

THE BRAG DKAR PA FAMILY AND G. YANG THANG RDZONG:  
AN EXAMPLE OF INTERNAL ALLIANCES IN SIKKIM<sup>1</sup>

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*Introduction*

The formation of a political alliance results from a wide variety of contexts and circumstances, and may be driven, for example, by political necessity and common cultural, physical, emotional or economic bonds. So the term 'alliance' actually represents a rather complex and broad spectrum of social, political, economic or cultural issues, which when expressed in a similar way by people can act as a bond by which social groups are formed around some shared interest(s). Therefore, when analyzing the nature of internal relations and alliances in Sikkim one is drawn into a process which aims to understand the nature of these contexts.

In other words, in order to understand alliances, we have to understand the contexts which have helped to shape and develop them. However, one constantly has to be aware that changes in these contexts necessitate a change or re-formulation of the nature of the alliance as by definition an alliance is not a permanent thing. Associations of this nature shift and adapt according to changes taking place within a wide variety of social contexts, such as far-reaching political, religious or economic transformations or a change in the focus of individuals or groups. For example, Bhutan and Sikkim formed a strong alliance in response to the mutual threat of Nepalese eastern expansion in the 1780s and 90s. However, the preceding decades of the eighteenth century were characterized by Bhutanese and Sikkimese conflict. In a similar way, not only did the internal alliances of Sikkim in the

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eighteenth century undergo a process of change relating to wider socio-political changes in the region, but Tibetan and Sikkimese relations were also affected. The documents on which this presentation is based indicate the importance of these internal alliances as well as making passing reference to the wider alliances between Tibet and Sikkim.

Two principal documents from the Brag dkar pa collection form the basis of this short assessment of internal Sikkimese alliances: document YA4 dated by Dieter Schuh as 1785, although the date of this text should be 1784, and Document YA8 dated 1796.<sup>2</sup> These documents are set in the period of the Gorkha invasion of Sikkim and Nepal's eastern expansion. While they make passing reference to the events of this period, they are in essence land documents, which reinforce the internal alliance between the Brag dkar pa family and the Sikkimese state. Furthermore, they provide interesting although select information relating to the nature of Tibetan and Sikkimese relations.

Since little work has been done on this area of Sikkimese history, this paper is really designed to contextualize this period and raise some important questions on the complexity of internal political alliances as well as wider associations and relations between Tibet and Sikkim. Since the primary source materials of this paper are land documents, other issues which represent alliances such as marital relations have not been addressed here. It may be interesting to note, however, that political marriage unions did exist between the Brag dkar pa family and other leading families in Sikkim and it is hoped that these alliances will be addressed specifically in a later paper.

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<sup>2</sup> Schuh gives the date of 1785 for document YA4 but this seems to have resulted from a misreading of shing 'brug for shing sbrul. These documents can be found in Schuh and Dagyab: 1978 *Urkunden, Erlasse und Sendschrieben aus dem Besitz sikkimesischer Adelshäuser und des Kolsters Phodang*: 17-34 and 43-50. Another important text will also be referred to here, document YA1, which was issued by the finance ministry of the bKa' shag of the Government of Lhasa. This text has been left undated by Schuh and Dagyab, although the text itself gives the year of writing as shing bya (wood – bird). The date of this text is hard to establish as the context provides only a few clues as to the possible date of the writing of this text, so we are left with only two probable dates of 1765 or 1885. However, the issue of grain and gifts to the Brag dkar pa family mentioned in this document (YA1) probably refers to the compensation given to the family by the Tibetan Government for not heeding the requests of the Sikkimese government after the Gorkha Tibetan war, to return the lands annexed by the Gorkhas during the invasion of 1788. As it states in YA8 that the grain levied as tax on the Bhutanese territories of Phag ri, would be granted to the Brag dkar pa family. So the date of this document should be similar to that of YA8 so perhaps shing bya should read lchags bya i.e. 1801.

In this paper, one section focuses on clarifying the confusion relating to the extent of Nepalese territorial gains after the invasion of Sikkim in 1788, for prior to the invasion of Sikkim these lands were under the control of the Brag dkar pa family and thus the reaction of the Sikkimese government to such a loss of territory will be an important indication of the closeness of the alliance between the Chos rgyal and the Brag dkar pa family.

### *Historical background*

Eighteenth century Sikkim was afflicted by internal discord and external pressures on its territorial integrity. The first Bhutanese invasion in the early years of the eighteenth century, which was instigated by the sister of the third Chos rgyal Phyag rdor rnam rgyal, was one of a series of international conflicts that continued until the end of the century<sup>3</sup>. This action arose out of a dispute over the royal succession, and such disputes became a matter of course during the eighteenth century as competing factions vying for political dominance used and manipulated the royal succession for the advancement of their aims. This fragility of the young Sikkimese state was exacerbated by external pressures on both its western (Nepal) and eastern (Bhutan) boundaries.

Furthermore, as a result of the weakness of the Sikkimese state in counteracting these external pressures, it became necessary for the government to both reinforce its internal alliances and strengthen relations with Tibet for times when Tibetan assistance was needed. Tibetan support during this period took a number of different forms, such as granting refuge to the chos rgyals, pressurizing the Bhutanese, sending officials to organize and manage the state and military apparatus and give military and financial support. The first example of this support is to be found during the period of the Bhutanese invasion.

During the time of the first Bhutanese war, the Brag dkar pa family makes its initial appearance in the politics of Sikkim. As it states in

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<sup>3</sup> With the benefit of hindsight, we can see that the eighteenth century was a 'make or break' period in the political evolution of Sikkimese statehood. The conflicts of the eighteenth century severely weakened not only the internal political establishments of the state but also the territorial integrity of Sikkim and had it not been for the desires of the British to open and exploit trading opportunities in Tibet and China, the fate of Sikkim could have been similar to that of the Himalayan states of eastern Nepal.

'*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*, and documents YA4 and YA8 of the Brag dkar pa collection, Ka rma dar rgyas brag dkar pa assisted the Sikkimese during the first Bhutanese war by acting as general of the Sikkimese forces from Rabs ldan rtse to Gangtok. In document YA8 of the Brag dkar pa collection it states that the younger brother of a regional administrator of the Tibetan government was sent by the government of Tibet after a request made by the Sikkimese:

<sup>4</sup>Since from this place (Sikkim) it was requested to the government capital of the great dGan ldan pho brang (the Tibetan government) asking for care (in this time of political unrest), it was given as an order of the spiritual leader<sup>5</sup> that the younger brother of Brag dkar mi dpon of dBus (is to act) as the companion of the law and by order of the spiritual leader (he) was dispatched.<sup>6</sup>

It may be interesting to note that in my conversations with the current head of the Brag dkar pa family, Mr. D. N. Tarkapa, the person mentioned in this text was none other than Ka rma dar rgyas. The reason a person capable of leading Sikkim was requested from Tibet was due to the fact that the Chos rgyal phyag rdor rnam rgyal had escaped to Tibet after various political intrigues at the Sikkimese court and the attempts of the Bhutanese, backed by the Chos rgyal own sister, to assassinate him. Furthermore most of Sikkim at that time was under the control of the Bhutanese.

In the absence of the King, Ka rma dar rgyas is said to have acted as regent of the state as well as general of the army, and in this role succeeded in killing the Bhutanese military leader<sup>7</sup> (figure 1), pushed the forces of Bhutan back and maintained the independence of Sikkim.<sup>8</sup> As a result of these actions it is said in the '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* that

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<sup>4</sup> Tib. *Gshungs sa dga' ldan pho brang chen por skyid sdug snyan zhu kyi ljongs 'di'i 'tsho 'dzin khrims kyi zung zlar dbus brag dkar mi dpon gyi chung po bla lha'i lung babs bla dpon bkas mngag*. YA8 line 7.

<sup>5</sup> Presumably the Dalai Lama or the regent of Tibet.

<sup>6</sup> Document YA8. This younger brother was more than likely a low level district administrator of the central Tibetan government, with a loose connection to the political centre of Lhasa. This conclusion rests primarily on evidence of similar deputations from Lhasa to other outlying Himalayan dependencies such as in Mustang. (Personal conversation with Dr Charles Ramble).

<sup>7</sup> '*Bras ljongs rgyal rabs*: 68-69 (Tibetan version). It also states that Ka rma dar rgyas severed the head of the general.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*

he was rewarded with an estate in Sikkim.<sup>9</sup> However, this grant of an estate also reflects the need of the Chos rgyal and his allies to defuse potential political opponents. By giving Ka rma dar rgyas rulership over a large estate (in what is now West Sikkim) extending to Darjeeling, he had assured the loyalty of a person with immense political influence and the means to challenge the position of the Chos rgyal and his associates. As a result of this gift of an estate to the Brag dkar pa family, a member of a Sikkimese aristocratic family was sent to Tibet to serve the government of Lhasa.<sup>10</sup> While this exchange of ranking officials served to strengthen the alliance between Tibet and Sikkim, it also legitimized the grant of land bestowed upon the Brag dkar pa family. Whereas Tibet did not really benefit from such an exchange, Sikkim managed to acquire a powerful individual, who, through his association with Tibet and the Tibetan government, was highly influential in Sikkimese politics.

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<sup>9</sup> However, the text referred to in *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* (Tibetan version *ibid.*), seems, at least in part, to be taken verbatim from YA8, which is a much later document. Those wishing to inspect this discrepancy further are directed to lines 10-12 of YA8 and *ibid.*

<sup>10</sup> Conversation with D. N. Tarkapa. D. N. Tarkapa also informed me that he is obliged by tradition (and presumably earlier law) to carry out the Bon rituals of the Sikkimese minister who was sent to Tibet in exchange for his ancestor Ka rma dar rgyas and up until the Chinese invasion of Tibet in the 1950s the local rituals of his ancestors in Tibet were carried out by the Sikkimese official. Every year D. N. Tarkapa performs the ritual sacrifice of livestock. It is interesting to note that this 'exchange' of officials is remarkably similar to the form of taxation which applied to the noble families of Tibet as Carrasco states: 'In return for the landed estates with which they are endowed, each noble family has to give one...of their members to the service of the government. This is considered their tax...' *Land and polity in Tibet*: 1959: 131. Since this tax was levied against the Sikkimese government this may indicate a period of vassalage to the Tibetan state.



*Figure 1. The helmet and sword of the Bhutanese general killed by Karma dar rgyas. The sword and helmet were taken as a trophy to g.Yang thang where they are still preserved by D.N. Tarkapa.*

#### *The documents*

The time period in which these documents fall (1785–1796) was particularly turbulent, not only for Sikkim but also for Tibet and Bhutan. Political developments resulting from the expansion of Nepal, undermined and threatened the regional status quo. The Nepalese invasion of Tibet in 1792 forced the Tibetans to seek military aid from China, which had the effect of changing the political relationship between those two countries. Furthermore, as a result of these significant developments in central Tibet, Tibet became more concerned about its internal politics which in turn had ramifications on the nature of Tibetan and Sikkimese relations. Sikkim had also been under considerable threat since the 1770s from both Nepal, which had taken possession of territory which the Sikkimese considered to be theirs in 1774, and Bhutan.<sup>11</sup> Thus areas of Sikkimese political influence, if not actual control, were being squeezed and annexed by

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<sup>11</sup> Pradhan: 1991: 123. Pradhan clearly states that the objective of this annexation of territory, loosely affiliated with Sikkim, was to gain possession of the fertile Terai to the west of the River Tista. This territory was basically the Limbuana region, which, despite Sikkimese claims, had remained autonomous of the Sikkimese state.

the expansion of both Nepal and Bhutan. The first document to be discussed was written within this wider political context and before the actual Nepalese invasion of Sikkim in 1788 whereas the second document was written after the chaos of the Nepalese invasion of Sikkim and the Nepalese–Tibetan war of 1790-1792.

Given this wider political context of external threat, document YA4 could best be considered as a reminder to the Brag dkar pa family of the loyalty of their ancestors. The document is mainly concerned with the verification of lands already bestowed upon the ancestors of the Brag dkar pa family and includes references to the history behind the acquisition of these regions rather than the issuing of new lands to the family. It is therefore possible to suggest that the issuing of this document to the Brag dkar pa family resulted from the wish of the Chos rgyal and his advisors to gauge the extent of support they could rely on in the event of a war and to remind key political figures of the possible benefits of remaining loyal to the Chos rgyal. For example, this particular document makes extended references to the lands that Karma dar rgyas received for his action during the Bhutanese invasion of the early years of the eighteenth century. In essence this document serves to highlight the alliance that existed between the Brag dkar pa family and the Sikkimese state and assures Tshangs rin 'dzin, the head of Brag dkar pa family at this time, of his position.

The reason for doing this is quite clear. The threat posed by the Nepalese was severe as, according to Pradhan, the Gorkhas desired to control trans-Himalayan trade and had secured a treaty from Tibet to that effect in 1775. However, by 1784 the Tibetans opened a trade route with Sikkim through the Chumbi valley in order to get around the high taxes levied against Tibetan traders through the Nepalese routes.<sup>12</sup> This heightened the possibility of a war between Sikkim and Nepal as Nepal had quite clear designs to run a monopoly of Himalayan trade. Furthermore, taking Sikkim out of the equation would stop attacks from Sikkim on Nepal's eastern border should the Gorkhas choose to invade Tibet in order to force the issue of Himalayan trade. The Sikkimese government was probably aware of Nepal's aspirations regarding trade, as they had suffered a number of losses prior to the treaty of 1775 to Nepal in its western regions bordering on Tibet; and it is by no coincidence that in the same year as the opening of the Sikkimese - Tibetan trade route, the Chos rgyal issued documents

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<sup>12</sup> Pradhan: 1991: 130 – 31.

relating to lands already held as a means of reinforcing traditional internal alliances.

In 1788, Nepal invaded Sikkim and it is said in the *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* that the Sikkimese government was taken by surprise by the Gorkha invasion.<sup>13</sup> However, Nepal had been encroaching on Sikkimese territory, despite the peace treaty of 1775, and perhaps the surprise documented in *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* refers rather to the speed of the Nepalese invasion and the total defeat of Sikkim by the two-pronged offensive from Bijaypur and the Darjeeling district.<sup>14</sup> As a result of this invasion the Chos rgyal fled towards the Bhutanese border and was given financial aid from the Bhutanese. What happened to this aid is uncertain. However, according to YA8, Tshangs rin 'dzin carried on the fight against the Gorkhas and managed to make a number of successful punitive attacks on the Nepalese. YA8 lines 12 – 13 reads thus:<sup>15</sup>

When in the times of the sde pa Tshangs rin 'dzin in the sa prel year [1788] Gorkha troops attacked and in the times when the troops of the lho po and Lepcha departed against the enemies of the [Buddhist] teachings, the brother Brag dkar sde pa Tshangs rin 'dzin departed first as the military leader. [And] after[wards] he forced the Gorkha troops back over rNam rtse, Chong thang and Sing la...

However, after Tshangs rin 'dzin death in battle in 1788 the Sikkimese forces, at least according to *'Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* and YA8, were severely weakened and eventually collapsed.<sup>16</sup> The events after this point become muddled in the chaotic aftermath of the Tibetan – Gorkha war of the 1790s. As noted above, the invasion of Sikkim was a tactical manoeuvre on the part of the Gorkhas to defuse a possible attack from Sikkim after the invasion of Tibet. However, what is uncertain is the extent of Gorkha control over Sikkimese territory after the 1792 war between Tibet, China and Nepal.

Most of the secondary literature seems divided on the actual geographical distinctions between Nepalese controlled Sikkim and the areas under the authority of the Sikkimese chos rgyals. F.I.S. Tucker, for example, states that the six thousand troops that were dispatched to

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<sup>13</sup> Ye shes sgrol ma: 1908: 48 (Eng. Version).

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.* and Pradhan: 1991: 132.

<sup>15</sup> YA8. Square brackets are the authors.

<sup>16</sup> Ye shes sgrol ma: 1908: 48 and YA8.



Sikkim in 1788 overran most of the Sikkimese territory in the Terai and the hills but were unable to penetrate the territory surrounding modern Gangtok.<sup>17</sup> B.J. Hasrat, however, seems confused in regard to the limits of Nepalese conquest as he states that the Gorkhas possessed most of Sikkim but the area of Nag po ri<sup>18</sup> (presumably this refers to Nag ri – which equates roughly with the modern Indian administrative district of Darjeeling)<sup>19</sup> was held jointly by Sikkim and Nepal. This seems to be mistaken as this particular region remained under direct Nepalese control until the end of the Anglo-Gorkha war and the signing of the treaty of Sugauli in 1815. L.F. Stiller on the other hand shows the eastern border of Nepal as following the Raman River until its confluence with the Tista (the territory to the east of the Tista was under the administration of Bhutan).<sup>20</sup> The map in Bajracharya's book entitled *Bahadur Shah: the Regent of Nepal*, shows that Nepal had possession of all of Sikkim's territory in the Terai south of the Raman River, west of the Tista and east of the Mechi River.<sup>21</sup>

While it has been established that the Nepalese had control of the Sikkimese capital of Rabdentse in 1788, what is not known is for how long they occupied this territory to the west of the Tista and in the hills. The *Bras ljongs rgyal rabs* sheds no light on this issue, being mainly concerned with lamenting the injustice of the Nepalese invasion. Having said that, there is one clue to be found in document YA8 and that is the place where the document was written and some of the contents. The final sentence of this document reads thus: '*lugs gnyis kyi gdan sa chen po pho brang rab brtan rtse nas me 'brug dbo zla'i yar tshes dge bar bris*' (This was virtuously written in the time of the middle of the second month of the fire dragon year from the great place of the dual system [of religion and politics] the palace of Rabdentse). While it could be the case that this reference to Rabdentse is nothing more than a wish of the government to maintain continuity with territory lost during the Nepalese invasion, it appears not to be so. A more detailed examination of the Tibetan documents, especially document YA8 clarifies the extent of Nepalese control in the western Sikkimese hills. 'So it happened that the region beyond [to the south of] Sing la [an area close to the modern boundary of West Sikkim and

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<sup>17</sup> F. Tucker: 1957: 57.

<sup>18</sup> B. J. Hasrat: 1971: 268.

<sup>19</sup> Regmi: 1975: 55.

<sup>20</sup> L. F. Stiller: 1973: Inserted map back cover.

<sup>21</sup> Bajracharya: 1992: 1.

West Bengal] slipped into the hands of others'<sup>22</sup> [i.e. the Nepalese]. The territory referred to here includes the district of modern Darjeeling and the land of the Sikkimese Terai extending eastwards to the Tista and south beyond Siliguri.

The document continues in an apologetic way, for this land had been a part of the endowments the ancestors of the Brag dkar pa family had been given by the Sikkimese state in the time of Ka rma dar rgyas. It further states that the government had sent a petition to the Tibetan government and the Ambans in Lhasa relating to this lost territory and that the Tibetan government had responded by granting the family the tax revenues of Phag ri rdzong in the Chumbi valley. The granting of these gifts is also alluded to in document YA1 of the Brag dkar pa collection, which is a document from the financial/revenue office of the Kashag and carries the black seal associated with that office.<sup>23</sup>

From lines 22-24 of YA8 the areas of land which remained in the ownership of the Brag dkar pa family are listed and included in this list is the area of g.Yang sgang which relates to the modern estate of g.Yang thang rdzong,<sup>24</sup> the residential lands of the Brag dkar pa family in West Sikkim. This seems to suggest that the region permanently acquired by the Nepalese after the invasion of Sikkim was the Terai up to where the Raman meets the Tista and then following the Tista southwards to the plains. What is still ambiguous, however, is the duration that the areas of West Sikkim, including the palace of Rab brtan rtse, were held by the Nepalese after the invasion in 1788.

While this document perhaps provides some interesting information on the extent of Nepalese held territory, it also gives some interesting

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<sup>22</sup> Document YA8.

<sup>23</sup> YA1 is reproduced here in full: *rtsis khang nas / mchod yon gong ma'i bka' shogs dgongs 'brel 'di ga nas 'go mchan song don bzhin / 'bras ljongs blon brag sha nas sa mchams dang dmag don gyi zhabs ('degs) zhus rjes gsol ras 'di lo'i 'bab 'bru ru'i khal nyi shu tham pa phag ri ljong sdod sbrel po'i lho'i pa'i sho nas sprad pas rtsis 'gro sngar lam bzhin yong ba gyis, shing [lchags] bya zla ches la /*

<sup>24</sup> g.Yang sgang at first inspection seems to indicate a precious mountain ridge or spur. Whereas in the meaning of the place name: g.Yang thang, the mountain spur (sgang) becomes plain (thang) thus forming the combined connotation: precious plain. g.yang in this instance refers to g.yang as in g.yang sgam (g.yang grom in the Sikkimese dialect) i.e a treasure box of religious articles. It is also possible that the use of g.yang in this place name implies a gorge / ravine and in the Sikkimese dialect g.yang can mean a kind of grass used for thatching [which happens to grow locally], which could provide two likely translations: 'the plain of the gorge' or 'the plain of g.yang'. Whatever, the precise origins of this place name it seems from the text in question that the residential estate of the Brag dkar pa family had previously been called g.Yang sgang.

details about the nature of the internal alliance between the Chos rgyal and the Brag dkar pa minister. Contained within the later sections of YA8, are a number of references to the loyalty of the family throughout history, the association of the Brag dkar pa family with the family of the Chos rgyal and commands to those under the administration of Sikkim, whether of high or low status, to obey and respect the old Brag dkar pa minister. While it may be argued that this is only a literary convention and thus have no significant meaning, it seems that this is not the case here. Not only had a member of the Brag dkar pa family given his life in the protection of the country but he also aided the Chos rgyal in his escape to the Bhutanese border, which probably saved the life of the Chos rgyal. The government thus seems to be genuinely grateful for such acts and apologetic at the loss of territory under the control of the Brag dkar pa family.

Moreover, this document serves to re-establish the alliance between the government and rdzong dpon after what had been a 'make or break' period in Sikkimese politics. It also signals a return to the status quo, an offering of thanks to this family for their efforts and loyalty and recognition of Tshangs rig 'dzin death during the conflict.

### *Conclusion*

The eighteenth century was undoubtedly a turbulent time in Sikkimese history: not only was Sikkim facing external threats, but also internal ones resulting from its relative youth as a state. Given this political context, it became increasingly important for the government to establish and maintain both internal alliances with powerful individuals and possible opponents, as well as external links with the Tibetan authorities. The documents relating to the Brag dkar pa family referred to here provide us with one example of such political relationships. In addition, they also highlight the complex issues involved in the formation and maintenance of alliances such as that with the Brag dkar pa family in Sikkim. Ka rma dar rgyas, as an official of the Tibetan government (although of a low level) sent to take control of the military and administrative apparatus of Sikkim, could have become a threat to the Sikkimese government. However, by bestowing an estate on his family and legitimizing this gift by sending a Sikkimese official to Tibet in return, the Sikkimese not only managed to neutralize a potential political opponent but also managed to establish an alliance with a powerful individual. Furthermore, after the time of Ka rma dar

rgyas and the continued residence of his family in Sikkim, this earlier grant of land also serves as an emotional bond, based on the recognition that the position of the Brag dkar pa family in Sikkim resulted from this political alliance with the Chos rgyal.

It is perhaps this emotional bond that document YA4 alludes to by the simple re-stating of the history of the family's acquisition of land. Also, the granting of land, which after all is the means for economic sustainability, gives such an alliance a physical quality. Clearly status is not only achieved through family histories but also through bonds of political and economic association between the state and the individual. Thus the political position and the general status of the Brag dkar pa family became inter-connected with the fortunes or misfortunes of the Sikkimese state. It is perhaps these economic, social, political and emotional bonds that YA4 is intending to exploit in order to guarantee the participation and support for the state in times of political instability.

So in conclusion, these documents help to give us an idea of the way in which, alliances are constructed and maintained, as well as providing clues to the way in which the internal political mechanisms of the Sikkimese state operated. The example of the relationships between the Brag dkar pa family and the state, may be used to assist our understanding of internal alliances in Sikkim in the wider context.

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