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The story of Sikkim's integration with India

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Why in News: Sikkim day is annually celebrated on May 16, recalling the history of the former kingdom's integration with India in 1975, marking the day India's the 22nd state joined the union.

Sikkim's history with the Chogyal royals

The kingdom of Sikkim was established in 1642, when, according to one account, three Tibetan lamas consecrated Phuntsong Namgyal as the first ruler or Chogyal of Sikkim.

The monarchy of the Namgyal dynasty was maintained for the next 333 years, until its integration with India in 1975.

Sikkim's Chogyal dynasty was of Tibetan origin. Sandwiched between India and China, and often party to conflicts over land with Bhutan and Nepal, the British colonisation of India first led to a kind of formal relationship developing between the two states.

The British saw Sikkim as a buffer state against China and against Nepal, with whom they fought in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16, helping Sikkim secure a number of territories that Nepal had previously captured.

A formal protectorate was established over Sikkim through the Treaty of Tumlong in 1861, meaning the British had control over it but it was not officially under their rule and the Chogyals could continue holding onto power.

Other official treaties followed: The treaty of Titaliya in 1817 gave the British authorities a number of commercial and political advantages in Sikkim.

The Calcutta Convention of 1890 demarcated the border between Sikkim and Tibet, and was signed by Viceroy Lord Lansdowne and Qing China's Imperial Associate Resident in Tibet. The Lhasa Convention of 1904 affirmed the Calcutta Convention.

Independent India and Sikkim

After India's independence, princely states had the option to accede to India or Pakistan, and certain cases – like of Hyderabad, Junagadh and Kashmir – where a decision was not immediate, led to greater confusion.

Such was the case with Sikkim, thanks to a unique relationship with British rule.

Venkataraman Subha Srinivasan writes in his book, 'The Origin of India's States', that Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel and the constitutional adviser to the constituent assembly, BN Rau, wanted to integrate the state with India by having the then Chogyal Tashi Namgyal sign the Instrument of Accession.

India's first Prime Minister, Jawaharlal Nehru, noted the unique situation in Sikkim. India was, during meetings with representatives between the two, of the view that it should take control of defence, external affairs and communication subjects for Sikkim. Until this was finalised, it was to sign a Standstill Agreement, keeping things as they were for the time being.

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Meanwhile, there was at least some demand within Sikkim to develop closer ties with India. Srinivasan's book says that ethnically, Sikkim consisted of three communities, the Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalis, of which the Nepalis formed the largest group.

Three political parties, the Sikkim State Congress (SSC) led by a Bhutia man, the Praja Mandal (PM) that had Lepcha leadership and Praja Sudharak Samaj (PSS) was led by a Nepali, passed a resolution in December 1947 demanding a popular government, abolition of landlordism and accession to India.

A delegation of SSC and PM leaders also met Jawaharlal Nehru, who was of the view that India could not intervene at this moment, and that Sikkim should "grow according to its own genius." Years later, PN Dhar, who was the Principal Secretary to PM Indira Gandhi, recalled that she said "in very clear terms" that her father had made a mistake in not heeding the wishes of the people of Sikkim to merge with India.

After protests in Sikkim, the king appointed an Indian officer as the diwan or chief minister, along with an advisory committee with SSC representatives.

In 1950, the Indo-Sikkim Treaty was signed, making Sikkim an Indian protectorate. It would not be sovereign, as India controlled its defence, external affairs and strategic communications.

It also secured exclusive rights to build infrastructure there and Sikkimese people would travel abroad with Indian passports. "Internal autonomy" was to be available to Sikkim. Additionally, a clause gave India overriding powers in cases of security threat

How Sikkim joined India

Sikkim's state council or assembly had some elected members and others nominated by the king. In the early years, it saw some political tussle over the representation for various communities, and the Chogyal's reluctance to let go of his control.

The 1960s and 1970s would see several events change the course of Sikkim's status.

First, a split in the SSC led to the formation of the Sikkim National Congress (SNC) in 1960. The party would go on to play a crucial role in accession.

There was also change in political leadership on both sides in this decade, with the death of Nehru in 1964 and of his successor, PM Lal Bahadur Shastri, in 1966. Then Chogyal Tashi Namgyal died in 1963, and Maharaj Kumar Thondup succeeded him, planning to leverage this period of changes to seek an independent status for Sikkim.

For new Indian PM Indira Gandhi, her position weakened after the 1967 general elections that saw her return to power with a reduced majority in the Lok Sabha.

This was following the India-China war of 1962, where India lost. It made it all the more important to contain skirmishes between Indian and Chinese troops on the Sikkim border.

The two states decided to alter existing wording to indicate a "permanent relationship" between them, but the Chogyal wanted further clarity on Sikkim's independence.

This was slowly becoming unacceptable to the Indian leadership, which by the early 1970s, decided to back pro-democracy forces in Sikkim – such as Kazi Dorji of the SNC.

Former R&AW officer Sidhu noted in his book 'Sikkim: Dawn of Democracy' that an Indian delegation went to Gangtok in 1973 as head of a small R&AW team, to inform the Chogyal of Chinese activities. But his real charter was to liaise with the Sikkim Congress, provide them with assistance and advice in the final, by then, aim of Sikkim's merger with India.

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Former Indian Ambassador to Nepal, Deb Mukharji, notes that Sidhu recounted “in detail his efforts to unify the pro-democracy and pro-merger political forces in Sikkim, which also happened to represent the majority.”

Anti-monarchy protests grew in Sikkim in 1973, following which the royal palace was surrounded by thousands of protesters. Indian troops arrived after the monarch was left with no choice but to ask New Delhi to send assistance.

Finally, a tripartite agreement was signed in the same year between the chogyal, the Indian government, and three major political parties, so that major political reforms could be introduced.

A year later, in 1974, elections were held, where the Sikkim Congress led by Kazi Dorji won. That year, a new constitution was adopted, which restricted the role of the monarch to a titular post. A referendum was held in Sikkim in 1975, where two-thirds of eligible voters took part. Here, 59,637 votes were cast in favour of abolishing the monarchy and joining India, with 1,496 voting against.

Within a week, India’s Ministry of External Affairs introduced the Constitution (Thirty-Sixth Amendment) Bill in the Lok Sabha to recognise Sikkim as a state in the Union of India. This was passed in the Parliament and assented to by President Fakhruddin Ali Ahmed, coming into effect on May 16, 1975.

Sikkim’s new parliament, led by Dorji, proposed a bill for Sikkim to become an Indian state, which was accepted by the Indian government.