a fairly large number of these 'left out' persons participated in the 'referendum', but were not entitled to vote as they would not be eligible to become *Sikkim subjects* under the criterion laid down in the Regulation, won't it prove that merger was illegal?

But Bhandari was not cowed down by the Congress (I) threat. He knew how touchy and nervous New Delhi was on the slightest mention of the merger issue. He also knew full well that the only way to get the Centre's attention and acceptance of his demands was to constantly harp on Sikkim's merger. His strategy of bargaining with the Centre with the use of this sensitive issue worked wonders for him.

One of Bhandari's main reasons for raising the issue in

mid-1987 was because the Centre was making moves to prosecute him on charges of corruption levelled by the CBI. On April 7, 1987, Gurung and other Congress (I) leaders submitted a memorandum to the State Governor, T.V. Rajeswar, asking him to grant sanction for Bhandari's prosecution. Gurung was lobbying against Bhandari in Delhi when the latter met the Prime Minister on the three demands. Whenever the Centre got tough, Bhandari resorted to the merger issue, which has always been his last card to scare the Centre into submission. Even this time, too, Bhandari had his way and nothing happened to the CBI cases against him.

But besides the CBI scare, Bhandari's readiness to link the citizenship demand with the 'referendum' voters may have had some relation to the Centre's stand on the citizenship issue. While Bhandari insisted 1970 or 1975 as the cut-off year to solve the citizenship issue, the Centre, it appeared, rejected Bhandari's suggestion and proposed that the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961 be made the basis for resolving the issue. Sometime in early 1988, the Chief Minister, through an official release, stated that the State Government had rejected a proposal of the Centre on the citizenship issue on the ground that it did not mention any specific year as the cut-off year to determine those who should be granted Indian citizenship.

The Centre had already made itself clear on the three demands of the ruling party. Regarding the citizenship issue, it wanted the Regulation to be the basis for grant of citizenship to the 'stateless persons'. The Union Minister of State for Home, Chintamani Panigrahi, in a reply to questions put forward by the Sikkim MP, Dil Kumari Bhandari, in the Lok Sabha in mid-May 1988, stated that the Centre had already communicated its decision on the three demands to the State Government.

Referring to the citizenship issue, Panigrahi stated in the Parliament that the Government had decided that "genuine case of commissions in respect of pre-1946 entrants or their descendants who were otherwise eligible" for registration under

Sikkim Subjects Regulation, 1961 would be looked into for rectification by a Committee of representatives of the Central and State governments.

On the seat reservation issue, Panigrahi said there would be no change in the present set-up, and that "status quo" would be "maintained". Regarding the SSP's third demand on inclusion of Nepali language in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution, Panigrahi informed the Parliament that the "demand had to be weighed against other possible repercussions and reactions" as other communities had also voiced similar demands. He was obviously referring to the likely opposition by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) in Darjeeling hills if constitutional recognition was granted to Nepali language. The GNLF supremo, Subash Ghising, preferred to use the word 'Gorkhali' instead of 'Nepali' to describe the language spoken by the Indian Nepalese.

The Bhandari Government outrightly rejected the Centre's reaction to his three demands. Its negative stand on the three demands outraged Bhandari, whose ruling party's main political plank has always been the three demands, which basically concerned the Nepalese. The State Government had earlier demanded that 1970 or 1975 be made the cut-off year to determine the 'stateless' persons in Sikkim. It had also asked for necessary amendment to the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975 to enable all those who were residing in Sikkim for five years prior to the merger in 1975 to get Indian citizenship. Bhandari claimed that the Centre granted citizenship to only *Sikkim Subjects* when Sikkim became a part of India and denied the same right to a host of others, who were living in Sikkim for generations, but whose names did not figure in the Register maintained by the Sikkim Government. Under the 1975 Order, only *Sikkim subjects*, whose names were enlisted in the Register, were entitled to become Indian citizens after the merger.

On May 16, 1975, when Sikkim formerly became an Indian State, the Ministry of Home Affairs in New Delhi passed

a notification which read: "In exercise of the powers conferred by section 7 of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (57 of 1955), the Central Government hereby makes the following Order, namely:-

1. This order may be called the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975.
2. Every person who immediately before the 26th day of April, 1975, was a *Sikkim subjects* under the Sikkim Subjects Regulation, 1961, shall be deemed to have become a citizen of India on that day".

The Central Government had to make legal provisions for Sikkimese nationals to become Indian nationals when Sikkim joined the Union. The above Order came into being because of Section 7 of the Citizenship Act, 1955, which states: "If any territory becomes a part of India, the Central Government may, by order notified in the official Gazette, specify the persons who shall be citizens of India by reason of their connection with that territory; and those persons shall be citizens of India as from the date to be specified in the order".

The ruling party, during its fourth annual anniversary celebrations on May 24, 1988, rejected the Centre's decision to give due importance to the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961. In a resolution adopted during its party convention in Gangtok, it stated: "The citizenship issue is one of the burning problems facing Sikkim. It involves about 54 thousand persons who though eligible have been inadvertantly left out from being Indian citizens. This unhappy situation has arisen out of the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975 issued by the Union Government following the merger of Sikkim with India on 26th April, 1975".

"According to the Order only those persons whose names were entered in the Sikkim Subject Register under the Sikkim Subject Regulation, 1961 were deemed to have become Indian citizens. It is obvious that the Union Government issued the

Order without realising its serious implications on the people of the State. The result is that thousands of Sikkimese people who had the domicile in the territory of Sikkim but whose names were not entered in the Register for various reasons largely due to ignorance, administrative lapses and political consideration were left out overnight following the merger. Such things have never happened anywhere in a democratic country".

The resolution, referring to the Regulation, stated: "The Sikkim Sangram Parishad wants to point out that the Sikkim Subjects Regulations, now repealed, was anti-people and the people of the State had revolted against it. It ultimately led to the over-throw of the Chogyal".

"The Sikkim Sangram Parishad, therefore, resolves that the people of Sikkim should be deemed to have become Indians from the day Sikkim merged with the India or 1970 be taken as the cut-off year for granting citizenship as passed by the Sikkim Legislative Assembly on a number of occasions, thereby fulfilling the constitutional requirement of five years continuous stay in India before the merger. This is the only natural solution to the citizenship issue as it is quite in keeping with the principle of natural justice and fair play".

While the SSP's views on the citizenship issue seemed quite genuine, its blatant attack on the Regulation and the Chogyal, made many people, particularly the genuine Sikkimese locals, who were earlier *Sikkim subjects*, doubt about the claim and motive of the ruling party on the issue. Many of them felt that the SSP was more enthusiastic over the demand for grant of citizenship to those who were in Sikkim just before the merger than safeguarding the rights and interests of genuine Sikkimese, whose names were not entered in the Register even though they were entitled to under the provisions of the Regulation. At least 70 per cent of the Sikkimese, whose names were enlisted in the Register, were Sikkimese Nepalese, and the allegation that the Chogyal favoured the minority Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas as against the Sikkimese

Nepalese on the grant of subject-hood, had no sound justification.

Most people in Sikkim initially looked to Bhandari as one who opposed the merger and fought for the long term interest of the genuine Sikkimese. Bhandari's stand on the merger, while he was in the Sikkim Janata Parishad and even earlier, was that the merger was the handiwork of New Delhi and did not have the people's consent. Bhandari's allegation that the 1961 Regulation was "anti-people" and that the people "revolted" against it, leading to the "over-throw" of the Chogyal, did not convince many people, who felt that the Chief Minister was trying to whip up Nepalese sentiments for his own political survival. But what Bhandari failed to realise was that many people, including the Sikkimese Nepalese, were suspicious of his moves and felt that his stand on the sensitive issue regarding the *Sikkim subjects* was nothing but a vote-catching device to stay in power. By attacking the 1961 Regulation, many believe, that Bhandari was trying to increase the vote bank of the majority community, irrespective of whether they were Sikkimese Nepalese or not. Whether the Sikkimese Nepalese themselves approved of Bhandari's risky gamble can only be gauged when the people are given the chance to express themselves freely and openly on the issue. But the reactions of Sikkimese leaders, including those from the Nepalese community, on this issue, revealed that even Sikkimese Nepalese wanted the government to put a halt to the increasing influx which endangered their future.

The Congress (I) reacted against the SSP's resolution on the Regulation. While the party demanded that the "real stateless" persons of "Sikkimese origin" be identified and conferred Indian citizenship, it said the SSP resolution against the Regulation "is a sinister attempt and design to efface the unique and distinct identity of the people". The Cong(I) viewed the ruling party's "rejection and condemnation" of the Regulation as a "clear indication of its intent to act counter and to circumvent the Government of India's initiative and proposal to grant

citizenship to the stateless persons of the Sikkimese origin".

My views on the issue, as carried in the editorial of the *Observer* dated May 28, 1988, were quite clear. Headlined "Citizenship for whom?", it stated: "The ruling Sikkim Parishad's rejection of the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961 as a base to resolve the citizenship issue of the State will certainly face stiff opposition from many quarters. Its demand for either 1970 or 1975 to be made the cut-off year on the issue is not new, but seen in the light of the present development, it definitely indicates that there is far more to the citizenship issue than what is made out to be. Genuine Sikkimese – be they Lepchas, Bhutias or Nepalese – do want genuine Sikkimese to come into their fold. To identify these persons, the same yard-stick should be used as done to the Sikkim Subjects some 28 years ago. This would naturally mean that the Sikkim Subjects Regulation of 1961 is the only authentic document to find out genuine Sikkimese, whose names have not been entered into the Sikkim Subjects Register.

By proposing either 1970 or 1975 as the base year, the ruling party appears to be fighting for those people other than "genuine Sikkimese". If this is so, they must make their stand clear and not confuse the people. It is an open secret that large-scale influx into the State came prior to the merger in 1975. Those people, who were encouraged to settle in Sikkim in 1973-75 by the Kazi Government, later brought in more of their relations and friends from outside the State. In fact, it was the Kazi Government, which initially demanded that 1970 be made the cut-off year on the citizenship issue. The Bhandari Government, which continues to criticise the Kazi regime for encouraging large-scale influx into the State, has now stepped into Kazi's shoes. Why?"

The editorial pointed out: "In Assam, a base year was necessary to delete "foreign nationals" from the voters' list. In Sikkim, the focus is to secure citizenship for "genuine Sikkimese". These are two entirely different problems demanding a different solution. But if the government wishes to fight

for those other than "genuine Sikkimese", it is entirely a new issue. But the two issues must not be mixed. It will confuse everyone and evoke unnecessary apprehension".

Surprisingly, even after it had taken a firm stand on the citizenship issue and proposed the 1961 Regulation as the basis for grant of Indian citizenship to the 'stateless' in Sikkim, the Centre, in September 1988, sent a 14-member Parliamentary team to Sikkim on a fact-finding mission on the citizenship issue. The team, led by the Congress (I) MP from Maharashtra, Balasaheb Vikhe Patil, included opposition MPs and Central Government officials. The main task of the Central team was to receive representations from the public on the issue. After studying public reactions over the issue, the team was expected to give its recommendations to the Parliament.

It may be mentioned here that a high-level Central team on the citizenship issue, led by the Additional Secretary to the Union Home Ministry, I.P. Gupta, came to Gangtok in January 1987 and met the Chief Minister, State Government officials and representatives of the people. The visit of the Central team followed assurances given to Bhandari by the Prime Minister, Rajiv Gandhi, in mid-1986 that the Centre would examine and settle the citizenship issue.

It was important for the Patil team to allow the public to voice its opinion on the issue which was of great importance to all sections of the people in the State. However, the visit of the Central team was far too short to receive public representations over the issue. Although the citizenship issue had direct bearing on the social, economic and political life of the people of Sikkim, particularly the genuine local Sikkimese, the State Government as well as the Centre had done very little to open the issue for a public debate. The SSP's view had always been that since it had an overwhelming number of seats in the Assembly, it did not feel the need to initiate a public debate on the issue. The ruling party's stand was that it alone represented the voice of the people and very little effort was made to involve the people of Sikkim from all levels of society for a

thorough and open discussion on the issue.

In the light of widespread allegations of suppression of free speech and expression in Sikkim, the process of resolving the citizenship issue only by representatives of the Central and State governments, without allowing the public to have their say, is not only unfair and undemocratic, but totally unacceptable to a large section of the people. The government's lack of openness and its inability to initiate a public debate over the issue, further deepened public suspicion and doubt over the motive and activities of both the State Government and the Centre.

I met Patil and his team during their visit to Gangtok and presented them with the first issue of the *Spotlight on Sikkim* (SOS) dated July 1983, which dealt exclusively with the citizenship issue. Patil took note of the facts presented and suggestions made in the magazine and asked his team members to place the SOS on record for studies on the citizenship issue. Patil was quick to notice the SOS's report on the increase of Sikkim's population between 1971 and 1981, where the population of the State rose from 2.09 lacs in 1971 to 3.16 lacs in 1981. It showed a record increase of 50 per cent in a decade, which witnessed an overwhelming influx of "outsiders", due mainly to the unstable political situation in Sikkim, which ultimately led to the merger in 1975.

There was fear among the local Sikkimese that a large number of people, who settled in Sikkim during the merger period (1970-80), would claim themselves to be 'left out' persons and try to infringe upon the rights and interests of the original Sikkimese belonging to the three ethnic groups. Even the Kazi Government, which depended on outside forces to change the political system in Sikkim, suggested 1970 as the base year on the citizenship issue. Patil, however, told me that citizenship would only be conferred to those who had authentic documents and evidence to substantiate their claim.

The SOS concluded with these views on the citizenship issue: "It is now for the Centre to decide whether to accept or

reject the State Government's earlier recommendations of making 1970 as the cut-off year. Whether there actually is such a huge number of stateless persons (numbering 30,000) in Sikkim as it is alleged, is the first issue the Centre should take up to study. The ruling government should not be allowed to exploit the situation for its own convenience without proper justification".

It added: "Even if they do find that there are such persons living in Sikkim, the Centre must accept the fact that citizens of any country have the right to resist foreign domination, be it in the form of military aggression from without or mass infiltration to capture power from within. A country which aspires to follow the democratic principles in all fields of human development, cannot for long endure, if it encourages a government of foreign nationals, by foreign nationals, and for foreign nationals...India's territorial integrity and Sikkim's distinct identity, within the framework of the Constitution, can and must find an expression in the prevailing situation".

In early 1989, the Home Ministry, as demanded by the State Government, made amendments to the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975, making way for grant of Indian citizenship to the 'stateless persons' in Sikkim. The SSP claimed that its citizenship demand was fulfilled and that a total of about 75,000 'left out' persons residing in Sikkim would be entitled to get Indian citizenship. It may be noted that the demand for citizenship to 'stateless or left out' persons, which first began with around 30,000 persons, steadily rose to 54,000 in 1988, and suddenly shot up to 75,000 in 1989.

In 1986, the State Government made attempts to identify the 'stateless persons' in Sikkim. The figure of the 'stateless persons' provided by the State Government could possibly be based on those who applied for citizenship in 1986. Whether those who applied for citizenship were "genuine Sikkimese" or not could not be ascertained as the government failed to provide a booklet on the citizenship issue containing the list of

the 'left out' persons who had applied for Indian citizenship.

The Home Ministry notification dated March 20, 1989 on the amendment to the 1975 Citizenship Order stated: "S.O. 214 (E) In exercise of the power conferred by Section 7 of the Citizenship Act, 1955 (57 of 1955), the Central Government hereby makes the following order to amend the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975, namely:-

1. This order may be called the Sikkim (Citizenship) Amendment Order, 1989.
2. In the Sikkim (Citizenship) Order, 1975, to paragraph 2, the following proviso shall be inserted namely;-

"Provided that any person whose names was eligible to be entered in the register maintained under the said regulation but was not so entered because of any genuine omission shall also be deemed to have become a citizen of India on that day if so determined by the Central Government".

The annexure to the above notification, which was published in the Gazette of India, Extraordinary, gave eight guidelines as to who would be entitled for citizenship under the Sikkim (Citizenship) Amendment Order, 1989. Whether the criterion laid down in the annexure for identification of "genuine omission" fully satisfied the requirements of the 1961 Regulation and the Amendment Order of 1989 has been a subject of great controversy.

When Bhandari came back to power after the November 1989 Assembly elections, he claimed that the National Front Government at the Centre had conceded to his party's citizenship demand, and that 80,000 'left out' persons in Sikkim would be granted Indian citizenship. Addressing a Press conference in Gangtok in August 1990, Bhandari expressed his gratefulness to the Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, for "liberating"

the people of Sikkim by granting citizenship to the genuine Sikkimese, whose names were left out from the Sikkim Subjects Register.

He said the grant of citizenship would be done in two phases. Citizenship to 40,000 'left out' persons would be granted in the first phase and the rest would be granted citizenship in the second phase. According to reports, a total of 94,000 persons had applied for citizenship of which names of 75,000 persons were qualified for citizenship, 5,000 were under consideration, and applications of 14,000 were rejected. However, opposition parties in Sikkim alleged that several lac citizenship forms were distributed to the people by the State Government.

Replying to a question in the State Assembly during its monsoon session in August 1990, the State Home Minister said: "The District Collectors received 46,011 nos. of forms throughout the State. Careful scrutiny of the same was made at the district level and later at the State level. After much verification, the State Government (Home Department) recommended and forwarded 26,415 forms covering 74,966 persons for registration as citizens to Government of India. The balance of 19,796 applications which is still under reverification with the State Government will be forwarded to Government of India on completion for issue of citizenship or otherwise depending upon their eligibility under the guidelines thereto... Government of India has already issued order granting citizenship to 40,083 persons out of 74,966 persons in the first lot vide MHA order No. 26030/36/90-ICI of 7th August, 1990. Similar action for the balance persons is also expected to be finalised within the current month".

Replying to a question in the Lok Sabha on the citizenship issue in August 1990, the Union Minister of State for Home, Subodh Kant Sahay, stated that orders for declaring 40,083 'left out' persons in the State as Indian citizens had been given on August 7, 1990. He also informed the Lok Sabha that the Centre was expected to issue another order in September 1990

for granting citizenship to another 35,000 persons in the State.

Public reactions to the fulfilment of the citizenship demand surprised both the Centre and the State Government. While the vast majority of the people showed little enthusiasm over the fulfilment of the demand, political parties and social organisations of Sikkim reacted strongly against the Centre and the Bhandari Government over the issue. The Congress (I) expressed its "concern" and "suspicion" over the process whereby the 'left out' persons were granted citizenship. It noted that the notification and guidelines relating to acquisition of citizenship were "contradictory" and urged the natural descendants of the *Sikkim subjects* not to fill up the citizenship forms and get themselves "cheated and exploited" by the ruling party.

"The genuine Indian citizens of the Sikkimese origin declared as the stateless persons may be deprived of their franchise during elections. Should such a situation arises, the Sikkim Sangram Parishad Government must be held responsible", a Press statement issued by the SPCC (I) in October 1989 stated. It added, "The Sikkim Sangram Parishad Government has successfully compelled a sizeable number of the genuine Indian citizens of the Sikkimese origin to declare themselves as Stateless persons or non-citizens. The citizenship status of these particular persons has been made highly questionable by the Sikkim Government".

The Rising Sun Party Working Committee, under the chairmanship of its President, R.C. Poudyal, during its meeting held on May 30, 1989 "strongly condemned" the State Government for indulging in corrupt practices and "misleading" the people on the citizenship issue. A Press statement issued by the RSP General Secretary, Sonam Tshering, stated that the RSP "strongly condemns the corruption indulged in by the SSP government in distributing more than four lakhs of so-called citizenship forms completely misleading the public. There is no account of the money earned by the sale of forms. Quite a few had to buy the forms at black market rates of Rs. twenty each". The RSP also accused the government of asking "even *Sikkim*

subject holders to buy and fill up forms in respect of their children born after 1975. Later these people were asked not to fill up forms".

Even the President of the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM), Kiran Chettri, who has now joined the ruling party, on March 29, 1989, stated that one of his party's major demands was making the 1961 Regulation as the "basis" for identifying "genuine Sikkimese" who may be regarded as "stateless persons". The Morcha alleged that Bhandari's claim that 67,000 persons in Sikkim were stateless was "baseless". Chettri, in a Press statement, stated that "Sikkim Subject Regulation 1961 should be honoured and valued because of its importance to identify the genuine Sikkimese who became Indian citizens". It added, "The Centre should condemn the resolution No. 2 passed on 24th May 1988 by the ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad which had said that the Sikkim Subjects Regulation 1961 was anti-national".

The Jana Mukti Morcha (JMM) President, Y.N. Bhandari, questioned the role of the Central and State Government for granting Indian citizenship to 80,000 persons residing in Sikkim. In a memorandum submitted to the Governor, R.H. Tahiliani, by the Morcha on August 1990, it alleged "conspiracy" between the Centre and the ruling party on the citizenship issue against the interest of the Sikkimese people. The memorandum stated that citizenship could only be granted to "genuine Sikkimese", who could not get subjecthood during the Chogyal rule. Citizenship cannot be given to "Sikkimese people, who were enrolled in the Sikkim Subjects Register, as they are already recognised by the Central Government as Indian citizens", the memorandum added.

Bhandari said other Indians, who had come from other states such as West Bengal, do not need citizenship since they were already Indians. The JMM also opposed the grant of citizenship to "foreigners", who were settled in Sikkim.

The President of the All Sikkim Youth and Contractors Association, Bharat Basnet, went on an indefinite hunger strike

in Gangtok on August 15, 1990 to protest against the grant of citizenship to the 80,000 "stateless persons". In a letter to the State Chief Secretary, P.K. Pradhan, Basnet demanded the withdrawal of the Centre's decision to grant citizenship to such a large number of "left out" persons. The letter said the decision of the Union Government on the citizenship issue was "totally opposed" to the recommendation of the State Citizenship Committee report of 1981 and was against the interest of the genuine Sikkimese. It noted that after Sikkim's merger, there was an unprecedented growth of population in the State because of a large-scale influx of outsiders. This had "certainly endangered the identity of original Sikkimese", the letter added.

While people in the North-East region were demanding withdrawal of outsiders from their respective states, in Sikkim, "We are negotiating with the Centre" for grant of citizenship to 80,000 "mysterious persons", Basnet told reporters. He pointed out that influx of outsiders was the main cause for disturbances in the North-East, and warned that Sikkim may be heading the same way.

Expectedly, the minority BLs voiced its strong opposition against the ruling party's blatant refusal to recognise the value of the 1961 Regulation. In a meeting held in Gangtok on October 8, 1989, the Mayel Lyang Tribal Organisation, a Lepcha organisation, passed a resolution demanding that the Regulation be made the basis for the grant of citizenship to the 'left out' persons.

The stand adopted by the Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association (STWA) on the citizenship issue was very clear right from the beginning. Although the Association, being now run by ruling party members, was less vocal on this sensitive issue, its earlier stand, when the organisation was an independent body, is noteworthy. It demanded that the 1961 Regulation be made the basis on the citizenship issue. The STWA voiced its concern over the move by some "interested groups" to "give citizenship status to a huge number of outsiders", irrespective of

qualifying years of residence in Sikkim. While stating that grant of citizenship to so many outsiders would create serious economic, social and political problems to the genuine Sikkimese, the Association demanded deletion of names of "foreign nationals" from the electoral rolls. "There should be no representation for such persons in the Assembly before finalising their identity", said a memorandum submitted to the Governor of Sikkim by the Association.

During its First State Level Convention in Gangtok on November 1988, the Denzong Tribal Yargay Chogpa (DTYC) passed an 8-point resolution aimed at safeguarding tribal interest and raising tribal consciousness on the rights of the BLs in Sikkim. The resolution passed during the Convention on the citizenship issue stated: "We have seen that a few people with selfish political ends do not hesitate to work against the common interest of the Sikkimese people. We have come across with a controversy of the so-called 'stateless' persons and their illogical claim of including their names in the electoral rolls. We cannot deny that names of a few genuine Sikkimese have also been left out while granting citizenship. But unusual increase in population by one lakh within a short period of 10 years (1971-81) lends every reason to the Sikkimese people to become apprehensive. The Sikkim Subject Regulation 1961 should, therefore, be the basis for granting citizenship".

Another tribal organisation, the Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC), a registered political party with tribal and OBC backing, in a letter to the State Chief Secretary, on September 8, 1990 by its President, Lachen Gomchen Rinpoche, former Sangha MLA and minister, demanded the State Government to furnish lists of all those who applied for citizenship with a view to raising objections if necessary. The DPC was apprehensive that a large number of the applicants may have already got their names enrolled in the voters' list "without being declared as citizens of India".

"We have come to learn that at least 90% of applicants, who have filled up the (citizenship) form, do not qualify to

become Sikkim Subjects and thus the claim of their names being left out from the Sikkim Subjects Register cannot be justified on any ground. They have filled up forms illegally. As Sikkim Subject Certificate holders, we have every right to raise objections against those applicants. Unless these applicants can prove that they have basic qualifications to be Sikkim subjects and they have been wrongly left out, they cannot get Indian citizenship", the letter stated.

In an article in the *Statesman* in April 1988, I gave a historical background on the subjecthood issue, highlighting the apprehension of the local Sikkimese over the increasing influx of outsiders, in the light of the government's decision to grant citizenship to as many as 54,000 'left out' persons in Sikkim:

"It may be recalled that the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950 not only decided Sikkim's status as a "Protectorate of India", but also referred to "*Subjects of Sikkim*", who were actually citizens of the erstwhile kingdom. The Treaty, however, did not define who the "subjects" of Sikkim were. But in 1950-51, the Government of Sikkim decided to settle the question of subjecthood, which had been a burning issue ever since Sikkim came in contact with the British Indian authorities in the last century. The British affected a change in the composition of Sikkim's population in their favour by encouraging immigration from Nepal, thereby diluting the kingdom's original Tibetan polity.

Apparently, due to a number of obstacles, the rules determining subjecthood that were framed during the Treaty period could not be implemented until 10 years later in 1961 when the Chogyal's Government promulgated the Sikkim Subjects Regulation. While defining the status of *Sikkim subjects*, the Regulation also made provisions for the acquisition and loss of subjecthood. According to a report, around 70 per cent of the names recorded in the Sikkim Subjects Register under the Regulation are those of ethnic Nepalese. This means that a large number of the Nepalese of Sikkim, whose identity has constantly been disputed, became *Sikkim's subjects* under the

provision of the Regulation in the Chogyal's era. The rest of the names entered in the Register were those of the indigenous, but minority, Bhutia-Lepcha community.

According to Section 3(I) (b) of the Regulation, which deals with people who are domiciled in Sikkim, "Every person who has his domicile in the territory of Sikkim immediately before the commencement of this Regulation shall be a *Sikkim subject* if he has been ordinarily resident in the territory of Sikkim for a period of not less than 15 years preceding such commencement".

This means that if 1946 (15 years before 1961) is made the cut-off year, as the Union Government now reportedly wants, those who had been residing in Sikkim five years prior to the 1950 Treaty are entitled to become *Sikkim subjects*. Nor is residence in Sikkim for the stipulated period the only criterion under the Regulation for obtaining subjecthood. While applying for subjecthood a candidate, who satisfied the residence qualification, must also "sever" his connexion with the "country of his origin". This may be done "by parting with his property in that country or acquiring immovable property in Sikkim". The implication is quite clear since no Indian or Tibetan sought to be recognised as a *Sikkim subject* and the overwhelming number of candidates were settlers of Nepalese origin... What the Chogyal's Government sought was to eliminate people of divided loyalty and ensure that all *Sikkim subjects* owed allegiance only to Sikkim.

Many applicants, the majority being of Nepalese origin, failed to qualify under these criteria, and therefore, left Sikkim in the early sixties. Most of them settled down in Assam, Meghalaya and other parts of the country. Later, a sizeable section returned to Sikkim. It is possible that many of these people are now seeking citizenship on the basis of the claim that they have been residing in Sikkim for over 50 years.

It has been alleged, especially by the Chief Minister's political critics, that the State Government's main claim is to give permanent residential status to a host of outsiders, which

would not be in the interest of genuine Sikkimese, whether ethnic Nepalese or Bhutia-Lepchas. But hardly anyone is prepared to speak openly on this issue... It is an open secret, for instance, that from 1972-73, in fact prior to the merger, Kazi Lhendup Dorji's Government encouraged the influx of outsiders, including people from Kalimpong, Darjeeling, West Bengal and Bihar, as well as rich businessmen and traders originally from Rajasthan.

These people were either absorbed in the State administration or given economic assistance to settle in the State. The resultant phenomenal rise in Sikkim's population from 2.10 lakhs in 1971 to 3.16 lakhs in 1981 accounts for the widespread fear and insecurity among the local people, including the Sikkim Nepalese, who feel that the majority of those who entered Sikkim during the seventies will somehow manage to prove that they have been residents since 1975 or even before then and thus obtain the necessary legal status".

The citizenship issue is very much interlinked with the demand for seat reservation for three ethnic groups in the State Legislative Assembly. If seats are to be reserved for the "Sikkimese", then identification of the genuine Sikkimese people is very important. Otherwise, non-Sikkimese may have easy access to Assembly seats reserved for the Sikkimese. The settlement of the citizenship issue must, therefore, precede the settlement of Assembly seat reservation.

First of all, the identity and the exact number of those holding the genuine *Sikkim subjects* certificates and their descendants have to be traced and firmly established. Secondly, the identity of those other than the *Sikkim subject* certificate holders have to be verified and placed under various categories. These may be sub-divided into various groups such as Nepali nationals, Tibetans, Indian Nepalese, other Indians and foreigners. Those who do not belong to any of the above categories may be placed in another group. It is from this group that one can trace the genuine 'left out' persons, whose names were not entered in the Register kept for

the *Sikkim subjects* during the Chogyal era. Since Sikkim's four and half lac population is divided into only four small districts, the identification of the above groups of people would be simple, provided the government has the will to get to the root of the problem regarding the citizenship issue. The citizenship issue is more than just identifying the 'left out' persons; it is giving to all the people in Sikkim, particularly the genuine Sikkimese, a sense of security and identity.

Only when the citizenship issue is finally and fully settled to the satisfaction of all groups can the Assembly seat reservation issue be taken up. Thus, having decided on the identity and population of the three ethnic groups and others in the State, one can now safely proceed to the seat reservation issue. If seats are reserved for the Sikkimese, including Sikkimese Nepalese, can anyone, who does not qualify to be a Sikkimese, contest from the reserved seats meant only for the Sikkimese? Will those who are listed in the 80,000 'left out' persons, who have been granted Indian citizenship, be entitled to contest in the Assembly as well the Parliament seats reserved for the Sikkimese? These are questions of fundamental importance to the Sikkimese people which deserve immediate attention by all concerned parties. Perhaps the Sikkimese people will only realise the impact of the citizenship accord only when they find out that non-Sikkimese have been elected to the Assembly from the reserved seats meant only for the Sikkimese.

In the light of nearly one fourth of the State's population being declared 'left out' persons, it is important to know at the very outset, what right these people have in the social, economic and political structure of Sikkim. Do the 80,000 'left out' persons have the right to buy land belonging to the original Sikkimese, including Sikkimese Nepalese? Do they have the right to contest elections from the reserved seats in the Assembly meant for the Sikkimese? And do they have the right to represent Sikkim in the two seats reserved for the Sikkimese in the Parliament?

The Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC) boycotted the 1989

Assembly elections in protest against the failure of the authorities to ensure that all candidates contesting from the reserved seats of the Sikkimese produce the Sikkim Subjects Certificate to prove their bonafide as a genuine Sikkimese. The DPC insisted that since the 13 seats, including the one seat reserved for the Sangha, are reserved for the Sikkimese Bhutia-Lepcha tribals, it was important for the candidate contesting these seats and the two seats reserved for the Sikkimese Scheduled Castes, who belong to the Sikkimese Nepalese community, to enclose their Sikkim Subjects Certificates along with their nomination papers, to prove their identity as a bonafide Sikkimese and justify their claim to contest from the reserved seats meant only for genuine local Sikkimese candidates.

The DPC also demanded that those contesting from the 17 general seats to either produce their Sikkim Subjects Certificates or Indian citizenship certificates. The boycott was also in protest against the authorities failure to provide the list of the 'stateless persons', who were granted Indian citizenship. The DPC alleged that there were grave irregularities in the voters' list and claimed that those who were declared 'stateless' had their names enrolled in the electoral roll. The Chogpa insisted that people of doubtful identity could not participate in the elections unless their citizenship as Indians was proved.

In a letter to the Chief Election Officer, P.K. Pradhan, dated November 3, 1989, the DPC's Working President, Krishna Chandra Pradhan, stated: "The State Government has noted that 54,000 people in Sikkim do not have Indian citizenship and that their cases are under process. It must be ensured that these people do not participate in the elections until their status is first made clear. It need hardly be emphasised that Indian citizenship is a basic requirement to contest elections or exercise franchise in an election under the Indian Constitution. The State Government has in fact acted irresponsibly in calling for early elections when the citizenship question was

still under process".

Emphasising the need for candidates contesting from the reserved seats to be genuine Sikkimese, the DPC in the letter said: "In the first democratic elections held in Sikkim in 1974, all candidates were required, without exception, to attach copies of their Sikkim Subjects Certificate as an essential criterion or eligibility. Those laws were never amended and rightly so. I, therefore, request you to ensure that every candidate attach a copy of his or her Sikkim Subjects Certificate and prove their basic eligibility to contest elections in Sikkim giving due cognizance to special character and history of the State".

Copies of the letter were sent to the Chief Election Commissioner, New Delhi, Secretary, Ministry of Home, New Delhi and the Returning Officers of east, west, south and north districts of the State. The response of the government and the concerned authorities was negative. The DPC, after having boycotted the elections, subsequently filed a writ petition on the citizenship issue in the High Court of Sikkim. The case is still pending before the court.

It may be noted here that under Article 371F(f) of the Constitution, only those persons who hail from the particular ethnic group for whom seats have been reserved in the Assembly are eligible to contest the election from the reserved constituencies. Article 371F(f) states that Assembly seats reserved for "different sections of the population" may be "filled by candidates belonging to such sections" only.

It states that only those "candidates belonging to such sections alone may stand up for elections to the Legislative Assembly of the State of Sikkim" from the reserved constituencies. Article 371F(f) is, therefore, very explicit and clear on the identity and eligibility of candidates contesting from the reserved seats, and makes no provisions for "outsiders" to contest from these seats which are meant for the Sikkimese.

Even if the State Government claims that the Centre has conceded to its demand on citizenship, the implementation of

the accord would surely pose more problems for both the Centre and the State Government. While genuine Sikkimese who failed to become Indian citizens in 1975 cannot be deprived of their rights, any backdoor method to capture power with the help of "outsiders" masquerading as genuine Sikkimese will surely be stiffly resisted by all Sikkimese. While the well-being of the minority Bhutia-Lepcha tribals would be endangered if more "outsiders" of doubtful identity are given the right to make inroads into Sikkim politics, it is the Sikkimese Nepalese, who will be the real losers in the long run. The danger is even more if the Parliament fails to restore the seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese in the State Assembly. It would then give an open opportunity to non-Sikkimese to get elected through the 17 general seats and capture power. Being declared Scheduled Tribes, the BLs will somehow get some sort of legal and constitutional protection for themselves, leaving the Sikkimese Nepalese completely insecure and rootless in their own homeland.

The abrupt abolition of seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly in 1979, and the Centre's reluctance to restore the reserved seats, coupled with its decision to accord citizenship status to so many people of doubtful identity and loyalty in this strategic border State, have caused many to doubt New Delhi's policy in this region. It is time that New Delhi stops pursuing its 'divide and rule' policy as it has done in the past and come out with an open and sincere mind to chalk out a strategy, which will lead to a solution that is in the best interest of the Sikkimese people and the country at large.

The answer to those who are bent on causing further division amongst the Sikkimese people with the sole intention of further depriving the people of their legitimate rights, and destroying the unique identity of Sikkim and the Sikkimese, is simple. It comes from a message that I left in my own column, "On My Own", in the *Observer* in 1988:

"We shall resist and fight back. To those who are bent on

wiping us from the face of the earth, from these mountains, which have been our dwelling place since our forefathers, I say, "Go ahead !". We can take things to a certain extent and no more. We are now more or less ready to play our legitimate role in the land of our origin. However weak and insecure we are, we are now prepared to fight back.

We shall fight in the Assembly. We shall fight in the Parliament. We shall fight in the Court and in the Press. And if need be, we shall fight in the fields and in the streets. Wherever we are, whatever we do, we shall fight. We shall never surrender".

Bhandari's claim that the 'left out' persons voted for the merger, and the record of the Election Department showing that only *Sikkim subjects* took part in the 1975 'special poll', are contradictory. The Kazi Government is on record as having stated that names of 'stateless persons' do not figure in the electoral rolls of 1974 as they were not treated as Indian citizens.

If the list of the 80,000 'left out' persons, who were granted Indian citizenship in 1990, and the 61,133 persons, who took part in the 'special poll' in 1975, is compared, one can find out how many of the 'left out' persons voted for the merger. If the names of 'left out' persons figure in the list of those who voted for the merger, and if it is proved that these 'left out' persons did not qualify for subjecthood under the provisions of the 1961 Regulation, it can safely be assumed that non-Sikkimese also participated in the 'referendum' which led to the merger.

If a large section of those who are now declared as 'left out' persons participated in the merger, and if these persons are not genuine Sikkimese, will it not prove that merger was illegal and a fake? For the Centre to justify, that Sikkim's merger had the approval of the genuine Sikkimese, who were then referred to as *Sikkim subjects*, it must come out with the list of the 59,637 voters who are believed to have voted in favour of the merger during the 'special poll' in 1975. And in order for Bhandari to prove that a large section of merger

voters were rendered 'stateless', which is one of his major claims, he must provide the list of 80,000 'left out' persons, who were granted Indian citizenship in 1990, along with those who participated in the "referendum" of April 1975.

Unless relevant figures are provided and facts are checked, there is no other authentic means to prove that the "referendum", which deposed the Chogyal, erased Sikkim's international status as a protected Kingdom, and merged it with India, was legal and constitutional, and reflected the wishes and aspirations of the Sikkimese people. If this issue is left unsettled, and doubts are not erased from the people's mind, the ghost of the merger will surely haunt the people for a long time to come. All said and done, it is a case of sowing the wind and reaping the whirlwind.

CHAPTER 15

Living Out My Dreams And Winning

"Can a man sacrifice his integrity? His honour? His freedom? His ideal? His conviction? The honesty of his feelings? The independence of his thought?"

Ayan Rand, *"The Fountainhead"*

"...Come and take them home, home to a freedom where a man did not have to bend his knee for his daily bread"

Harold Robins, *"The Adventurers"*

"Stand up, don't bow! Stand up, don't bow!"

Rev. Jesse Jackson

Four weeks after the *Observer* closed down in the first week of November 1991, I received feelers from the Chief Minister for a 'patch up'. A friend of mine and an influential member of the ruling party met me on November 27, 1991. He, once a close confidant of the Chief Minister, came straight to the point. He suggested that I should try my hand in "business" if I was not able to continue with the paper. He said he would assist me if I accepted the proposal.

Though he was not very clear on what he was trying to say, he gave me the impression that the Chief Minister was keen on making it up with me. I told him that although I was unable to take out the paper due to political reasons, I had no intention of quitting the Press. I also told him that I was not interested in doing business. I could see that my friend was quite disappointed with the outcome of the meeting. Without embarrassing him, I had flatly rejected his proposal.

I consulted my family members on what took place during the meeting. They endorsed my stand. We decided to stay as we were and not to accept any help from anyone which may have an adverse effect on my career in the long run. While it was important to stand firm on what we believed to be right, we also felt the need to politely reject whatever Bhandari was offering, so that my rejection did not provoke him to be vindictive towards me. I felt that if the authorities felt that I was not being responsive, they might make things more difficult for me. I was already going through a tough time and I didn't want further trouble.

The mediator from Mintokgang and I met again the next day. This time, things became more clear. He seemed more eager for me to grab a deal with the government than I was. He told me that he had thought over what I had decided the previous day and felt that I should give it a second thought. He wanted me to take advantage of the situation and accept whatever the government was offering me. He was my friend and I trusted him. His intentions seemed genuine and he was concerned about my well-being as well as the credibility of my paper. He accepted the fact that I had suffered much and should now make up for it in the best way possible without sacrificing too much.

I soon realised that I wasn't exactly aware of what Bhandari was upto, and I was curious to find out at the outset what his own views were before I made any further moves. However, I was firm on the stand that I would not leave the Press. Taking up business was, therefore, out of the question.

During our meeting the next day, I realised, to my great surprise, that my insistence on staying in the Press and continuing with the paper was acceptable to the other party. I was told that the government would fully back me in my effort to establish the Press. This seemed to be a very tempting proposition although I had doubts about the motives of those who were making this proposition. This was but natural for any journalist who was placed in such a situation. At this point I felt the need to talk directly with the Chief Minister instead of communicating through a third party.

Finally, I decided to meet the Chief Minister personally and have a face to face talk with him. I was ready to accept anything from the government for the establishment of a good offset printing press unit in Gangtok but was firm on not compromising on basic issues that concerned the Press, my paper and myself. I asked my friend to fix an appointment with the CM, and, fortunately, this was done immediately and the date was fixed for December 1, 1991.

We reached Mintokgang by 2.45 p.m. and were seated at the small lounge. As usual, the Chief Minister was prompt and entered the room exactly at 3 p.m. as scheduled. My friend was also present in the room. Being Sunday, Mintokgang was quiet, and the atmosphere for a frank face-to-face chat with the CM was most ideal. After an introductory note by my friend on the progress of our talks, I took the initiative and came to the point straightaway without beating round the bush. I put across my views sincerely and directly. I was brief and to the point. I was very clear in what I wanted to say and said it without any hesitation. The Chief Minister listened patiently without much interruption. This was the first time in almost ten years that I was talking directly with the CM on a personal level. It was a strange experience.

I told him that despite my being a sincere and dedicated journalist for a long time, I was unnecessarily being targetted and labelled as an 'anti-Bhandari' newsman in the State and made to suffer. This was mainly because the opposition in the

past one decade had been most ineffective, and the people, by and large, turned to the Press to play the role of the opposition. Independent journalists in the State were, therefore, looked upon as trouble-makers and because of this, many of us, including myself, had to go through a rough time. I told him that despite all the troubles that I had to go through, I had no resentment against anyone. What we had to do was a part of our job and as journalists we often face pressures and threats from various quarters from time to time.

But despite all that has happened I intended to stick to my line and continue with my profession. I told him that my main interest was to build up my press and to take out Sikkim's first daily newspaper, which the people of the State needed and deserved. I also impressed on him the importance of the Press in a democratic set-up. I reminded him that in the past I had sought help from the government but somehow the response was negative and I was not able to progress much in my work. I was still ready to seek help from the government. I had no ego problems and had a professional outlook. However, there should be no strings attached and I should be allowed to function freely and independently.

I had made myself very clear, and now it was Bhandari's turn to speak. He said the State needed a good paper and the government would help me to set up the Press. He added that the government's backing was essential for the Press and even national papers had good relations with the government. I fully agreed with him on this. He appreciated my stand that while the Press should be ready to take any help from the government, it should remain independent. I was glad that the Chief Minister mentioned the phrase – "independence of the Press" – several times during our conversation.

"Your bad days are over", he told me and said from henceforth his government would help me in whatever way it can to set up an off-set printing press in Gangtok. He, however, suggested that while I remained fully in charge of the paper, I should not shoulder the financial burdens alone. At that point

I juttet in and said, "If I include others in the running of the paper, it will cause unnecessary problems. I prefer to remain solely in charge of the Press and paper. This will give me a free hand to take out the paper without anyone's interference".

I realised that the Chief Minister may have wanted me to float shares or take loans from private individuals when he suggested that I should share my financial burden with others. I could have done this at the outset when I first set up my unit in 1984, but all along, I was firm on the stand that I remained the sole proprietor of the Press and the paper. It was important for the credibility of the paper that both the establishments were fully and solely under my control. A free hand to run my show my way was what I really needed, and there would be no compromise on this vital issue. I was prepared to wait longer to achieve this end.

And finally, our much-awaited meeting was over. It lasted for 1.45 minutes. The Chief Minister suggested that I submit a project on what we had discussed to the government for action to be taken. He suggested that we meet again shortly to pursue the matter. I felt the meeting went on well. Before I left, we had a warm and friendly handshake. And holding my hands at the door-way he said, "Now that we have met, let us not part". His smile and sincerity seemed genuine and this made me happy and confident of the future.

A few of those who knew what was going on between Bhandari and myself encouraged me to strike while the iron was hot. Many said the Chief Minister was not a man to dishonour his word, but if things were not acted upon immediately, he may change his mind. But I had my own views and didn't feel the need to rush into anything. What was more important was to view the developments from a long-term perspective rather than trying to strike a deal straightaway.

And instead of taking full advantage of the situation, as suggested by many, I took things easy and stuck to my earlier stand. I did not for once waver from my earlier stand. What I really wanted was a clear line with the CM, and this was the

most important thing. In the past, relations between me and the CM were strictly on a professional level and lacked a personal touch, which is most important in any human relation and more particularly in our profession. As journalists, we should be in touch with all those who matter in public life, and particularly those who are in power.

I was confident that I had established a good rapport with the CM and this was most important. My friend, too, acknowledged this: "The Chief Minister never speaks this way to anyone. Even with his ministers, he does not say things directly. But with you, he was totally different. It's good that you met him".

Whatever help that I could get from the government was important, but it was not everything. A sound and working relationship with the government and the CM was more important as this would ensure that things would run smoothly. Relations have to be built up step by step on the basis of trust, mutual respect and tolerance. They can never be achieved in a one-hour session no matter how deeply two persons may have communicated with each other.

This was the main reason why meeting Bhandari and talking with him was important. Creating a cordial and healthy relationship with him and the government and getting them to understand and appreciate the role of the Press in the State was far more important. It was important to establish good relations even if we did not get anything from each other. And so, I was clear in my mind on what I was looking for and did not rush into anything.

As far as the backing of the government is concerned, what can the government really do for newsmen besides providing them with the necessary working atmosphere. After all, apart from a few advertisements and some job work, the government cannot do much for us to help us financially. And even release of advertisements and job works would be given according to the laid down rules and regulations, which meant that if I did get government advertisements, it would not be

more than Rs. 25,000 annually. As for job works, in an average, a printing press owning a newspaper is entitled to at least Rs. 50,000 worth of job work from the government printing department annually. But this, too, depends on the government, and the Press cannot make demands as a matter of right. For instance, the total amount of job work that I got from the printing department did not exceed Rs 1,10,000 in the past ten years.

Financially, the prospect of earning from sales is much better than through government advertisements. The more bold and independent the paper, the higher the sale. I depended more on my circulation than on advertisements. I felt that if the government was really and truly interested in helping me then it should allot me a site to establish the press and grant me some loan to start my paper. And then they should give me complete freedom to run my own paper. It also really did not matter if they did not give me advertisements, loans or job work. A suitable place to install the press and the freedom to run the paper was all that I really needed and wanted. I would have managed to raise the money from other sources if the government was reluctant to do so. But financially it would be too risky to invest so much on the paper if we are not allowed to function freely as in other parts of the country where newspaper establishments have a better and more free working atmosphere.

I always had a long-term perspective to whatever I did, and this situation was no exception. Instead of running into things blindly, I first wanted to analyse the government's reaction to my stand, and then make my next move. I did not meet the CM as advised, instead, I went to Kathmandu to attend an international conference on violation of human rights in the Himalayas which lasted for a week. It was there that I met M.R. Josse, Consultant Editor of *The Independent* of Kathmandu, and struck a deal. I became the Sikkim correspondent of the *Independent* and started filing reports for the paper ever since till very recently.

I tried to meet the CM after coming back from Nepal but

he was out of station. So, instead of waiting for him, as planned earlier, we left for south India where my sister-in-law, Chime Revatsang, and her family resided. The *Observer* had been temporarily forced to close down from November 1991 and so it was time for another break.

We had a good vacation there and returned only in the first week of February 1992. The entire family had a solid two months rest and relaxation. It was a good break for us all. It also gave me an opportunity to review past events and chalk out my future plans. I was convinced that my earlier decision regarding my Press was right and sound, and pursued on the same line when I returned to Sikkim.

In April, I submitted two applications to the government: one related to the request for allotment of a site in Nam Nang in Gangtok for press-cum-residence purpose and the other for a loan from the SIDICO (Sikkim Industrial Development and Investment Corporation Limited), a State Government undertaking, to set up my off-set printing unit. These applications were made in pursuance of my talks with the CM and were meant for the expansion and modernisation of my existing printing unit with the aim of bringing out Sikkim's first daily newspaper.

After I met Bhandari in December, I tried to analyse why he had taken the initiative to open a dialogue with me. Did Bhandari really wanted to help me or was there more to it than met the eye? Activities of politicians, particularly those impetuous ones like Bhandari, have to be understood in the context of the prevailing political environment they are faced with. The political scenario during the months that preceded my meeting with Bhandari show that he was having a rough time, perhaps the toughest time since he came back to power in 1985.

Bhandari's admission in the third week of November 1991 that the Centre was trying to de-stabilise his government, came at a time when dissidents within the SSP were secretly working together with the Congress (I) to topple him. The holding of

the NECCC(I) meeting in Gangtok in September 1991 and the sudden visits of many influential Central leaders, including Union ministers and Central Congress (I) functionaries, to Sikkim, coupled with the aggressive mood of the local unit of the Congress, provided enough indications to the SSP dissidents that the Centre was quite serious about Bhandari's ouster.

What made matters worse for Bhandari were reports that Chamling, who was gradually being projected as an OBC leader, along with Chamla Tshering, Tourism Minister and a tribal leader, were coming together to oust him. The two reportedly had at least 20 of the 32 MLAs with them. These developments also meant that the tribals and the OBCs (*matwalis* or Mongoloid Nepalese), two of the State's most powerful groups, which constituted at least 80% of the State's population, were coming together and joining hands to pave the way for Bhandari's ultimate downfall. These developments were viewed with great concern by a section of the ruling party which saw that such developments were a direct threat to Bhandari and the upper-caste Nepalese, particularly the Pradhans, who were firmly entrenched in the State administration.

My report in the *Statesman* carried in its November 21, 1991 issue, stated: "Dissident activities within the ruling party... has received further encouragement from the Congress (I)'s renewed bid to oppose Bhandari". The report further added: "The Congress (I)'s leadership in the State is in touch with dissidents in the ruling party, who are now waiting for an opportune moment to strike at Mr. Bhandari, who is aware of these developments".

Even as the opposition and the dissidents were mounting pressure on Bhandari, what aggravated the situation was the publication and mass circulation of a scandalous pamphlet against Mr. and Mrs. Bhandari, alleging that while the latter was having her own extra-marital affairs in Delhi, where she normally resided, her husband, with whom she was having an

estranged relationship, was suffering from the dreaded disease – AIDS.

This not only greatly embarrassed the couple, it also put the Chief Minister in a tight spot. The opposition was attacking him on both fronts – politically and personally. This naturally evoked strong reactions from the Chief Minister, who at once ordered the arrest of all those allegedly involved in the publication of the pamphlet. Six persons, including opposition leaders and a journalist (Rajendra Baid) from Siliguri, who were allegedly involved in publication of the pamphlet, were arrested in the third week of October 1991. The political situation in Sikkim became very tense after their arrest.

The arrest and torture of Baid in the hands of Sikkim police was condemned by the national media in no uncertain terms. While Baid received wide publicity, Bhandari's high-handedness in the State was fully exposed in most national dailies and journals. The crackdown on the opposition in Sikkim had certainly boomeranged and Bhandari's image, particularly among the national media and the Central leaders, hit an all time low. Bhandari's action fully justified allegations that there was no democracy in Sikkim and that the State was run by a ruthless dictator.

Even as he was facing attacks from the media and the opposition, Bhandari's greatest threat came from within his own party. Dissension within the ruling party legislators was simmering, and with the Congress's active encouragement, it gradually surfaced. For the first time in recent years, the "smiling dictator" knew he was in deep trouble.

When Bhandari returned from Delhi in November-end, he at once called for a Press conference and denied reports that there were dissidents in his party. To prove it, he literally paraded Chamling and Tshering in front of the Press at a Press conference in Gangtok on November 27. Whatever plans they may have had, the two ministers, during the Press conference, pledged their support and loyalty to the Chief Minister. Bhandari had obviously read my report in the *Statesman* on

dissident activities in his party.

Referring to a report in a Calcutta daily (though he didn't make a mention of it, he was obviously referring to the *Statesman*), Chamling in a Press statement given after the CM's Press conference, denied reports that he was leading a rebel group of MLAs against Bhandari. When I asked him the next morning how he could deny my report which was based on his own claims of having 12 MLAs on his side, he had nothing much to say. Though I was convinced that Chamling was waiting for the right moment to strike Bhandari, I felt he should have taken a firmer stand even if some of his colleagues were a bit hesitant.

It is important to note that my friend, the messenger from Mintokgang, met me on the day Bhandari gave the Press conference in Mayur Hotel. It was November 27. Either something had transpired in Delhi during the CM's stay there or he was provoked by my report in the *Statesman*. It could be that Bhandari did not want to further antagonise me and wanted to help me with the Press and the paper, which had folded up from the beginning of November 1991. It could also be that he wanted to adopt a 'carrot and stick' method to deal with me. If I rejected his offer, his next line of action may have been to finish me physically.

This was how I viewed the situation at that time and adopted a strategy to take things easy. I wanted to give the impression that I was not too rigid in my stand and would be prepared to accept something from the government, while in reality, not taking anything at all. In this way I could swim out of the situation without disappointing anybody and yet maintain my independence.

On my return from my holiday from south India, I was surprised to find out that I was elected the President of the Sikkim Press Association (SPA). My initial reaction to the new development within the SPA was that of suspicion and doubt. What was the Press upto this time? Was the ruling party behind it? I at once set out to find out the facts for myself. To my

pleasant surprise, I discovered that the local journalists themselves had taken the initiative to form a strong and united Press in the State. They, therefore, wanted to revive the SPA, which was then almost defunct as most of the active members had resigned due to unhealthy developments within the Press.

I was glad to find out that the initiative to revive the SPA and to make me its President was genuine and had come from within the Press and was not at all politically-motivated. It was difficult to believe that members of the Press in Sikkim had, at long last, come to their senses. This was very encouraging as I did not expect much from most journalists in the State. But despite their weaknesses and shortcomings, they realised the need to come together and form a strong and united Press body in Sikkim. This was an indication that we had learnt something from past mistakes. Being pro-government did not serve much purpose for many journalists. Their closeness to the government not only damaged their professional image, but financially, too, they were not doing well. Even if they were not able to become one, they realised the importance of being completely independent in their outlook. Soon after my return from my holiday, we called for a general meeting of the SPA where I accepted the responsibility of leading the Association and urged everyone to work together in the best spirit.

This time I was genuinely interested in helping not only the Press body but each and every journalist in the State. My much-improved rapport with the Chief Minister helped us to create better working relations with the government. The Chief Minister's response to our numerous suggestions was also positive and for a while it seemed that a new era for government-Press relations had begun. To celebrate the occasion, we organised a picnic party on March 1, 1992. The Chief Minister, the Chief Secretary, P.K. Pradhan, and the Information and Public Relations Secretary, Palden Gyamtso, and others also joined us on the occasion. As part of our programme, the SPA made a short trip to Nepal and Assam. These visits enabled us to come into closer contact with members of our profession in

the region. For the first time, the SPA was able to get a five-room office in the town area which certainly was a big achievement. A common meeting place for local journalists in the State capital was what was needed and, for the first time, this requirement was met.

And for a while everything seemed to be going well for us. Expectedly, there were allegations that the Press was "bought over" by Bhandari. However, we did not pay much heed to it as we knew for ourselves where we stood and what we wanted to achieve. We realised the importance of having a strong and united Press in Sikkim, and if anyone was willing to help us to achieve this aim, we would welcome it. But the Press would be free and independent and there would be no compromise on the basic ideals and interests of the Press. The Chief Minister himself was on record of having stated to a delegation of the SPA, which called on him in February 1992, that he was for a 'strong and united' Press in the State. We were deeply hopeful that the CM would honour his promise, and were determined that if he didn't, he should eat his words.

The *Observer* report on May 23, 1992 gave a vivid picture of the mood of the Press in the State in early 1992: "The general interest and enthusiasm within the Press circle had received further motivation with the acquisition of a five-room office for the SPA. Another meeting with the Chief Minister was held recently where the SPA put up several suggestions pertaining to various matters of the Press. The government is now all set to grant State Government accreditation to journalists, increase advertisement rates, help towards circulation of local papers, provide more job works for local printing presses, which are run by journalists, and may even provide land and loan for construction of a Press building in the State".

The new atmosphere enabled me to approach the government to undertake printing of my paper in the Government Printing Press until I was able to establish my own unit. The Government Press had just installed its off-set printing unit with desk-top publishing (DTP) system and I felt that it would

be an ideal situation for me if the government would allow me to print the *Observer* at their press for a few months. In the first week of May, I requested the IPR Secretary to help me with the publication of my paper on a temporary basis.

In a letter to the Secretary dated May 8, I wrote: "The *Sikkim Observer* is likely to hit the stands soon and for this we would like to know if the government press could undertake the printing of the newspaper temporarily. Presently, we are making arrangements to get our own off-set printing press with desk-top printing system. As we would like to resume publication of the paper soon and as our printing unit is yet to be established, we would like to seek the help of your department in this regard for at least 4 to 6 months. Sir, you are well aware that when the government printing press has been facing some problems, it was the local printing presses which came to your aid and undertook the printing of the government organ, *Sikkim Herald*. We are confident that the government will respond positively to our request. This would not only help us personally but would go a long way in creating better relations between the government and the press and for the growth and development of the Fourth Estate in our State".

"Rising Up Once More" is the way we captioned a short note in the 'Letter from the Publisher' column of the *Observer* in its first issue dated May 23, 1992. The paper was printed at the government press. The letter stated: "This issue of the *Sikkim Observer* comes to you after almost seven months. The paper was forced to suspend its publication in October-November last when no printers in the State and the region were willing to undertake the printing work for fear of interference from outside elements. It may be also recalled that in 1990 also the paper was off the stands for another seven months. The circumstances in which the paper was forced to close down was almost the same. Yet another attempt has been made to bring out the paper and we are deeply grateful and happy that the Sikkim Government Press has undertaken to temporarily do the printing work for us until we get our own

printing press set up which we hope will be very soon. We expect our paper to come out regularly from now on but our readers should bear with us if we falter a bit in trying to rise up once more".

The printing of the *Observer* at the government press caused some controversy. I had anticipated this but did not give much thought to it and went right ahead with my work and refused to even listen to the baseless allegations that I was "with the ruling party". I was convinced that what I was doing was in the best interest of my profession, my paper and the people of Sikkim. My closeness with the CM did not affect my credibility. I was convinced that the people of Sikkim, including the intelligentsia, was devoid of independent thinking and, therefore, incapable of understanding what I was doing. Why should I take note of their reactions? As far as I was concerned, the *Observer* had not changed. I was the same journalist who stepped into the *Eastern Express* office almost ten years back. Only the views of some people about my paper had changed. They, of course, were motivated by their own vested interests and blinded by their own ignorance. Even listening to their reactions was simply a waste of time. Incidentally, one of the main reasons for approaching the government was because my printers, Prenar Press, was closed during that period, due to defects in the printing machine. This time, I was in no mood to go all the way down to Siliguri to get the paper printed.

Summing up the political scenario in Sikkim in the first issue of the *Observer* dated May 23, 1992, I wrote: "Today, Mr. Bhandari rules supreme. While the SSP has both the seats in the Parliament, all the 32 seats in the Assembly belong to the party. There is virtually now no opposition in the State where even national parties like the Congress (I) have gone into hiding or its leaders concentrating on other activities than politics. Followers and supporters of the Rising Sun President, Mr. Ram Chandra Poudyal, are now almost all set to join the ruling party. Mr. Poudyal, who till very recently, was seen as Mr. Bhandari's arch rival, has now given up politics and turned

to religion".

The report, which was the lead story, ended with this observation: 'If the likely reshuffle in the Cabinet goes through smoothly, Mr. Bhandari can rest be assured that the best is yet to come'. The word *'If'* was the most important word in the entire issue. I don't think any of the pseudo-intellectuals in Gangtok noticed this.

The next issue of the *Observer*, which appeared in June first week, by reporting that the "likely reshuffle" of the Cabinet may not be smooth, also proved that the paper was still the same and showed that it was not afraid, despite being assisted by the government for its publication, of reporting on sensitive political issues as it had been doing in the past. By giving wide coverage on the delicate issue of the Cabinet reshuffle, the paper forced the ruling party to give top priority to settle the issue once and for all. The paper's lead story on Bhandari's reactions to the likely reshuffle was captioned – "CM on Cabinet Reshuffle: Communal, incompetent ministers to be dropped". This was indeed a clear indication that he was against Chamling, who was emerging as the number one leader of the backward classes in Sikkim. There were also strong rumours that apart from Chamling, some "corrupt ministers" would also be sacked.

The SSP was expected to change its entire Cabinet after completion of half term in office which expired on May 31, 1992. Being aware of the likely revolt within the party if all the ministers were changed, Bhandari maintained that Cabinet reshuffle was his "prerogative" and that much now depended on the "performance" of his ministers. This was a clear indication that he did not want an entirely new set-up in the Cabinet.

Chamling's performance and his activities certainly did not gain much favour with the CM. His links with ethnic groups and off-the-cuff remarks against the administration and the ruling party made him one of the most controversial men in the Cabinet. Unlike others, Chamling was a popular politician and did not depend on Bhandari to get elected to

the Assembly. Because of this, he was quite independent in his thinking and the people appreciated this. All others were basically Bhandari's "yes men", who depended on him for almost everything.

Chamling's reaction to Bhandari's autocratic style of functioning was carried on the front page of the same issue of the paper. Headlined – "I'm a democrat, not a sycophant: Chamling", the news-item carried Chamling's remarks which he made to some newsmen who visited his residence in Gangtok just days before his ouster. Chamling's remarks, as reported in the *Observer*, stated that he was a "democrat and not a sycophant". This definitely hit Bhandari below the belt and invited strong reaction from him. It was clear from his statement that many SSP legislators, including ministers, were reduced to being mere sycophants and "rubber stamps", and ceased to act as elected representatives of the people. By stating that he was a democrat, Chamling openly defied Bhandari, who was on the verge of knocking him out, and gave everyone the impression that he was unable to function under an undemocratic set-up.

Chamling had indeed spoken up and did not fear action being taken against him. The report stated: "Mr. Chamling, who is expecting to be dropped from the Cabinet, is quite casual of the whole affair and seems quite content to step down if asked to. 'I want to play politics. The chair is not important for me', is his cryptic remark when asked to comment on his future plan of action". In the editorial of the paper I remarked that Chamling, the writer-poet-turned-politician, was "the most vocal and undoubtedly the most popular and potential man in the Bhandari bandwagon".

There was no deliberate act on my part to break up the ruling party. However, I wanted to report events as they happened without siding with any particular group. Independent and competent observers of my paper would have noted that I had not moved an inch from my earlier stand, and that the paper, though printed in the government press, was still fiercely independent. In fact, the *Observer* acted as a catalyst

and brought some changes in the staid political scenario of Sikkim. For with Chamling's ouster, politics in Sikkim took a different turn having far-reaching implications. And if these changes pave way for a just, humane and more democratic set-up in Sikkim and in the region, *Sikkim Observer* will look back with pride and feel great that it had performed its role responsibly despite short-term losses for the paper.

One reason why I wanted the paper to be printed in the government press was to test and find out whether the government genuinely wanted to help me or not. I also wanted to see whether Bhandari really meant what he said to me earlier and whether he was able to honour his word and give me the independence that I needed as an editor.

No sooner was the second issue of the *Observer* was out, word got around that I may be asked to discontinue printing of my paper at the government press. There were various reasons (excuses really) given for this. But the fact was the government was in a fix and was not willing to give me the freedom that I needed, lest it endangered its own interest. There were reports that certain powerful persons in the State were not happy with my paper being printed in the government press. While a section of them genuinely felt that the credibility of the paper would be affected if it was printed at the government press, there were others who felt that I should not be allowed to hit against the government using its own machinery.

But since no formal order to stop the publication of the paper was conveyed to me, I somehow managed to take out the next issue of the *Observer* in mid-June from the government press. The lead story was captioned "Chamling dropped." The much-awaited reshuffle did not take place and only Chamling was dropped for his "communal and anti-party activities".

And with Chamling's dismissal, the *Observer* was also 'dismissed' from the government press! I was told by the IPR Secretary that the government wanted me to discontinue using the government press. To me it was a clear indication that the highest authorities were not keen on helping me with the publi-

cation of the paper if I insisted on taking out an independent paper. It was also a sign that no matter how much one talks of freedom of the Press, when it comes to our own personal interest, high ideals take a back seat. And so after three issues, the *Observer* was once again abruptly closed down.

When a journalist asked me how I was able to convince the government to get my paper printed in their press, I told him with a touch of humour, "I have served the people through the Press for ten years and got nothing except harassment. Now at last they have realised this and the tide is flowing my way. The government press, which is really the people's press, is now printing the people's paper!"

One senior bureaucrat is said to have applauded the manner in which I was able to convince the authorities to use the government machinery to take out my paper. He felt that I had succeeded in my struggle and had won finally. It was my 'victory', he said. He seems to be one of the very few individuals who really knew what was happening and understood what I was upto. The fact that I had not compromised even when those who had harassed and victimised me for nearly a decade were willing to make up and help me, is now on record. And this was my biggest achievement. It really was a victory for me. And I had certainly won.

And before I eventually quit using the government press, I was able to make one last move and that was to give birth to my long-awaited paper – *Himalayan Guardian* – which will, hopefully, become a daily paper one day when freedom reigns in Sikkim and when I have a well-established press of my own.

In my earlier talks with the CM, I had mentioned something about this paper to him. During an interview with the CM for the *Guardian*, of which I was the editor-cum-proprietor, I asked him if I would be allowed to continue using the government press for the *Observer* as I had requested. It was important to hear from the CM himself what his views were. His reaction was quite understandable. He politely said no. I knew that was the final decision for the *Observer*.

But somehow I was able to take out the first issue of the *Guardian* from the government press. I took advantage of the fact that since I was carrying out an exclusive interview with the CM, the press would get the paper printed. In this paper, too, I tried to maintain a balance and did not give any indication that my freedom was being compromised. The *Guardian*, unlike the *Observer*, is supposed to focus less on Sikkim, and more on the region, including Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet and the North-East. However, besides the CM's one-page interview, the main article written by myself on Sikkim was regarding Chamling's dismissal.

I saw Chamling's ouster as a 'turning point' in Sikkim politics and observed: "With the Cong(I) organisation in the State still in its infancy and RSP leaders and supporters joining the SSP, all eyes are now focused on Mr. Chamling. Will Mr. Chamling emerge as an alternative to Mr. Bhandari? Will he be able to capture the imagination of the people and get things organised? Or will he be just another of those poets – a dreamer?"

If this Left-leaning politician with a Mandal-base is able to make the right moves and get the right response, he could well be the coming messiah the people have been looking for. Only time will tell whether Mr. Chamling's "warm blood" bubbling in him is full of "fiery spirit of revolt" (expressions taken from Chamling's poem "*Perennial Dreams*") or, he too, will be just "bubbles of water" – full of life and frolic for a while, but eventually to get evaporated into thin air".

Govt-Press relations took a different turn starting from the month of June 1992. The fact that the State Government authorities were not happy with the activities of some independent journalists was gradually known to a section of newsmen in Gangtok. The first clear indication was the abrupt closure of my paper. The government was expected to allow me to use its press for at least six months till I got my own unit established. But within two weeks from the start of the publication of the *Observer*, I was asked to discontinue printing the

paper at the government press. The sudden *volte face* surprised everyone, including myself. It was pointless taking out the paper from somewhere else in the State as I would somehow be stopped from publishing the paper. For me, it was a clear indication that Bhandari was not happy with the paper's independent stand. I was also doubtful about the government's willingness to provide me a piece of land for the press, leave alone the loan part.

Subsequently, a number of journalists faced threats to life and property. It actually started after Chamling's dismissal from the Cabinet on June 17, 1992. The first target was B.B. Subba, editor of *Adhibhakta*, a Nepali weekly. Subba was alleged to have published a scandalous report on the Ecclesiastical Minister, P.L. Gurung, who was supposed to have sexually abused a village damsel in west Sikkim. Gurung lost no time in filing a defamation suit against Subba, who at once went into hiding after receiving threat to his life from local *goondas*. His paper stopped coming out since then though Subba still managed to take out a few issues from outside Sikkim from time to time.

Another journalist, who was wanted by the authorities, was C.B. Chettri, editor of *Saptabik Sikkim*, another Nepali weekly published from Gangtok. The main ire against Chettri related to a letter carried in the 'Letter to the Editor' section of his paper which went against the ruling party. Both Chettri and Subba had to flee Sikkim for sometime in order to escape arrest. Chettri subsequently managed to continue with his paper, though on a subdued note.

On June 24 night, some hoodlums, reportedly SSP youths, *gheraoed* the residence of Ganga Rai, editor of *Darpan*, a bi-weekly Nepali paper. Luckily, we were able to defuse the tense situation and saved Rai. "I could have been finished if you had not intervened", Rai told me after the harrowing incident. *Darpan* is perhaps one of the boldest Nepali papers in the State, and in the past two years, it has been able to establish its mark among the people.

Shiva Pradhan, editor of *Gangtok Samachar*, had just

returned home in the afternoon of June 30. He was away from the State for about two weeks. Apprehending trouble, I went to see him at his place. I got there as soon as he got back. Without wasting any time I told him to pack his bag and leave Gangtok immediately as his life was in great danger. I had got reports that some *goondas* were being sent to his place on the same day to fix him. I didn't know what he had done while he was away but all that was needed to be done at that point of time was to ensure Pradhan's safety. I felt that he should quit Gangtok immediately to avoid trouble. Within half an hour of his arrival, he was sent away in a reserved taxi late in the evening. He came back only after about a week when the situation was normal.

The threat against Rai was because he had published the people's reaction to Chamling's ouster in his paper. His comments on the state of the Press in Sikkim was carried in the July 31, 1992 issue of *India Today*, where he stated: "We don't enjoy any press freedom. One can't even publish bare news items, never mind comments. In Sikkim you write and face the rod".

These developments within the media were viewed with great concern and apprehension by the SPA members. While Rai was the SPA Vice-President, Pradhan was its General Secretary. Both Subba and Chettri were its members. It was difficult to maintain any kind of relation with the government if it failed to respect our basic rights. Though we still wanted to continue cordial relations with the government, we were convinced that it was pointless trying to persuade the authorities to go slow on the Press. They neither had the will nor the intellectual capacity to understand and appreciate the role of the Press in a democracy.

We did not act rashly against the authorities' failure to check the continuous threat and intimidation to newsmen in the State but during the general meeting of the SPA on June 16, I made it quite clear to the members that while the Press was keen on maintaining good relations with the government,

"freedom of the Press cannot be sacrificed" in the process.

Two months later, I took another step which may have further annoyed the authorities. During the meeting of the SPA held on August 28, 1992, I voiced my opinion against the move of some members of the SPA to felicitate Bhandari for fulfilling the demand for constitutional recognition of Nepali language. The SPA had already welcomed the Centre's decision to include Nepali in the 8th Schedule of the Constitution and had issued a Press release on this after the Parliament passed a Bill to accord constitutional recognition to Nepali, Manipuri and Konkani in August 1992. Some of us felt that welcoming the Centre's decision on the language issue was right and proper as most of our papers in Sikkim were Nepali papers. Moreover, the language issue, though being one of the basic demands of the ruling party, also concerned those in the literary and media circles. But some of our members felt that we should do more than just welcome the Centre's decision. They wanted to make a big issue of it, mainly with a view to serve their personal interests. I, along with a few others, disagreed on this.

Language has always been a very touchy issue in the hills of Darjeeling and Sikkim, and I felt that we, as a professional body, should not involve ourselves too deeply in it. I advised our members to restrain themselves and to express their views on the issue through their own papers and not to use the SPA to do anything which would jeopardise our credibility and interest. Besides, it was too dangerous to make a big issue of the whole thing when our friends on the other side of hills in Darjeeling were all tensed up due to non-fulfilment of their demand for constitutional recognition of the Gorkha language.

I was glad of the fact that some of our members appreciated the views that I had expressed in the meeting, which urged the SPA members to think rationally and maintain the independent character of our Association. However, for fear of adverse reactions, they expressed their views personally to me in private and not at the meeting, where they remained silent. I would have appreciated if they had spoken up openly

at the meeting and let their feelings known to all. One of our main weaknesses as newsmen has been our eagerness to please those in power for personal gains, irrespective of the harm it may cause to the Press in general. I'm afraid this kind of attitude will still be the main problem among journalists in Sikkim even as politicians try to take advantage of our poor economic condition.

Another very disturbing development within the Press and which also directly concerned the State Government came up in September 1992. In their enthusiasm to please certain influential persons in the administration, some journalists felt that it was their rightful duty to side with the Power Department in battling against the CPI(M).

In a letter to the Power Department Secretary, L.P. Tewari, the CPI(M)'s State Secretariate Member, Duk Nath Nepal, had severely criticised the functioning of the Power Department on matters relating to employment in the department. Instead of being impartial observers of events, some newsmen took advantage of the situation and directly involved themselves and other journalists in the controversy by siding with the Power Department for their personal gains.

During a meeting of the Press held in Mayur Hotel at the end of September 1992, some journalists defended the Power Department and virtually condemned the activities of the CPI(M) in Sikkim. Fortunately, though most of the members expressed their condemnation against the CPI(M), others, including several members of the SPA, refrained from passing any comment on the issue.

Apparently, some newsmen, who were close to Tewari, one of the most influential secretaries in Sikkim, called for a 'get-together' at the hotel and invited several journalists. I was out of station at that time. Not knowing what the real purpose of the meeting was, some newsmen came to the hotel but were shocked to find out that they had been tricked into a situation. The meeting was basically called to project the image that the Press was against the CPI(M) and was with the government.

I was furious when I found out what some of my colleagues were upto. We immediately called for an emergent meeting of the executive body of the SPA and discussed on the matter. One person, who was deeply involved in the controversy, was one of our executive body members. He realised his mistakes and apologised during the meeting. We took strong exceptions to such development and issued a Press statement at once to clarify everything. The activities of some newsmen seemed to justify the allegation that the Press was functioning as a frontal organisation of the ruling party. This was far from the truth and we felt the need to take a firm stand and make things clear to everyone.

In a Press release issued after our meeting, we condemned the manner in which the Press was unnecessarily dragged into a controversy. The unfortunate incident not only tarnished the SPA's image but damaged the integrity of many of our senior journalists, who unknowingly attended the meeting without realising its implications. I personally made a strong appeal to all newsmen in the State to desist from involving themselves in situations which would cause unnecessary controversy and doubt in the minds of the public.

The appeal, dated October 15, which was sent along with the Press release, stated: "A section of the Press in Sikkim has taken a very serious note of the manner in which several newsmen in the State have involved themselves in voicing criticisms against the activities of a political party in an obvious bid to defend the administration. I refer to the meeting held here in Gangtok in Mayur Hotel by a section of the Press in which many present at the meeting expressed their views against the allegations of the CPI(M) on the functioning of the State Power Department. I myself being out of station at that time was not present in this meeting but it appears that the sole purpose of the said meeting was to elicit views from newsmen on the statement issued by the CPI(M) against the Power Department with a view to ensure that most pressmen were against the activities of the CPI(M) in Sikkim.

While individual journalists are free to express their views and comments on the activities of political parties, it is not expected from responsible media persons to meet at a particular place and to take a collective stand opposing or supporting the activities of any individual or organisation, particularly of politicians and political parties, which are in no way connected to the Press. The timing, the general views expressed, and the outcome of the meeting does not reflect well on the Press in the State which is trying to preserve and promote the high traditions and standards of journalism. This is most unfortunate and I as the President of the Sikkim Press Association appeal to all newsmen to limit their activities to professional work and to act responsibly in future and not do anything which may adversely affect the integrity and credibility of the Press in the State. I am glad that some members, after realising why they were called for the meeting, refrained from passing any comment on the subject matter under discussion.

I also appeal to all concerned persons, irrespective of whoever they may be, not to resort to the Press to fight their battles. Any attempt to use the media by any person, from within or outside the Press, as had been done in the above case, will be construed as interference with the freedom of the Press and will be strongly opposed. Resorting to such devious methods to use the Press will also adversely affect the growth of a healthy and responsible Press in the State which is vitally needed. The Press in Sikkim wants to establish a healthy and cordial relationship with the State administration. But this cannot be done at the cost of the integrity of individual journalists and freedom of the Press".

My appeal further stated, "I have constantly appealed to the Press 'to promote and protect professional interest, standard, dignity and unity'. I reiterate this appeal once again. I am well aware that we are passing through a difficult stage but these are testing times for us all and we must stand firm and steadfast. Our activities as individual journalists and as a collective body must reflect the highest ideals of our profession. I am

confident that the Press in Sikkim, despite our occasional shortcomings, will work in the best interest of the Press and the people of the State".

The appeal received wide coverage and was even aired by the AIR (All India Radio). Most of the members of our Association, including those close to the ruling party, felt that we had taken the right stand. The step we had taken was a reminder to everyone, including the State Government and the ruling party, not to take the Press for granted. This time, I was determined to stick on and shoulder the responsibility entrusted to me in the beginning of the year. Despite our inherent weaknesses, I was determined to guard our freedom at any cost.

A few days after our Press statement, the Chief Minister gave a Press conference at Mayur Hotel, which surprisingly, was hosted by the Power Department. Normally, when the CM gives a Press conference, no other departments are involved. This time it was different. It was a clear indication that we had done the right thing by speaking up and sticking our necks out to maintain our freedom and independence. Some of us were convinced that we had been vindicated in our stand on freedom of the Press in Sikkim. After this incident, it was clear to everyone where I stood and what the majority of newsmen really wanted. Time, fortunately, revealed the truth to everyone in its own special way.

More than a year had passed since I had met Bhandari on December 1, 1991. And for a long time his words – "We have met, let us not part" – kept ringing in my ears. I have always been a very positive kind of a person and expected the best from worst situations. For a while, I felt that Bhandari would change for the better, and that with this change, the Sikkimese people, who have suffered so much for so long, would benefit. But perhaps I expected too much from him. Perhaps I was too naive – always looking for the best in an individual and always ready to trust and be trusted.

Bhandari has his faults, and there is no doubt in my mind on this matter. But seeing him from a slightly closer angle, I felt

that he was a misunderstood person in many respect, and given the right situation and the right people around him, he would certainly have a better and different image for himself, which the Sikkimese people, who once placed great faith and trust on him, would be proud of. But unfortunately, he himself deliberately chose to drift away from the people and cause doubts in their minds. I was convinced that power had gone into his head and that he was beyond redemption. He could not tolerate any criticism and wanted all, including the Press, to bow down to him. He gave us freedom to move around; but this freedom was limited, much too limited for a person like me who wanted full freedom and could not function with a limited autonomy.

And as I look back over the happenings of the year 1992, I cannot help but wonder what Bhandari was really upto. Let him judge things for himself. As for myself, I've come through fine. My meeting with Bhandari, as I look back now, was a meeting of two bodies and not two minds. Someone once told me, "Love is not looking into each others eyes but looking into the same direction". How true this is in my own profession. There may be exceptions, but pressmen and politicians cannot really hold hands and walk together in the same direction for too long.

Perhaps the reason why the government was reluctant to help me set up my press was mainly because of the impression they got from me that I would not give anything in return. Bhandari could have kept his word and helped me set up my press. But he didn't. We were two individuals trying to build up a relationship without giving anything concrete to each other. But relations, which are built on doubt and mistrust and which lack a strong foundation, cannot last. This is what happened in our case.

What could have I given that would satisfy him? The only earthly possessions that I had was my press and the paper. And these, too, have been taken away from me. I was left with only my freedom and dignity. And who can take them away from

me? No one.

Knowing my uncompromising attitude, one of my friends, who had earlier defected into the ruling party from the Congress (I), advised me in November 1992, "Jigs", he said, "bend, don't break".

My reply to him was, "If you bend, you are broken!" He smiled and walked away, while I drove on.

CHAPTER 16

Ethnic Awakening

"The course of human events – even the greatest historical events – is determined ultimately not by the leader but by the common, ordinary people. Their hopes and dreams, their doubts and fears, their courage and tenacity, their quiet commitments determine the destiny of the world"

Jimmy Carter

"Revolutions are not made, they come. A revolution is as natural a growth as an oak. It comes out of the past. Its foundations are laid far back".

Wendell Phillips

In the eyes of the vast majority of Nepalese living in the country, Sikkim is gradually being perceived as a Nepali State, catering to the linguistic and cultural aspirations of the Indian Nepalese for a 'homeland' of their own, delinked from Nepal. Though the right moment has not yet come, there are signs of the emergence of a greater Nepali State in the region comprising Sikkim, Darjeeling, and possibly other neighbouring areas where Nepalese are dominant. For the Nepalese, language has always been a unifying factor, and the constitutional recognition of the Nepali language, through its inclusion in the 8th Schedule of the Indian Constitution in August 1992, has given

the Indian Nepalese a sense of unity, identity and self-respect. The move for creation of smaller states in India on linguistic lines by major political parties in the country, will definitely help towards creation of a Nepali-dominated State in the region.

But beneath this somewhat superficial and sweeping generalisation of the psyche and aspirations of the Nepalese in the region, there are dissenting voices, which are yet to take a concrete shape. Though the role of language as a major factor for national and regional unification cannot be altogether denied, there are indications that race, and not language, may be the overriding factor in determining the course of political events in the region, and particularly in Sikkim, where the Mongoloid section of the Nepalese, who are in the majority, are becoming more assertive and articulate.

Many of them, including the Rais and Limbus, are openly declaring that though they are also a "Nepali-speaking people", Nepali is not really their 'mother tongue' as is made out to be by protagonists of Nepali language, who claim that Nepali is the 'mother tongue' of 'one crore' Nepalese in India. While the Limbu language is a recognised language in Sikkim, having its own script, the Rais, who are divided into ten *thars* (tribes), have their own language/dialect, and are making efforts to preserve and promote them.

Elsewhere in the world, politics may be decided by the colour of one's skin, or by the faith that one professes; but in this part of the region, the shape of things to come may ultimately be determined by the shape of one's nose. The traditional *thepche-nepche* (the Aryan Nepalese have 'pointed noses' and the Mongoloid segment of Nepalese have 'flat noses') divide denoting their racial differences, is gradually surfacing, and will definitely set the future political agenda in the Himalayan borderland. Such developments will surely spill over to eastern Nepal, where the feeling of oneness between the Rais and Limbus of belonging to the same race (Mongoloids) and having a common historical background and

religion, is very much alive.

About a hundred years back, when the British in India first cast longing eyes on Sikkim, they adopted a divisive policy based on racial and religious considerations. The Britishers felt that by allowing the Hindu Nepalese to settle in Sikkim and thereby changing the composition of its population, their position in the kingdom would be secured, enabling them to set a foothold in the region. "The influx of these hereditary enemies of Tibet is our surest guarantee against a revival of Tibetan influence. Here also religion will play a leading part. In Sikkim, as in India, Hinduism will assuredly cast out Buddhism and the prayer wheel of the lama will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman", wrote H.H. Risley in the *Sikkim Gazetteer* in 1894. The British experiment was a complete success. The origin of the merger of Sikkim with India in 1975 may be traced back to the late 19th century when the Britishers succeeded in taking over the administration and politics of Sikkim. The first Political Officer of Sikkim, John Claude White, who took charge of the administration in Sikkim in 1889, adopted the policy of encouraging large-scale Nepalese immigrants to settle in Sikkim, despite opposition from the indigenous Buddhist Bhutia-Lepchas. If it wasn't for the large Nepalese population in Sikkim, the former kingdom's merger with India may either have been delayed or not have taken place at all.

The political and social scenario of Sikkim and the Himalayan region has undergone a sea change in the past one century. The process of modernization and the speed of change has led to greater political consciousness and more democratisation of the political system. Better educational facilities, faster communication system, and improved economic prospects have helped the people to view the changes taking place from a different perspective. People all across the Himalayan frontier – stretching from Ladakh in Jammu and Kashmir in the North West to Arunachal Pradesh in the North-East – are on the threshold of a new cultural renaissance. Like the people of the Baltic states of Lithuania, Latvia ad

Estonia and other places in eastern Europe, the Ladakhis, Nepalese, Sikkimese, Bhutanese and those in the North-East states of India are slowly rising up and looking backward to go forward. They are discovering their roots and making determined efforts to preserve their ancient heritage even in a cold and hostile political climate.

Though this new awareness in many places is confined to a few select groups and individuals at the moment, nevertheless, given the right political atmosphere, it will set the Himalayas aflame and thus usher in a new era in the entire region. A large section of Nepalese living in the Himalayas do feel the need to shake off the past and get back to their roots and embrace their unique cultural heritage, which has been almost wiped out after more than two centuries' rule of the Shah dynasty of Nepal, beginning from mid-18th century. The winds of change blowing across the world, and particularly in the former Soviet Union and Eastern Europe, have acted as a catalyst to the new ethnic awakening in the entire Himalayan belt, where race and religion may yet play a major role in determining the socio-political development of the region, though in an entirely different and revolutionary way.

In Sikkim, the political, economic and cultural domination of the minority high-caste Hindu Nepalese belonging to the Aryan race, is being steadily resisted by the majority of the Nepalese, who belong to the Mongoloid stock. This will definitely have its counter effect in Nepal, where the composition of the Nepalese population and dominance of the upper-caste Brahmins and Chettris is very much the same. While the Drukpas in Bhutan are fiercely championing their own national identity, the main cause for rebellion among the Nepalese living in southern Bhutan is suppression of their cultural identity. When the Nepalese in southern Bhutan realise their true identity and not the one given to them by their past rulers in Nepal, things will definitely take a new turn, and the struggle for peaceful co-existence will be much smoother even as the vast majority of the Nepalese living there make new and

startling discoveries of their real cultural identity.

In the seven sister-states of the North-East, the fight for retention of the regional sentiments of the people through the 'sons of the soil' policy, and their refusal to merge themselves completely into the national mainstream, too, has racial overtones. Despite hardships caused through decades of underground resistance movements, the people of the North-East have not yet reconciled to being dictated by New Delhi and are now making concerted efforts to forge a 'united front' to safeguard their identity.

The pace and direction of this new ethnic awakening depends on the nature of change and the willingness of the people to fight against the *status quo*. In their endeavour to preserve their own unique identity, past traditions and customs, rooted in the Hindu culture introduced by the ruling Shah dynasty in Nepal, are gradually being discarded by the Mongoloid section of the Nepalese. While the Nepali language has been, and will continue to be the *lingua-franca* of the region, preservation of other languages and dialects, which belong to the Tibeto-Burman group, are being stressed. A beginning has also been made to abandon Hindu customs and practices in some areas in the region in place of their own traditional animistic religion or Buddhism.

Politically, the feeling that the vast majority of the Nepalese in Nepal and Sikkim are being dominated by a minority community, who are seen as aliens, is very much alive in the inner circles, and is fast gaining strength and support. The emphasis on regional sentiments and the determination of the people to discover and preserve their own cultural roots, coupled with the steady cry for democracy and rule of the majority, adds a new dimension to the problems and prospects of the changing face of the Himalayas.

As early as 1983, Das in his book on Sikkim warned: "A tiny speck in the vastness of India with its Himalayan serenity, Sikkim seems to be insignificant in the vast multitude of problems facing other States of India. Yet, behind that Mon-

goloid droopiness of the eyelids, lies a dangerous streak of potential trouble more serious than one of the "seven sisters" of the northeast. Its emergence as a Nepalese speaking State, its geographical location with Tibet, Nepal and Bhutan surrounding it on three sides, its ethnic discontent and power distortions linked to it the "sons of the soil" politics of the adjoining northeastern states affecting the Nepalese settlers there and the demand of a Gorkhaland by the Darjeeling-Nepalese with an eye on Sikkim, are some of the dimensions of the problems which need a careful study based on the perceptions of tomorrow. China's trouble potential in this region with its non-acceptance of Sikkim's merger with India and Nepal's mother country image in the eyes of the two million Nepalese settled in the northeastern region besides the Bhutanese problems with its own vast Nepalese population, cannot be ignored easily or lost sight of in the national context".

The anti-Hindu stir led by various ethnic groups in Nepal is gradually building up, particularly in the eastern region of the country. It is only a matter of time before Kathmandu wakes up to the sound of ethnic resurgence surfacing all over the country and is forced to take note of the united voice of the minorities. The minority groups in Nepal, who are united on racial and religious lines, are opposing the domination of the upper-caste Hindu Nepalese, who have imposed Hinduism as the State religion and the Nepali language, also known as the *khas bhasa*, as the State language. They are demanding education in their respective mother-tongues and revival of Buddhism and tribal religions of the Kiranti people inhabiting eastern Nepal. Thus, the war of attrition between the '*matwalis*' and the '*tagadaris*' (Brahmin-Chettris wearing the sacred thread), which has a long history, goes on, and may even lead to a bitter end in the next century if the minority upper-caste Hindus continue to ignore the aspirations of the majority community. Those who refuse to accept the ebb and flow of history are surely shying away from reality and resisting change, which is but inevitable.

The Limbuana Mukti Morcha (LMM – Limbuana Liberation Front), a Limbu-dominated political organisation of eastern Nepal, has been demanding 'regional autonomy' for the vast tract of land lying between east of Arun river in eastern Nepal and the Singalila range bordering western Sikkim. This area, earlier known as 'Limbuana', was inhabited largely by the Limbus. The LMM President, Bir Nembang, in his party leaflet, has demanded restoration of the provisions of the "*Lal Mobar*" signed in 1774 between the Limbus and Prithvi Narayan Shah, the founder of Nepal's Shah dynasty. According to Nembang, Prithvi Narayan Shah issued a "*Lal Mobar*" to the Limbu king granting him the right to "rule" Limbuana. While the greater portion of this land is still in eastern Nepal, parts of it now fall under Darjeeling and western Sikkim, where Limbus (also known as Tsongs in Sikkim) are in the majority. This vast tract of land, which was previously the homeland of the Limbus, was bifurcated in 1815 under the Segauli Treaty, which ended the Anglo-Nepalese wars.

The LMM alleges that the party-less panchayat system in Nepal, which ended in 1991 with the advent of democracy, failed to put an end to the "discriminatory" treatment of the minority "nationalities" in Nepal, the majority of whom are of Mongoloid stock. It has called for a "democracy" based on the "self-determination of nationalities in Nepal".

Another person, who is leading the Mongoloid onslaught against the high-caste Nepalese in Nepal, is Gopal Gurung, a Nepali writer and journalist based in Kathmandu. Gurung's book, "*The Unseen Truth in Nepali Politics*" (presently banned in Nepal and Sikkim but much in demand in these places and Darjeeling), attempts to expose the hollowness of Nepali politics, which, he says, is based on exploitation of the majority Mongoloid Nepalese by the minority Hindus. Gurung has now formed a political party, the Mongol National Organisation (MNO) to take up his cause. Expectedly, his party failed to contest the elections in Nepal in 1991 as it was regarded as a "communal" party by the concerned authorities. Both Nem-

bang and Gurung, who have undergone jail sentences for their cause during the panchayati raj in Nepal, have made numerous contacts with key figures and organisations in Sikkim and Darjeeling.

Minorities in Nepal have for long resented domination by the upper-caste Hindus, whose origin may be traced back to 1559, when Drubva Shah of Rajput origin conquered the Gorkha principality in Nepal and settled there. Two centuries later, his descendant, Prithvi Narayan Shah, conquered the different principalities in Nepal and unified the country and made it a Hindu kingdom in 1769. Though the original inhabitants of Nepal resented the cultural infiltration of the aliens led by the Shah rulers, not much was done in the way of resistance, and the various minority groups living in Nepal, down the centuries, have learned to undergo the process of cultural assimilation, which actually meant discarding their native identity and accepting the religion, language and culture of the Hindu rulers.

With the advent of democracy in Nepal, the minorities are asserting themselves and demanding equal status and preservation and promotion of their cultural heritage. A memorandum submitted to the Nepalese Prime Minister, Girija Prasad Koirala, in August 1991 by the "Various Religious, Languages and Nationalities Action Committee", has voiced its opposition to declaring Nepal as a "Hindu Kingdom". The memorandum, signed by the Committee's General Secretary, Parshu Ram Tamang, has alleged that Nepal's Constitution is discriminatory and catered to the interests of the minority upper-caste Hindus and ignored the sentiments of about 80 per cent of the population who, it is claimed, are non-Hindus.

The Committee has demanded the replacement of the word "Hindu" with "Secular" in the Constitution. It has also voiced its opposition to declaring the Nepali language as the "language of the Nation" and has alleged that non-Nepali languages, which are the mother-tongues of the various ethnic groups in Nepal, have been given "inferior status" in the

country. The Committee has also urged the government to make constitutional provisions to ensure that education is carried out in mother-tongues of the various "nationalities" of the country.

The fact that the minorities in Nepal are asserting their rights and becoming more vocal, is reflected in the resolutions adopted in the first International Workshop on "Human Rights Violation in the Himalayas – Dominance of the Elite" in December 1991, which urged all governments in the Himalayan region to "ensure equality of all ethnic, social, religious and linguistic groups, and to take appropriate measure to enable members of all these groups to participate fully in society and in decision-making processes". The resolutions adopted in the meet also stated: "The Constitution of any country should not promote, safeguard, or grant preferential treatment to any particular religion".

Organised jointly by the Peace Movement Nepal and Nepal Watch (Germany), the participants included human rights activists, journalists, intellectuals, writers and social workers from Nepal, India (Sikkim and Ladakh), Bhutan, Tibet and Europe. They recommended that all governments in the Himalayan region should ensure that "education is available in the mother tongues of different groups, at least at primary level".

Political consciousness amongst the minorities in Nepal is growing and the international media is fully alive to the situation there, although major papers in India and in Nepal, have kept a discreet silence on this touchy issue. As early as March 1951, the London *Times* in one of its leading articles headlined "Unrest in Nepal", wrote:

"Nepalese of Mongoloid-Tibetan stock (Magar, Gurung, Limbu and Rai) ...regard the Rajput governing class, to which King Tribhuvan and the Rana family both belong, as alien. A feeling is growing among the men of Gorkha race that they have more in common to the east and north than with the plainsmen of India. This feeling is very strong in the large

Gorkha colonies in Sikkim...Bhutan and in Assam. It has been reinforced by the regular arrival of political refugees from Nepal, full of grievances against the Kathmandu Government. In this way there has grown a dangerous movement which is ready to accept help from any quarter in overthrowing the Kathmandu regime and breaking the power of the Rana family".

Reflecting the same sentiments, the paper again wrote in April 1951. "...there is a party in Nepal which dislikes the present connection between Delhi and Kathmandu and would prefer to build up a Mongolian-Tibetan national movement linked to Sikkim, Bhutan, and countries north of the Himalayas rather than to India".

Much the same feeling persists even after a gap of four decades as is evident from an article which appeared in the *Sunday Mail* of Calcutta in 1992. Entitled "Anti-Hindu Stir Building Up in Nepal", the paper wrote: "Various ethnic groups in Nepal, known for their martial qualities, have expressed concern over the erosion of their racial and tribal identity. They have opposed imposition of Nepali as the language of the Himalayan Kingdom, demanded education in their respective mother-tongues and threatened a bloodbath if the domination of the Brahmin and Chhetri Hindus over the Mongoloid segment of the population is not ended. They have also opposed the constitutional provision of having Hinduism as the state religion. They claim that the Hindus are actually a minority in Nepal, and if a state religion is a must, let Nepal be called a Buddhist country".

The paper went on to add: "...the emergence of political parties like the Mongol National Organisation (MNO), Limbuwan Mukti Morcha (LMM) and the Nepal Janajati Sangha (NJS) has added a new dimension to the whole situation. Though ill-organised now, these political parties may create a strong base in future, aggravating the struggle for supremacy between the people of Aryan and Mongoloid stock".

Ethnic resurgence in various regions of the Himalayan

belt cannot be viewed in isolation. It must be perceived from the changes that are taking place in the local, regional, national and international level. While the Ladakh Buddhist Association (LBA) has been spearheading the agitation against Muslim domination and demanding creation of an autonomous hill district council for the Ladakhis, various ethnic groups, which have sprouted in the past several years in Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and the North-East, are also joining hands and raising similar demands.

The LBA believes that "decades of suppression by the Kashmiri Muslims" over the Buddhist Ladakhis, who are the majority community in the region, have led to erosion of the Ladakhi culture and art. The LBA General Secretary, Rigzin Jora, says: "We are not talking of secession when we demand an autonomous district hill council for Leh. We are Indians and will always remain part of the country. But it is absolutely erroneous to equate Kashmir Valley with the rest of the State. Ladakh constitutes 60 per cent of the total Jammu and Kashmir territory and has a distinct geo-political and cultural identity of its own. The aspirations of the people of Ladakh and their national outlook are different from the people of Kashmir".

The demand for formation of 'Gorkhaland' in the hills of north Bengal raised by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led by its President, Subash Ghising, is indicative of the identity crisis of the Indian Nepalese, who are striving for a sense of belonging in the Indian sub-continent.

In Sikkim, a section of the Bhutia-Lepchas and Limbus are propagating the revival of the traditional '*Lbo-Mon-Tsong-Sum*' concept of unity between the Bhutia, Lepcha and Limbu communities. Historical records show that these three communities were the dominant groups in Sikkim before the Britishers encouraged large-scale Nepalese influx in the region in the 19th century. But efforts for bringing unity among the hill tribes does not end with the '*Lbo-Mon-Tsong-Sum*'. The need to embrace a wider section of the hill people in the region to form a common union among the people, having

similar background and common aspirations, has been greatly felt, and this feeling of oneness and unity is gathering momentum day by day.

The Limbus, along with the Tamangs and Rais, in Sikkim and Darjeeling are demanding Scheduled Tribes status for the three communities with the sole objective of improving their economic lot and preserving their cultural identity, which has been largely erased. The formation of the All-India Kirat Rai-Limbu Janajati Association in Darjeeling is reflective of the mood of the people in the region.

In Sikkim, apart from social organisations, political parties such as the Congress (I) and the Denzong People's Chogpa have demanded Scheduled Tribes status for the Limbus and Tamangs. The Congress (I) unit in Sikkim headed by Ashok Subba, who belongs to the Limbu community, wants Sikkim to become a 'tribal state'. This demand is being supported by other tribal organisations, including the Denzong Tribal Yargay Chogpa (DTYC) and the Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumlung. A few years back, the Chogpa had taken the initiative to form a broad-based political organisation in Sikkim comprising the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals and other hill tribes from the *matwali* community, who are now listed among the OBCs in Sikkim. The demand of the Congress (I) in Sikkim for closer ties with the North-East, and the likely inclusion of Sikkim in the North-East Council (NEC), seen from the present context, seems significant.

The emergence of Pawan Kumar Chamling '*Kiran*' as the leader of the *matwalis* in Sikkim and the rise of the Rais in State politics, will surely accelerate the process of unity amongst all hill tribes in the region. Describing the Rais in their book – "*The Gurkhas*" – W. Brook Northey and C.J. Morris say: "In appearance the Rai is, perhaps, more Mongolian than any of the other races inhabiting Nepal". Chamling, the writer-turned-politician, whose poems speak of 'seeds of revolt' and 'fire of revolution' is perhaps acutely aware of how cut-off his people are from their roots. Restoring the lost identity of the

Rais and economic and political upliftment of the OBCs in Sikkim is a top priority in Chamling's political agenda. The fact that Chamling feels the need to have a long-term political perspective for himself and his newly-formed political party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), is a measure of the man's depth of understanding of the political and cultural dilemma that his people are faced with. His determination to lead them to attain "freedom from fear, hunger and oppression" (lines from Chamling's poem entitled "*Sparks of Revolution*") reflects the anger and frustration felt by a large section of the hill people in the region.

With the coming of democracy and the emergence of a strong and assertive multi-ethnic society in the Himalayas, held together with a common historical background and racial and religious affinity, a fresh look and a new approach to the problems and prospects of the Himalayan people is called for. It will not be in the national interest of both India and China to continue to ignore the changes that are perceptibly taking place in the Himalayan frontier. Though there may be many denials over the reported move to form a 'greater Nepal' or a 'greater Sikkim' in the region, the concept of a 'greater homeland' to meet the cultural aspirations of the hill people in the region will not die down easily, particularly when the people are now more aware of their past history and more conscious of the need to discover and preserve their unique cultural identity. This new sense of freedom and oneness of thought amongst the hill tribes in the region will surely lead to a new socio-political awareness in the Himalayan belt in the near future.

However, the direction and destiny of the present ethnic awakening in the region depends largely on what happens to Tibet, whose cultural and religious influence on the people of the Himalayas, has always been great. The formation of organisations such as "Himalayan Buddhist Cultural Association" and "Himalayan Committee for Action on Tibet" by Buddhists living in the Himalayan region of India, aimed at preserv-

ing and promoting the rich cultural heritage of the Himalayas and supporting the "just cause of Tibetan struggle", is an indication that the people in the Himalayas are alive to the problems faced by Tibet and the Tibetans, and are willing to do their bit to put pressure on the Chinese authorities for Tibet's cause.

The opening of the traditional border trade routes with Tibet through the Himalayan frontier between India and China, after the closure of over three decades, and the possibility of an amicable settlement of the border disputes between the two countries, are all good signs. The likely resumption of the traditional border trade route through Nathula pass in eastern Sikkim will hopefully lead to improved relations between the two countries.

In his book, *"The Chinese Betrayal: My Years With Nehru"* (published in 1971), B.N. Mullik, the former Director of the Intelligence Bureau (IB), while commenting on India's foreign policy on Tibet and the Himalayan frontier, wrote:

"To guarantee effectively the security of the Himalayas, it is essential to restore Tibetan independence. This is the aim to which India's foreign policy should be directed and should remain ever present in the minds of the Indian negotiators in every talk that is held with China or the countries allied to her or even in the United Nations...every diplomatic step should be taken and carried on skillfully with this aim in view...What is required is a new posture, a new line of thinking and a long-range policy regarding India's relations with Tibet and China, and that policy should have Tibetan independence as its core".

Mullik then goes on to add: "With an independent Tibet separating China from India, the other Himalayan States like Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, etc. will fit into their proper positions as independent or semi-independent countries or units with friendly and defence ties with India. The population of NEFA will not be disturbed any longer and there will be a much better prospect of integrating this population in India's political and social stream while maintaining its cultural identity...It is Mongolian independence which has made a large stretch of

the Russian frontier immune from Chinese threats, and it will be Tibetan independence which alone can make India's northern frontiers immune from a threat from the same direction. Therefore, both from the point of view of moral and humanitarian grounds as well as from the point of view of India's own national security and interest, India must strive, with the cooperations of all like-minded nations, to restore Tibet to its independent status".

As the two giants of Asia come together and become more friendly and open with each other, it must evolve a new policy for the people of the Himalayas based on peace, freedom and mutual respect.

CHAPTER 17

Struggle And Triumph

"These are the times that try men's souls. The summer soldiers and the sunshine patriots will, in this crisis, shrink from the service of his country; but he that stands it now, deserves the love and thanks of man and woman. Tyranny, like hell, is not easily conquered; yet we have this consolation with us, that the harder the conflict the more glorious the triumph".

Thomas Paine

"...for without victory, there is no survival".

Winston Churchill

"And I know that if you carry these words through to the end, it will be a victory...not just for you, but for something that should win, that moves the world – and never wins acknowledgment".

Ayan Rand, "Atlas Shrugged"

I began the new year on a positive note. I was convinced that 1993 would bring significant changes in my life. I have always been acutely aware of the fact that on completion of every ten years, new avenues and opportunities seem to gradually unfold. And as I lay on my bed on the first day of

January 1993, I was deeply conscious of the fact that the new year would bring something different in my personal and professional life.

One of the most exciting and meaningful news for me in recent times came on February 10. We had won in the seat reservation case in the Supreme Court which had been kept pending for 14 years. The Supreme Court, in a landmark judgement on February 10, upheld reservation of 12 seats for the Bhutia-Lepchas (BLs) and one seat for the Sangha in the State Legislative Assembly. The judgement also upheld the validity of the 36th Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1975, which provided special status to ethnic and religious groups in Sikkim. This historic judgement, delivered by a five-judge Constitution bench on February 10, came as a great surprise to most people although some of us were expecting a verdict on the seat issue any time during that period.

For me, the Supreme Court verdict was a personal victory. It was my first New Year gift! I felt a deep sense of satisfaction and security and was happy that our efforts to preserve our identity and retain our political rights had not gone waste. After nearly one and half decades of legal wrangle, we had finally triumphed. This was a significant achievement of historical importance.

A five-judge Constitution bench by 3:2 majority judgement upheld the validity of the 36th Constitution (Amendment) Act, 1975, which provided for special provisions in Article 371F of the Constitution to accommodate certain incidents of the evolution of the political institutions of Sikkim. The verdict also upheld the validity of an amendment to the Representation of People Act, 1950/51 reserving 12 seats for the BLs and one seat for the Sangha in the State Legislative Assembly. The majority judgement delivered by the Chief Justice designate, Justice M.N. Venkatachaliah, on behalf of Justice J.S. Verma and Justice K. Jayachandra Reddy and himself, upheld reservation of 12 seats for the Bhutia-Lepchas and one seat for the Sangha in the State Legislative Assembly of Sikkim.

Justice S.C. Agrawal, in a separate judgement, agreed with the judgement on the issue of reservation of 12 seats for the BLs, but differed on the issue of one seat for the Sangha. The Chief Justice, Justice L.M. Sharma, delivered a dissenting judgement and observed that reservation of as many as 12 seats for the BLs was disproportionate to the ratio of population of the BLs to the total population of Sikkim. Justice Sharma, who was to retire as Chief Justice the very next day (Feb. 11), while striking down the seat reserved for the Sangha as unconstitutional, directed dissolution of the Assembly and called for fresh elections.

The judgement delivered by Justice Venkatachaliah on petitions filed by Ram Chandra Poudyal and his brother, Somnath Poudyal (now in SSP), while upholding the validity of Article 371F of the Constitution observed: "The inequalities in representation in the present case are an inheritance and compulsion from the past. Historical considerations have justified a differential treatment".

The Supreme Court's views, as reflected in the judgement, regarding Article 371F of the Constitution relating to Sikkim noted: "Article 371F(f) cannot be said to violate any basic feature of the Constitution such as the democratic principle. From 1975 and onwards, when the impugned provisions came to be enacted, Sikkim has been emerging from a political society and monarchical system into the mainstream of a democratic way of life and an industrial civilisation. The process and pace of this political transformation is necessarily reliant on its institutions of the past. Mere existence of a Constitution, by itself, does not ensure constitutionalism or a constitutional culture. It is the political maturity and traditions of a people that import meaning to a Constitution which otherwise merely embodies political hopes and ideals. The provisions of clause (f) of Article 371F 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 dominance of one section of the population over another on the basis of ethnic loyalties and identities. These adjustments reflect a 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. Indeed, the impugned provisions, in their very nature, contemplate and provide for a transitional phase in the political evolution of Sikkim and are hereby essentially transitional in character.”

The judgement added: "It is true that the reservation of seats of the kind and the extent brought about by the impugned provisions may not, if applied to the existing States of the Union, pass the Constitutional muster. But in relation to a new territory admitted to the 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 necessary in the admission of strategic border State into the Union. The departures are not such as to negate fundamental principles of democracy”.

Referring to the reservation of 12 seats for the Bhutia-Lepchas, the judgement read: "The degree of proportionality of reservation has to be viewed in the historical development and the rules of apportionment of political power that obtained between the different groups prior to the merger of the territory in India. A parity had been maintained all through. The provisions in the particular situation and the permissible latitudes, cannot be said to be unconstitutional”.

The judgement further observed: "The provision in the Constitution indicating proportionality of representation is necessarily a broad, general and logical principle but not intended to be expressed with arithmetical precision. Articles

332(3A) and 333 are illustrative instances. The principle of mathematical proportionality of representation is not a declared basic requirement in each and every part of the territory of India. Accommodations and adjustments, having regard to the political maturity, awareness and degree of political development in different parts of India, might supply the justification for even non-elected Assemblies wholly or in part, in certain parts of the country. The differing degrees of political development and maturity of various parts of the country, may not justify standards based on mathematical accuracy.

Articles 371A, a special provision in respect of State of Nagaland, 239A and 240 illustrate the permissible areas and degrees of departure. The systemic deficiencies in the plenitude of the doctrine of full and effective representation has not been understood in the constitutional philosophy as derogating from the democratic principle. Indeed, the argument in the case, in the perspective, is really one of violation of the equality principle rather than of the democratic principle. The inequalities in representation in the present case are an inheritance and compulsion from the past. Historical considerations have justified a differential treatment".

Regarding reservation of seats for the minority Bhutia-Lepchas in the Assembly, Justice Agrawal in his judgement noted: "The reservation of seats of Bhutias and Lepchas is necessary because they constitute a minority and in the absence of reservation they may not have any representation in the Legislative Assembly. Sikkimese of Nepali origin constitute the majority in Sikkim and on their own electoral strength they can secure representation in the Legislative Assembly against the unreserved seats. Moreover, Sikkimese of Bhutia and Lepcha origin have a distinct culture and tradition which is different from that of Sikkimese of Nepali origin. Keeping this distinction in mind Bhutias and Lepchas have been declared as Scheduled Tribes under Article 342 of the Constitution."

He added: "The said declaration has not been questioned

before us. The Constitution in Article 332 makes express provision for reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly of a State for Scheduled Tribes. Such a reservation which is expressly permitted by the Constitution cannot be challenged on the ground of denial of right to equality guaranteed under Article 14 of the Constitution".

The Court also upheld the reservation of one seat for the Sangha in the Assembly on similar ground: "The Sangha, the Buddha and the Dharma are the three fundamental postulates and symbols of Buddhism. In that sense they are religious institutions. However, the literature on the history of development of the political institutions of Sikkim adverted to earlier tend to show that the Sangha had played an important role in the political and social life of the Sikkimese people. It had made its own contribution to the Sikkimese culture and political development. There is material to sustain the conclusion that the 'Sangha' had long been associated itself closely with the political developments of Sikkim and was inter-woven with the social and political life of its people. In view of this historical association, the provisions in the matter of reservation of a seat for the Sangha recognises the social and political role of the institution more than its purely religious identity."

The judgement further observed: "In the historical setting of Sikkim and its social and political evolution the provision has to be construed really as not invoking the impermissible idea of a separate electorate either. Indeed, the provision bears comparison to Article 333 providing for representation for the Anglo-Indian community. So far as the provision for the Sangha is concerned, it is to be looked at as enabling a nomination but the choice of the nominee being left to the 'Sangha' itself. We are conscious that a separate electorate for a religious denomination would be obnoxious to the fundamental principles of our secular Constitution. If a provision is made purely on the basis of religious considerations for election of a member of that religious group on the basis of a separate electorate, that would, indeed, be wholly unconstitu-

tional. But in the case of the Sangha, it is not merely a religious institution. It has been historically a political and social institution in Sikkim and the provisions in regard to the seat reserved admit of being construed as a nomination and the Sangha itself being assigned the task of and enabled to indicate the choice of its nominee. The provision can be sustained on this construction".

My report on the Supreme Court verdict carried in February 14, 1993 issue of the *Statesman* stated: "The verdict was widely welcomed by the people, particularly tribals, who claimed that even after 13 years of legal and political onslaught against the community, the effort to abolish their reserved seats and take away their political rights had failed". The feeling that we had at long last successfully defended our rights in the highest court of the land was shared by many people who celebrated the victory in their own quiet ways as is customary with most hill people in the region.

I invited Anup Deb, Chewang Tobgay and Sonam P. Wangdi, a Sikkimese lawyer who had contributed his share on the seat reservation case, for lunch at home soon after the news of the Supreme Court decision reached Gangtok. It was a quiet affair and all of us were genuinely happy over the outcome of the case. Members of the 1983-84 team, which fought the seat case in the Supreme Court, on behalf of the Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association (STWA), an intervening party in the case, were Deb, Chewang and myself. The only person who was not present at my place was Jigdal T. Densapa, the former Home Secretary, who by then had retired from government service. Though officially representing the State Government, one of the respondents in the case, Densapa was very much a part of our team.

It was truly a well-deserved victory for those who had for a long time worked sincerely and painstakingly for a right cause. We knew that it was a victory not only for the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Sangha but for the entire Sikkimese people whose rights and interests were protected under Article 371F

of the Constitution.

Those of us who were associated with the case were aware of the fact that Poudyal had really not lost anything in the case as he did not ask for reservation of seats for the Sikkimese Nepalese. Many people in Sikkim were under the impression that Poudyal, in his petition, had demanded restoration of Assembly seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese. We had only ably defended ourselves against those who were determined to erase us from the face of the earth. I was convinced through this experience that no matter how long it may take, sincere effort and hard work pays in the long run. I was also fully convinced that no power on earth can crush anyone if the people themselves fight and resist all forms of domination and exploitation with all the might at their disposal.

Bhandari, realising the division within the Nepalese in Sikkim on racial and ethnic lines, and being aware of the need to regain support of the BLs, unnecessarily made a big issue of the Supreme Court verdict. He not only welcomed the verdict, but though belated, declared a public holiday to celebrate the occasion. Many public meetings were held throughout the State by the government to celebrate its 'victory' on the seat issue.

Despite the government's much-publicised efforts on the seat issue, many people were not too happy over Bhandari's mischievous moves to take all the credit on the Supreme Court verdict on himself. "Why should he take all the credit?", was a common complaint of most people, many of whom were aware of the dubious role played by the ruling party on the seat reservation issue.

The fact that Bhandari was forced to celebrate "his defeat" is a reflection of the political bankruptcy of the ruling party. Witnessing such a farce and participating in it, is indeed, a very painful and humiliating experience. Many, including prominent public figures and opposition leaders as well as the intelligentsia, criticised the ruling party's rather clumsy and shameful bid to take political advantage of the court verdict. Whether

it was actually able to get all the credit on the issue is altogether a different story. A true indication of Bhandari's success in getting the credit from the people on the issue would only be reflected during the polls.

Chamling, who was with Bhandari since the 1985 Assembly polls, was more forthright and publicly alleged that Bhandari and Poudyal were together on the seat case even though they managed to fool some of the people by appearing to be fighting against each other. This may perhaps be the reason why Poudyal constantly refused to withdraw his petition from the Supreme Court despite public pressure to do so. "Bhandari does not really want me to withdraw my petition", Poudyal told one of his confidants in January 1991, when the case came up for final hearing in the Supreme Court. "He hasn't personally asked me to withdraw the case", Poudyal explained, indicating that both of them had the same views on the seat case.

My own feelings and observations on Bhandari's double role in the case was similar to that of Chamling. In January 1991, I was, once again, back in Delhi to pursue the seat case. Deb was also there along with Kazi. Just before the hearing of the case, scheduled for January 16, 1991, I wrote in the *Statesman*: "Sensing that both the Centre and the State governments (respondents in the case) are not taking the matter seriously, the Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC), a political party of the tribals, through its general secretary, Mr. Tashi W. Fonpo, has in an application to the Supreme Court asked for impleading DPC as party to Mr. Poudyal's case. The DPC is convinced that Bhutia-Lepcha MLAs are not serious in contesting the case. It feels that secret parleys are going on between the ruling party and Mr. Poudyal to get a verdict which would go against the tribals. Even if seats are not reserved for the Nepalese, reduction of seats of the tribals or increase in the general seats in the Assembly would go in favour of the Nepalese since they are in the majority in the State".

I was convinced that a small but powerful section of the

State's Nepali leadership, including highly-placed bureaucrats, were more interested in championing the cause of all Nepalese in the State and in the country rather than only the 'Sikkimese Nepalese'. They, motivated by higher goals for the Nepalese in general, were not content by merely safeguarding the rights and interests of about two and half lac Sikkimese Nepalese. They had bigger plans in mind for the "one crore" Nepalese living in the sub-continent. This may be the main reason why Poudyal has not asked for restoration of reserved seats for the Sikkimese Nepalese in his writ petition.

Those among the Nepalese leadership, including Bhandari, who appeared to be opposing Poudyal legally on the seat issue, did so half-heartedly or with some ulterior motives. Their plans to make Sikkim into a full-fledged Nepali State, which would attract other Nepalese in the region, irrespective of whether they were Indian citizens or not, were dashed to the ground with the Supreme Court verdict. Added to this, the emergence of the *matwali* factor in State politics, which actually surfaced only after the former Prime Minister, V.P. Singh, came up with the 'Mandal card', made things even difficult for those who had greater political designs in Sikkim. With this issue, the age-old inner rivalry between the minority upper-caste Hindu Nepalese and the majority *matwali* Nepalese, who were converted into Hinduism subsequent to the conquest of Nepal by Prithvi Narayan Shah in the latter part of the 18th century, was at once resurrected. Ever since, Sikkim politics have undergone a revolutionary change. If the BLs joined hands with the OBC group, the fate of leaders belonging to the upper-caste Hindu Nepalese such as Bhandari and Poudyal, would be permanently sealed.

Apart from those whose names have already been mentioned earlier in this book regarding their involvement in the seat case, names of a few more persons, who have contributed towards the cause of the minority community in Sikkim, are worth mentioning and placing on record. When the case on the seat issue was initially filed in Delhi High Court by Poudyal

in 1979, the following persons made some contributions in safeguarding the reserved seats of the BLs: Tenzing Dadul, Lachen Rinpoche, Sonam Tshering, Athup Lepcha, Solomon Saring, and the late Rinchen Wangyal Lassopa. Later, when the case came up for final hearing – first in 1983-84 and finally in 1991-93 – among those whose association in the case – legally, politically or otherwise – helped the BLs, included A.K. Subba, Tashi W. Fonpo, P.T. Lucksom, Nandu Thapa, Kalzang Gyatso, T. Gyatso, Nima Lepcha, Kazi Lhendup Dorji, Prakash Gurung, Sonam Yongda, Sonam Bhutia and Chopel Lepcha.

The Supreme Court verdict not only safeguarded the seats reserved for the minority community, but by upholding the sanctity of Article 371F of the Constitution, which has its basis on the historic May 8 Tripartite Agreement of 1973 and the Government of Sikkim Act, 1974, it also enabled the Sikkimese to demand restoration of seats reserved for the Sikkimese Nepalese. The verdict also acknowledged and gave due weightage and recognition to constitutional and historical processes that paved the way for Sikkim becoming the 22nd State of the Indian Union.

While the BLs still need to fight on and demand fresh delimitation of Assembly constituencies to enable election of genuine BL representations in the Assembly, the need for the Sikkimese Nepalese to continue fighting for restoration of their earlier reserved seats, in the face of the ever-increasing influx, assumes greater importance. The Sikkimese people must have a proper understanding of their past history and a clear vision of their future. They must, unitedly and effectively, raise their voice for restoration of their reserved seats and all other rights and freedoms guaranteed under the Constitution to ensure their future survival.

Another major development which took place this year was the attempt made by two former chief ministers of Sikkim regarding corruption charges levelled by the Central Bureau of Investigation (CBI) against Bhandari. Tired of being perpetually kept waiting by the Central Government on the matter,

Kazi and Gurung sought the direct intervention of the Prime Minister, P.V. Narasimha Rao, on the issue.

In a memorandum submitted to the Prime Minister in December 1992, the two former chief ministers alleged that Bhandari, who amassed "crores of rupees", had been let off scot free as he had the backing of certain highly-placed Central leaders. While the CBI found "solid evidence" for Bhandari's prosecution, the "Centre seems to be favouring the Chief Minister and had refused permission to the CBI to reopen the cases against him", the memorandum to the PM stated. Despite the CBI case still pending, Bhandari "has gone from strength to strength to perpetuate and even perfect the intricate art of corruption, misappropriation and even syphoning of government funds", the memorandum added.

The two veteran politicians, while requesting the Prime Minister to "save Sikkim" from being "the most corrupt State of the Indian Union", pointed out, "Politically, the time has come for Centre to take bold steps in Sikkim". Kazi and Gurung, who were the main forces behind Sikkim's merger in 1975, said, "We fought for democracy and freedom. What we have in Sikkim today is dictatorship of the worst type".

Not being content with merely approaching the Centre to initiate appropriate action against Bhandari, Kazi, on March 1993 raised the issue in the Supreme Court. He filed a public interest writ petition in the Supreme Court in March seeking the Court's direction quashing the notification of the Sikkim Government dated January 7, 1987 withdrawing sanction granted by the Gurung Ministry in May 1984 allowing the CBI to investigate cases of corruption in Sikkim. Kazi also asked the Court to issue an order to the CBI and the Central Government, respondents in the case, to produce all records pertaining to cases of corruption against Bhandari and the former chief secretary of Sikkim, P.K. Pradhan, who was then Secretary, Rural Development Department (RDD). Apart from the State's former Rajya Sabha M.P., Karma Topden, many others, including government officials, are said to be involved

in the corruption cases pending with the CBI.

According to Kazi, the CBI had completed investigation in two cases in 1986 and found "incriminating material" against Bhandari and Pradhan. Other sources and reports make similar claims but unless these claims are authenticated by the CBI or the courts, they still remain mere allegations.

The petition also sought for Court's direction to the State Governor to accord sanction for Bhandari's prosecution. The Supreme Court, which took up the hearing of the case on May 5 this year, issued notice to the CBI directing it to give its "views" on whether it had found Bhandari prima facie guilty of amassing wealth disproportionate to his known sources of income. Apart from the CBI and the Union Government, other respondents in the case are Bhandari and Pradhan.

Most people, particularly those who are fed up with the blatant misuse of power and the rampant corruption in the State administration, welcomed Kazi's initiative. The 93-year-old-man in this single act was able to partially redeem himself of his past sins – the selling of Sikkim. Most Sikkimese to this day have neither forgotten nor forgiven the '32 thieves', including Kazi, of their betrayal in bartering away the kingdom's sovereign status for personal gains and reducing Sikkim into a State of the Union.

Kazi's legal initiative against his arch enemy, and his call for restoration of democracy in Sikkim, further boosted the morale of the opposition and anti-Bhandari forces in Sikkim. They were fully convinced that the only effective way of dealing with Bhandari, who always seemed to get away with anything, is to raise the corruption issue, which has always been a very touchy and sensitive subject for the Chief Minister, in legal as well as political platforms. It may be noted that Kazi's move to raise the issue in the Supreme Court came just a few weeks after the forcible retirement of Pradhan as chief secretary. Pradhan's premature retirement from office by the Centre in February 1993 was aimed at ensuring "clean and efficient administration" in Sikkim.

Both the PCC(I) President, A.K. Subba, and the SDF President, Pawan Chamling, welcomed Pradhan's 'dismissal'. While Chamling urged the State Governor, Admiral (Rtd.) R.H. Tahiliani, to dismiss the Bhandari Government for rampant corruption in the administration, Subba said certain influential persons, who were involved in corruption, were likely to face action from the Centre soon.

Unlike in the past, the State Government and the ruling party failed to publicly lodge its protest effectively against Pradhan's abrupt dismissal. The only noticeable reaction of the State Government was its insistence that Pradhan's termination from service was a "voluntary retirement" and not "dismissal" as understood by a large section of the people. This kind of mild reaction from the State Government was only a face-saving device, and the government had actually accepted the Centre's decision in this regard. The fact, however, remains that the much-feared man, who wielded enormous power in the administration and who was equally very influential in political circles, was suddenly dethroned and there was not even a murmur. The ruling party, to the surprise of many, failed to react.

In fact, Pradhan's virtual dismissal from service was celebrated by many people all over the State, including a large section of government employees. Commenting on his dismissal, one prominent politician remarked, "Mr. Bhandari's right hand has been chopped off". His comment, to a large extent, reflected the views of many people who were not very happy with Pradhan's autocratic ways. Most people felt that the Centre's order terminating the chief secretary's service was an indication that it was, at long last, ready to strike against Bhandari.

In the past, the Centre's excuse for not confronting Bhandari has been that since his SSP had an overwhelming majority in the House, any action initiated against him would have an adverse repercussion. The truth is that many Central leaders, including senior bureaucrats, never really desired to go against Bhandari, who was seen as a very resourceful person, capable

of coming to their aid when they needed it. Bhandari was also more cooperative with the Centre than many Congress (I) or non-Cong(I) chief ministers.

This is perhaps the main reason why the activities of the opposition in Sikkim have been most disappointing and ineffective ever since Bhandari returned to power for the second time in 1985. However, with Chamling's dismissal from the Cabinet in June 1992, and his subsequent ouster from the party, political climate in Sikkim changed dramatically in favour of the opposition. For the first time in many years, public expectation of an alternative to Bhandari was high after Chamling's dismissal. They saw in Chamling a man capable of mobilising the masses and making a bid for the highest seat of power. Unlike other politicians in Sikkim, Chamling had a good rapport with the masses and if he was able capture the imagination of the people and make the right moves, he would certainly become a credible leader in his own making.

For the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), formed in March 4, 1993, corruption in high places became one of its major issues. Kazi's initiative on pursuing the corruption cases against Bhandari and Pradhan in the Supreme Court came as an added advantage for the SDF. Chamling, who was in close contact with Kazi, had his party's first public meeting in Jorethang, largest commercial centre of south and west districts of Sikkim, on April 18 this year. Public response to the meeting was most encouraging, and to many observers, this was an indication that Bhandari's days had been numbered.

Ever since the SDF's second public meeting in Rabongla in south Sikkim on April 28, the party soon emerged itself as a viable force, pulling along with it not only supporters from other parties and organisations, but from the minority Bhutia-Lepcha and Bahun-Chettri (Brahmin-Kashtriya) communities as well. This was seen as a great blow to the ruling party, which depended on the vote bank of these two minority communities.

While Bhandari, being a Chettri, expected support from

his own Bahun-Chettri community, he was also quite confident that the Bhutia-Lepcha tribals would also back him as they had done in 1979, when he first came to power. However, within a short span of less than two months since its first public meeting in Jorethang, the SDF's popularity in Sikkim began to trouble Bhandari. The anti-Bhandari movement, spearheaded by the SDF, was gaining ground all over the State.

The SDF obtained the upper hand after open confrontation broke out between its supporters and the ruling party youths in Namchi on June 18, which led to complete destruction of the SSP youth camp there. While the ruling party claimed that the main objective of setting up a youth camp, consisting of about 350 youths, was to create social awareness among the youths on various social issues, many viewed the setting up of the youth camp in Namchi as a direct confrontation with the SDF on home-ground. The main headquarters of the SDF was based in Chamling's own residence in Namchi. The SDF attack on the camp not only put a sudden and dramatic end to the SSP youth programme, it also enabled the party to get an upper hand and instill confidence among its supporters and the public in general. The SSP youths, many of whom belonging to the dreaded 'Commando Force' of the ruling party, abruptly left the camp and 'fled' to Gangtok the very next day on June 19. For the SDF, this was their first open confrontation with the ruling party youths. They had a taste of success and were ready to forge ahead.

Flushed with its Namchi victory, the SDF mustered enough courage to 'invade' the State capital on June 21, where its supporters held an impressive rally in the heart of the capital. The rally, consisting of about 1,500 supporters, marched along the national highway from the party headquarters in Deorali to the Zero Point area below the Raj Bhavan. The angry agitators carried placards and shouted anti-Bhandari and pro-democracy slogans. The SDF's June 21 breakthrough convinced many that the party had the guts and the skill to react and resist Bhandari Government's repressive rule.

A State Government order of 1989 forbids holding of rally and assembly of persons in Gangtok. But because of the pressure exerted by pro-democracy activists and their open defiance against the government during the rally, the authorities were forced to yield to SDF's demand to stage its procession in the main *bazaar*. "This is the first time that we are seeing people speak so openly against the government and Bhandari", commented one of the observers of the June 21 rally.

June 22, 1993 will go down in the history of democratic movement in Sikkim as a significant moment in the people's struggle to overthrow an oppressive regime. While many may criticise the destruction caused to government vehicles (some belonging to the police) by the agitated demonstrators, it was indeed a day when the Sikkimese people, fed up of the long years of repressive regime of the Bhandari Government, stood up and openly defied the 'dictator' in a manner which took everyone by surprise. The fear psychosis prevalent in Sikkim in the past one and half decades suddenly evaporated even as the crowd of about 2,000 stationed near the SDF party headquarters at the Kanchen View Hotel complex in Deorali, a small town on the national highway just below Gangtok, staged an open revolt against the government's decision not to allow them to march to the Paljor Stadium to hold a public meeting of the party.

Police lathicharge and lobbing of tear gas shells against the peaceful demonstrators, a rare sight in a peaceful State like Sikkim, was aimed at dispersing the crowd and putting an end to the rally. A senior police officer explained to me, "The reason why we did not allow the SDF to use the main highway to enter the Paljor Stadium was to avoid a repetition of the June 21 episode when party supporters illegally squatted at the national highway and caused unnecessary inconvenience to the public". He, however, failed to fathom the frustration level of the demonstrators, who were determined to head for a showdown.

Instead of fleeing for safety after the police crackdown, the SDF activists, on the contrary, returned to the scene of action, and confronted the police directly. In the process, as many as five government vehicles, including one gypsy belonging to the East District Superintendent of Police, A.C. Negi, were set on fire. Many more were destroyed in the rampage that followed. In order to escape the wrath of the angry mob, many policemen fled and returned to resume their duty only when normalcy was restored late in the evening.

Though more than 200 SDF activists were arrested and as many as 100 injured during the police crackdown, the open and violent revolt put a sudden and decisive end to the fear psychosis that was prevalent in the State ever since Bhandari's return to power in 1985. The authorities as well as the ruling party and the public in general realised after the June 22 incident that the SDF was a force to reckon with. The sudden disappearance of the SDF leaders, including Chamling, who were forced to go underground and seek shelter in the districts and even outside the State to evade "arrest and persecution", did not deter the vast majority of its supporters and other pro-Sikkim, pro-democracy activists from carrying on with their political activities. They were now determined to go all the way and begin a mass agitation in the State to ensure Bhandari's speedy downfall.

Midnight police raids and further arrests in Gangtok and elsewhere in the State did not stop SDF supporters from continuing with their activities. Torchlight demonstrations, group meetings, pamphleteering, posterings and issuing of bold Press statements and public meetings carried on continuously all over the State after the police crackdown on pro-democracy activists on June 22. The inability of the SSP to stage a counter-rally, due to fear of SDF retaliation, and also because of lack of manpower (nobody in the SSP really dared to come out openly against the SDF after the June 22 incident) added a new dimension to the speedy political development in the State, which helped to further build up the anti-Bhandari wave in Sikkim.

The public welcomed the changed atmosphere which placed the ruling party on the defensive. Fear had been conquered to a great extent and many were now openly taking sides with the SDF or indirectly encouraging anti-Bhandari forces in the State.

The pro-democracy and anti-Bhandari movement led by the SDF and the three impressive show of strength and solidarity in Namchi and in Gangtok by the SDF activists in the third week of June this year, convinced many that Chamling's new political outfit, which Calcutta's *Sunday* magazine described as "a loose platform of all those opposed to the chief minister", was not only willing but capable of putting a swift and decisive end to Bhandari's 14-year 'misrule' in Sikkim. The Centre at once took cognizance of the changed political atmosphere in Sikkim and called Chamling from his hideout for talks in New Delhi.

The SDF's successful encounters with the ruling party and the authorities expedited the process of solidarity among anti-Bhandari forces in Sikkim. The first major move for opposition unity in the State came on June 24 when a Joint Action Committee (JAC) was formed under Kazi's leadership. The JAC was set up chiefly to form a 'united front' for joint action of all opposition parties against Bhandari's 'dictatorial' rule in Sikkim. A resolution of the JAC passed during its June 24 meet noted that the "constitutional machinery in the State" had completely failed even as the Bhandari Government adopted "series of repressive measures" to curbe freedom of speech and movement in Sikkim. The aim of the new body was to chalk out a joint strategy for mobilising public opinion with a view to seek the support of the people and democratic organisations to oust Bhandari and thus restore freedom and democracy in Sikkim. The JAC was convinced that without a mass movement in Sikkim, restoration of freedom, democracy and the rule of law would not be possible.

The Committee, headed by Kazi as its Convenor, had representatives from three opposition political parties: B.B.

Gurung, P.M. Subba, Rajan Gurung and Gyamtso Bhutia (Congress-I), P. T. Lucksom (SDF), and Duk Nath Nepal (CPI-M). Former minister in the Kazi Government and Working President of the Denzong People's Chogpa (DPC), Krishna Chandra Pradhan, and the Convenor of Citizens For Democracy (CFD), Hem Lall Bhandari, were also part of the 9-member Committee.

Fortunately for the SDF and anti-Bhandari forces in Sikkim, the JAC managed to get the support of the West Bengal Chief Minister, Jyoti Basu, who stated in Kalimpong in July first week that his administration would not permit anyone to harass Sikkimese opposition leaders in West Bengal. Basu was aware of the fact that many opposition leaders in Sikkim had taken refuge in Kalimpong and Darjeeling in West Bengal to avoid being arrested by Sikkim police. Basu also assured a delegation of the JAC, who called on him in Kalimpong, that he would draw the attention of the Parliament and the Union Government of the violation of human rights and democratic processes and torture of political workers in Sikkim. With the opposition parties in Sikkim getting support from both Basu and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) leader, Subash Ghising, the Sikkim Chief Minister was certainly placed in a tight spot.

Even as the political situation in Sikkim was hotting up, the Press was facing its own battle. Pressure exerted on the local Press by forces that were bent on suppressing the freedom of the Press, forced local journalists to stage a rally on June 19 to lodge its protest against suppression of the freedom of the Press in Sikkim. While some journalists, including Bijay Bantawa, Editor of *Himgiri*, were threatened, others like P.V. Yatta, editor of *Naya Paripati*, were brutally assaulted by some miscreants in April-May this year. The authorities, instead of condemning such actions and booking the culprits, went on to encourage it.

The Chief Minister and Mrs. Bhandari's public address on the occasion of the 10th anniversary celebrations of the SSP

held at the Paljor Stadium in Gangtok on May 24 this year, was a reminder that the ruling party's attitude towards the media had not changed. As in the past, it was still against some independent local journalists in the State and wanted to curb their freedom. References of *Darpan* and *Sikkim Observer* were made during the public address by SSP leaders. The *Observer* was categorised as an "anti Sangrami" paper by Mrs. Bhandari. The total destruction of the Moti Press in Deorali, where two local Nepali weeklies – *Swatantra Samachar* and *Partidbarsban* – were being printed, on June 7, allegedly by some ruling party youths, was another instance where the Press had been unnecessarily targetted and terrorised.

After almost a year's closure, I somehow managed to bring out the *Sikkim Observer* on May 19 this year. The lead story with Chamling's photo was captioned – "Chamling strikes back – SDF wave worrying SSP". The editorial of the paper – headlined "Sikkim For Sikkimese" – clearly outlined its views on Chamling's new party. It stated: "The fact that a large number of the people from all sections of the population, including the Buddhist tribals and upper-caste Hindu Nepalese, are drawn towards Mr. Pawan Kumar Chamling's new political outfit, the Sikkim Democratic Front, is an indication that the SDF is more than just a 'Rai party' as has been alleged by Mr. Chamling's opponents".

It added: "That the Rais, a community dominant in south Sikkim to which Mr. Chamling belongs, stood by their leader despite enormous pressure exerted by the ruling party, speaks volumes of this community's resilience and Mr. Chamling's character and leadership. They have been living under constant strain and suffered much for a long time; but they have not given up. They have stood firm and have finally triumphed. In their struggle for a just cause, they have given birth to a new political force in the State and unleashed the latent spirit of the people to fight for a just, free and an open society."

The editorial further observed: "Mr. Chamling has no magical formula to sell to the people. His message is simple and

direct and it rings an echo in each heart which has for long suffered in silence. The failure of the Bhandari Government stems from the fact that the Chief Minister had drifted far away from his initial stand which can best be described in three words – "Sikkim for Sikkimese"... Fortunately for the Sikkimese people, the SDF is gradually emerging itself as a genuine Sikkimese party having a mass appeal. The spirit in which the party is functioning with having to face all sorts of constraints and limitations is reminiscent of the way Mr. Bhandari's Sikkim (Janata) Parishad set out to put an end to the Kazi Government in the late '70s. This truly is a remarkable example of the will and endurance of the human spirit which strives to achieve the highest and refuses to yield to doubt, despair and disillusionment".

I was happy that despite a year's gap, *Sikkim Observer* was well-received by the public and sold well. However, the next issue of the paper, which was due on June 9, did not see the light of the day. Once again, my printers in Gangtok refused to print the paper after having initially agreed to do so. In fact, even negatives of the issue were prepared and all set to go on the machine when the printer, H.P. Sharma, expressed his reluctance to get the paper printed in his press. He said he was facing 'pressures from above'. I advised him not to listen to anyone but to meet the Chief Minister personally and seek his opinion. Sharma later informed me that though he was unable to get an appointment with the Chief Minister, his file was sent to him at his residence in Mintokgang.

When I realised that Sharma was still reluctant to print the paper even after having referred the matter to the CM, I told him that he was free to delete any objectionable piece in the paper and get the matter printed leaving blank spaces where news have been censored. This proposal was also unacceptable to him. Finally, after keeping the matter pending for three days, he turned down my request. He obviously feared unpleasant reactions from the authorities if the *Observer* was printed at his press. Because of the delay caused by Sharma's

indecisiveness, it was pointless going all the way down to Siliguri in West Bengal to get the paper printed.

The manner in which the government and the ruling party was treating the Press convinced me that there was a systematic attempt to throttle the voice of the Press. Enough was enough and we could no longer remain a silent spectator and tolerate the circumstances in which we were forced to function. We decided to hold a protest rally in Gangtok to voice our grievances and to create public awareness of the situation we were faced with.

The State Government continued to meddle in the internal affairs of the Press even after the decision to hold the rally was taken. Understandably, the protest rally, organised by the Sikkim Press Association (SPA) of which I was its President, was boycotted by most members of the body and other media-persons, who were also invited to participate in the rally. They were either threatened or lured to avoid a confrontation with the authorities. Many of them, after having initially passed resolutions in favour of holding the protest rally, backed out at the last minute. They apparently did not want to jeopardise their financial interests as most of them were dependent on the government not only for the existence of their paper but for their very livelihood. The public at large was widely aware of the situation faced by the local Press and knew each journalist on a personal level and did not expect much from most media-persons in the State.

When the authorities failed to stop us from holding the rally, we were requested by some government officials to postpone the rally till the arrival of the recently-appointed Information and Public Relations (IPR) Secretary, L.P. Tewari, who was then out of station. They felt that our problems would be resolved if a dialogue was initiated with the government. Our reaction to their request was simple and straightforward. We told the authorities that we were willing to meet Tewari or any other government representative, including the CM, who was the concerned Minister, but the proposed rally

would take place on the scheduled date as we were determined to lodge our protest for the injustices inflicted on us. We were fully aware of the fact that the protest rally, the first one of its kind in the State, would certainly come in the way of Govt-Press relations. However, we wanted everyone, including the government, to realize what was at stake. It was also important for all concerned to know at that point of time that we place freedom of the Press above other considerations.

In the past, when injustices were done to the Press, our immediate reactions have been to pass resolutions condemning such actions and formally taking up the matter with the concerned authorities. We now felt that we could no longer be content with just issuing Press statements but wanted to lodge our protest in a different and more effective way which would also draw the attention of the people as well as the authorities. There were attempts from various quarters to stop us from holding the protest rally, but our patience and persistence finally triumphed.

Six local journalists (Govind Sharma and Joseph S. Lepcha – *Swatantra Samachar*, Sonam Topden Penchung – *Tbatoe Denzong*, Deependra Khati – *Sikkim Telegraph*, Tshering T. Namgyal – *The Times of India* and myself on behalf of *Sikkim Observer* and *The Statesman*) participated in the historic rally on June 19. Of the six, only two (my wife and myself) belonged to the SPA. The rest did not belong to any particular media group. The number was small but this did not make any difference to us. What was important was the issue at stake, the stand we had taken, and the spirit in which we defended our freedom. After the rally, I resigned from the SPA as I felt that I would not be able to work with those who did not have the interest of the Press at heart.

By then, I had already made up my mind to disassociate myself with any media body in the State and to concentrate in my own profession. Working with those who were least interested in the profession was to me a sheer waste of time and energy. However, some of those who participated in the rally

and other local Sikkimese journalists, who had the interest of the Sikkimese people in mind and who were also equally interested in forming a credible Press organisation in Sikkim, persuaded me to form a new Press body catering only to the interest of bonafide local Sikkimese journalists. This was something I had not thought of it earlier. I liked the idea and happily agreed to their proposal. We finally formed the Local Sikkimese Journalists Association (LSJA). Members of this body was to be limited to only genuine local journalists and possibly national media representatives as well.

Recent developments within the Press in Sikkim and my 10-year experience in the Fourth Estate convinced me that activities of the majority of the so-called newsmen in Sikkim, including some senior journalists, not only created a poor image of the Press in the State, but further association and encouragement of their activities would not only bring a bad name to the Press in Sikkim but would also hamper the interest of the public in general. My main purpose of associating myself with the LSJA, of which I was its President, was to help local Sikkimese journalists and to build up a sound foundation of the institution of the Press in Sikkim.

In the long run, the best bet for the Press to develop itself so that it can play its legitimate role in society is to help and encourage those persons who have the desire to accept professional responsibilities and uphold certain basic principles. Moreover, local journalists, who are born and brought up in Sikkim, would be in a better position to understand and appreciate the sentiments of the people than those who neither have the interest of the people at heart nor are able to carry out their activities in a professional manner. In other places, the Press plays a leading role in upholding democratic values; but it seemed to me that the Press in Sikkim was aiding the forces that were bent on suppressing the freedom of the Press and democratic aspirations of the people. This was indeed a very shameful and unhealthy development.

We had actually sought permission to hold the rally in the

main town area but this was rejected on the ground that an order of the District Magistrate of 1989 did not permit holding of rallies in Gangtok *bazaar*. After tactfully pressurising the authorities to grant us the necessary permission, we were finally allowed to hold the rally at the Paljor Stadium premises on June 19. Considering the negative attitude of the government on the proposed rally, this decision was acceptable to us and we wanted to make the best use of the time and space.

To extract maximum advantage of the situation, we carried our banners and posters and walked down to the stadium which was a few minutes walk from the SPA office. Our posters and banners carried slogans such as – "Rally in Support of Freedom of the Press in Sikkim", "Stop Muzzling the Press", "Press Suppressed", "Voice Of The Press Is The Voice Of The People" etc. We also had more posters in Nepali. Those who sympathised with us and were aware of our activities came and congratulated us. They offered *khabadas* to us before, during, and after the rally, which lasted for an hour. Though many among the general public, including politicians, social workers and other prominent figures, expressed their willingness to join us in the rally, we decided to hold it independently to avoid any misunderstanding.

In a written message to those gathered at the rally, I stated: "Our presence here today is not just to lodge our protest against suppression of the freedom of the Press in Sikkim. We are here not merely to raise a voice against those who have inflicted injustices to us; we are here basically to remind the people and the government that without a free Press there cannot be a free society. Freedom of the Press is based on the ideal that the people have a right to know what goes on around them. If the Press is not allowed to function freely, and if it is silenced and suppressed, the people are deprived of the right to know".

Before calling for the protest rally, I, as President of the SPA, made a written appeal to the public to rally support for Press freedom in Sikkim. The appeal was not only sent to all

news-persons in the State but was circulated among the public. In the appeal, I stated: "We believe that it is time that the Press and the people stood up together and let the authorities know that enough is enough. The Press, particularly independent journalists in the State, has been subjected to various constraints and the time has come for the public to rally to its support in discharging its duties in a free and fair manner. We, therefore, appeal to all freedom-loving individuals and free and democratic forces in Sikkim and elsewhere, to raise their voice to protect the freedom of the Press in Sikkim. The traditions of a free Press can only be maintained if the Press receives the support it deserves from the people. At this juncture, I also make a fervent appeal to all my colleagues in the Press, both within and outside the State, to do whatever they can to oppose the forces of suppression and to stand together for preservation of the freedom of the Press which is guaranteed in our Constitution".

I reiterated the same sentiments in my address during the rally: "Let me remind you today that media-persons and media organisations cannot alone ensure and protect the freedom of the Press. In the final analysis, it is the people who have to come forward and provide the much-needed protection to journalists and safeguard freedom of the Press. But we, as journalists, must make our stand very clear. We must stand firm and resolute in our stand. While our opinions as journalists may differ on various issues and matters, we cannot and must not allow vested interests or our own selfish motives to creep in and deprive us of the opportunity to stand erect and united on the issue of the Freedom of the Press. It is not how many of us are here today to support the cause of the Freedom of the Press that matters, but how much faith, sincerity and dedication that we have in the righteousness of our cause".

We were clear on our stand concerning the government's role in the present predicament: "We do not squarely blame the State Government for the suppression of the freedom of the Press in Sikkim. The threats and assaults on journalists,

theft and ransacking of printing presses, and closure of newspapers may not necessarily be the handiwork of the government or the ruling party. We are very clear on this and we want to go down on record of having said this. But we believe that it is the State Government, and particularly the concerned authorities and law-enforcing agencies, which are primarily responsible for ensuring a free flow of information to the people through the Press. This can happen if media-persons are allowed to function in a free atmosphere where there is no threat to their life and property".

I finally rounded up my message on the occasion with this call: "Today, we are here to lodge a symbolic protest. But if our voice is not heard and if the suppression of the freedom of the Press still continues despite the stand that we have taken here today, we must not be content with mere symbolism. We must raise a voice in every village and town in this State. We must raise our voice in Mangan, in Geyzing, and in Namchi (headquarters of the three other districts of Sikkim), and if need be, in Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay. We must also raise our voice in the Assembly and in the Parliament, and if need be, in other international Press forum as well. We must continue to press on until ten thousand conscious citizens in Sikkim come together and raise their voice and rally support for Freedom of the Press in Sikkim".

The two-day rally held in Gangtok by the SDF-led pro-democracy activists in June this year proved that the people of Sikkim were willing to take to the streets if further suppression of free speech, expression and movement continued. Violence that followed the police crackdown on the peaceful demonstrators on June 22, is an indication that if legitimate forms of expression such as the Press are suppressed, people will be forced to resort to violent means to express themselves. The country cannot afford to have another hostile border State at this juncture.

GLOSSARY

<i>Agya</i>	brother.
A.S.S.U.	All Sikkim Students Union.
<i>Azo</i>	grandfather.
Bahun-Chettris	upper-caste Hindu Nepalese consisting of the Brahmin-Kashtriya group.
<i>Battisay Chor</i>	The literal meaning is '32 thieves' but it actually refers to the 32 members of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly who 'sold' Sikkim to India by merging the former Kingdom with the Indian Union in 1975.
<i>Bhuntay</i>	Fatso or fat man.
BLs	initials for Bhutias and Lepchas as a joint-community.
C.B.I.	Central Bureau of Investigation.
<i>Cho</i>	Honorific term for upper class males.
Chogyal	Ruler of Sikkim.
C.P.I.(M)	Communist Party of India (Marxist).
D.Y.F.I.	Democratic Youth Federation of India.
D.P.C.	Denzong People's Chogpa, a tribal-backed political party.
' <i>Desh Bechowas</i> '	sellors of the country—reference to Sikkimese politicians responsible for the merger.
' <i>Desh Farkownay</i> '	refers to those who promised de-merger.
<i>Durbar</i>	Government.
Hermonites	ex-students, teachers of Mount Hermon School.
J.A.C.	Joint Action Committee.
<i>Khada</i>	traditional white silk scarves presented at religious and other functions as mark of respect.
<i>Lhadi-Medi</i>	congregation of lamas and laity—an ancient institution.
<i>Lhon-Mon-Tsong-Sum</i>	term used for unity of Bhutias, Lepchas and Limbus.
L.M.M.	Limbuana Mukti Morcha (Limbuana Liberation Front).
<i>Lukshyama</i>	cremation spot of the Chogyals at a hilltop in Gangtok.

<i>Matwalis</i>	Mongoloid section of Nepalese known for their fondness for alcoholic drinks.
MH	Mount Hermon.
NZ	New Zealand.
NECCC(I)	North Eastern Congress Coordination Committee (I).
OBC	other backward classes.
Parity system	balance of power between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese communities.
<i>Pipon</i>	village headman of Lachen.
P.T.I.	Press Trust of India.
QHS	Queen's Hill School.
RC	Ram Chandra Poudyal.
Sangha	association of lamas.
S.T.	Scheduled Tribes.
S.D.F.	Sikkim Democratic Front, newly-formed opposition party of Pawan Chamling, a dissident ruling Sikkim Sangram Parishad legislator.
S.H.C.	Sikkim Himali Congress.
S.J.P.	Sikkim Janata Parishad.
S.P.A.	Sikkim Press Association.
SPCC(I)	Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee (I).
S.S.A.	Sikkim Students Association, Bombay.
S.S.P.	Sikkim Sangram Parishad—ruling party of Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari.
S.T.W.A.	Sikkim Tribal Welfare Association.
S.U.C.	Sikkim United Council.
S.Y.W.S.	Sikkimese Youth Welfare Society.
S.O.S.	<i>Spotlight on Sikkim</i> , monthly publication highlighting political and social issues in Sikkim.
<i>Tankas</i>	religious painting on silk.
T.N.A.	Tashi Namgyal Academy.
T.T.C.	Trained Teacher's Certificate.
U.N.I.	United News of India.

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Sikkim Observer

INSIDE SIKKIM: AGAINST THE TIDE is an account of one man's lone struggle to protect his freedom and dignity. Jigme N. Kazi, Editor of *Sikkim Observer* and Correspondent of *The Statesman*, fought an uphill battle for ten long years in a harsh and unkind system that thrives on lies, deceit and corruption.

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