

REIFICATION OF ETHNICITY IN SIKKIM:  
‘TRIBALISM’ IN PROGRESS<sup>1</sup>

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Several scholars have highlighted the role of ethnic belonging and solidarity on political action in Sikkim.<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I intend to question and deconstruct this argument by highlighting the historicity of ethnic categories in Sikkim. This firstly reverses the above-mentioned argument by highlighting the determining role of politics in defining and reifying ethnic boundaries, and politicizing ethnic groups. By doing so, I also propose to apply to the case of Sikkim the distinction discussed by Brubaker (2004: 11-18) between ethnic categories as commonly represented and institutionalised by states, and ethnic groups. This finally supports the idea that, in Sikkim also, ethnicity<sup>3</sup> is not pre-defined and ‘natural,’ but emerged at the intersection of various political interactions.<sup>4</sup>

This paper thus focuses primarily on ethnic categorization, and not on ethnic identification; it thus also proposed to differentiate categorization and identification.<sup>5</sup> This approach in terms of categorization entails critically analyzing their emergence and use in Sikkim, in the intention to deconstruct the idea of a natural bond between socio-political entities constructed by political leaders, and ethnic identities and be-

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<sup>2</sup> See, for instance, Chaube 1987, Datta 1994, Gurung 2011, Roy-Burman (J.J.) 2001, Sinha 1975.

<sup>3</sup> Following Poutignat and Streiff-Fenart (1995: 21-33), ‘ethnicity’ is not comprehended here as ethnic groups and ethnic belonging but in the sense of the social actors’ understanding of social divisions and inequalities in terms of ethnic belonging and differentiation.

<sup>4</sup> Barth 1969, Brubaker 2004, J.L. and J. Comaroff 2009, Wimmer 2008 to mention only a few.

<sup>5</sup> I am grateful to B.G. Karlsson for guiding me toward this clarification. In my opinion, a study of those categorisations from the top presents a first step in the study of cultural changes induced by them, or, in other words, of the influence of policies and politics on ethnicity and cultural identities; this is the focus of other publications, while this article is essentially on the history of the construction of ethnic categories.

longing. In other words, it proposes to look at how labels that often determine people's socio-political life in a more or less positive way emerged and were used, and to make a difference between these labels and what people actually are and want to be. This approach in terms of categories then allows for analytical distance. The argument of an influence of 'ethnic' affiliation on politics in Sikkim is not refuted, but by historicising ethnic categories, this influence is moved to the level of political action (suggesting that at other levels, people's actions are actually dynamic and fluid). Besides, this paper demonstrates that social scientists as well as policy-makers often have an ethnic reading of situations that are, in reality, involving various agents and factors.

In short, taking inspiration from Dirks,<sup>6</sup> how have the classificatory categories of the population, or 'ethnic categories,' which today are a core feature of the politics of Sikkim, been conditioned by history? This discussion will be engaged into by a history of ethnic categories in Sikkim, starting with the first colonial Sikkim censuses<sup>7</sup> and ending with the 2006 Sikkim State Socio-Economic Census. How did the colonial, and then the Indian and Sikkimese administrations represent Sikkimese ethnic communities in official and legal documents, and how did this reflect early ethnological concerns?<sup>8</sup> Additionally, to what extent did the first modern policies in Sikkim, shaped in the aftermath of the decolonisation of India, reflect the then existing categorisations of the Sikkim population?

## 1 - ETHNIC CATEGORISATIONS THROUGH HISTORY

### *The populations of Sikkim*

The first colonial census in 1891 mentioned thirteen "races or castes" in the Kingdom of Sikkim, namely Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu, Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Jimdar, Khambu (etc.),<sup>9</sup> Kami, Brahman, Magar, Chetri (the Indo-Nepali caste of Kshatriya), Newar, Slaves, and Dirzi.<sup>10</sup> The Sikkim State socio-economic census of 2006 added the following groups to this list: Sunuwar/Mukhia, Thami, Jogi, Dewan, Bhujel, Damai, Sariki, Maji, and Sanyasi/Giri.<sup>11</sup>

The early history of settlement in Sikkim is still partly in the shadows, but the attribution of rights and benefits on the basis of ancestral

<sup>6</sup> 2001: 5 and 8.

<sup>7</sup> There are earlier Sikkim censuses in Tibetan translated and analysed by Mullard (2009); see here below.

<sup>8</sup> See, among others, Cohn 1987 and Dirks 2001.

<sup>9</sup> Rai, Jimdar and Khambu are three names for the same group.

<sup>10</sup> *Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1894: 27.

<sup>11</sup> Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006.

presence in Sikkim, as in some other parts of India, makes this question an important political issue. The Lepchas depict themselves as being autochthonous to Sikkim,<sup>12</sup> the Bhutias are seen as having come from Tibet and Bhutan to Sikkim<sup>13</sup> beginning in the 13<sup>th</sup> century,<sup>14</sup> and the Limbus' ancestral lands lie in the western part of Sikkim bordering Nepal. The presence of Magars in early Sikkim history has been mentioned in *The History of Sikkim*, written (or compiled) in 1908 by the then royal couple,<sup>15</sup> and by Hooker (1854).<sup>16</sup> However, Mullard's study of primary sources (including censuses and an agreement between ethnic groups), contemporary with the foundation of the Sikkim kingdom, leads to conclude that there is no evidence of Magars having been in Sikkim at that time.<sup>17</sup> Hooker also mentions Tamangs ("Moormis"), and Mechis in the Terai in the 1850s. Newars from Nepal settled in Sikkim in the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>18</sup> Numerous people from what is now north-eastern Nepal also fled to Sikkim starting at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century during the Gorkha conquests of Eastern Nepal.<sup>19</sup>

In the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the colonial government (which seized administrative power in Sikkim from 1888 to 1918)<sup>20</sup> encouraged the settlement of Nepalese in order to increase the number of workforce and taxpayers, and as a bulwark against Tibetan influ-

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<sup>12</sup> Mainwaring 1971: ix.

<sup>13</sup> Mullard 2009: 32

<sup>14</sup> By their own historians, as for instance the King and Queen Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908.

<sup>15</sup> Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma. This text is believed to be a later edition of an earlier historical work (Mullard 2009: 31).

<sup>16</sup> Hooker writes that the Magars (spelt "Magras") are aborigines of Sikkim (1854 [1980], vol I: 130). This question is however debated in Sikkim; see, for instance, Sonam Wangdi 2010.

<sup>17</sup> Saul Mullard's personal communication.

<sup>18</sup> Shrestha 2005: 27; see also Subba 1989: 1.

<sup>19</sup> As well as to India; Pradhan 1991: chapter 6 (especially p.117).

<sup>20</sup> Rose 1978: 207. See also Administrative Report of the State of Sikkim 1918-19:1, and Rao 1972: 123 and 145.

ence;<sup>21</sup> this led to a growth of the population, though available Census figures raise problems.<sup>22</sup>

Anthropological studies of Nepal organise these groups according to the criteria of language, localisation or social organisation. A superimposition of these criteria would be an oversimplification, but in broad brush strokes, this classification more or less matches the one commonly used in the Himalayas, between Kirāt or Kirant—a term that “generally means the ‘autochthonous’ Tibeto-Burman groups of East Nepal”<sup>23</sup> and the “the wild non-Aryan tribes living in the mountains”<sup>24</sup>—Newars and caste-organised groups.

The Kirant category includes various ethnic groups depending on an author’s predilections, including sometimes just the Rais, and at other times the Mechs, Lepchas, Yakhas, Limbus, Magars, Gurungs, Sunuvars, etc.<sup>25</sup> They speak languages belonging to the Tibeto-Burman family<sup>26</sup> that are differentiated from the Tibetan dialect spoken by the Bhutias. As for the latter, they have retained a number of Tibetan cultural practices, while having also adopted local features. Regarding the Lepchas, in contrast to their oral tradition, hypotheses of their early migration from the east and from southern Tibet have been drawn, based on the inadequate evidence of “linguistic and cultural relations to communities living in north-eastern regions of India and Burma.”<sup>27</sup> The castes in Sikkim are mainly Nepalese, represented by the Bahun (Brahman), Chetri (Kshatriya), as well as the so-called low castes of

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<sup>21</sup> See Risley’s famous quotation on “the praying-wheel of the Lama [that] will give place to the sacrificial implements of the Brahman [...] settl[ing] the Sikkim difficulty for us” (*Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1894: xxi), and Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908: 77. H. H. Risley (1851-1911) was a colonial administrator and ethnographer. His ‘obsession’ for caste as the main organizer of Indian society, and for the castes’ racial origin, left a deep mark on the first Indian censuses. He was the supervisor of the 1891 census for Bengal and the commissioner of the 1901 census (Dirks 2001, mainly: 212-224, see also Cohn 1984).

<sup>22</sup> The official figures give an increase of 264% of the Sikkim total population from 1891 to 1931 (see the census 1891, published in the *Gazetteer of Sikkim*, and Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006: 12). But the 1891 figure of 30,500 has been proven inaccurate; it very likely underestimates the real number of Sikkim inhabitants at that time (Mullard 2011: 210-213).

<sup>23</sup> Gaenszle 2000: 4.

<sup>24</sup> Chatterjee (1951:16), quoted by Subba 1989: 35. See also Schlemmer 2003/2004: 121.

<sup>25</sup> Subba 1989: 35-36.

<sup>26</sup> Schlemmer *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> Bentley 2007: 41-42, analysing Mackean 1920: 511, Siiger 1967: 27, Sprigg 1982: 16-31, White 1971: 7, *Gazetteer of Sikkim* 1973: I, Beauvoir Stocks 1975: 7, and Pradhan 2006: 3.

Kami (black-smith), Damai (tailors and musicians), Sarki (tanners and cobblers) and Majhi (boatmen).

Most of the Kirant follow one of the major religions of the area—Hinduism or Buddhism—although they usually also have their own religious specialists. Today around 60% of the Sikkim population is Hindu.<sup>28</sup> Most of the Bhutias and Lepchas are Buddhist, though many Lepchas have converted to Christianity. The main language of Sikkim is Nepali, which in many cases has replaced the individual languages of the various communities.

This broad picture makes the dichotomy between ‘castes’ and ‘tribes’ in the Indian colonial classification as well as in anthropological literature on this area visible. While “the 1854 Nepali legal code, or *Muluki Ain*, codified the position of many of the country’s groups, incorporating them within the Hindu caste framework,”<sup>29</sup> in contrast “[t]his [colonial and anthropological] model posits two Himalayan ideal types: the Indic, characterised as linguistically Indo-Aryan, racially Caucasian and religiously Hindu; and the Tibetan, characterised as linguistically Tibeto-Burman, racially Mongoloid and religiously Buddhist.”<sup>30</sup> And it does not allow the “classif[ication of] all of the people who fit into neither category.”<sup>31</sup>

It is commonly found in tourist literature that the population in Sikkim is made up of three ethnic groups, namely Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese. I first argue here that this classification is constructed on an opposition between ‘caste’ and ‘tribe.’ Secondly, despite the fact that this dichotomised representation structured the censuses of Sikkim as well as its first modern political institutions, it long remained unclear to administrators which group to put in which category, migrations from Nepal having apparently blurred the distinctions. Thirdly, in the 1990s, the previous ‘Nepalese’ category, upon which policies and politics had been based, was overthrown and replaced by a divide between ‘Indo-Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid’ based on the then revived notion of race. A new tripartite organisation of the population thus came out, including these two groups and the Bhutia-Lepcha. Both the recommendations of the second Commission for Backward Classes in 1980 and the “movement of indigenous nationalities” (*janajati* in Nepali) in the 1990s<sup>32</sup> were instrumental in this shift. It led to an uncommon distribution of power in the area, in which ‘Mongoloid’ formed the government in place of the high castes in 1994. I suggest that this was possible partly by using the legal resources obtained by Bhutias and Lepchas since

<sup>28</sup> Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation 2006: 358.

<sup>29</sup> Shneiderman 2009: 172.

<sup>30</sup> Shneiderman 2009: 173.

<sup>31</sup> Shneiderman 2009: 173.

<sup>32</sup> See Subba 2012.

1975, like the status of Scheduled Tribes and the legal protection provided by the article 371f of the Indian Constitution (see here below). Furthermore, since the category of ‘Backward Classes’ is viewed as a springboard for inclusion into the category of Scheduled Tribes by the Sikkim government, these recommendations triggered a struggle for reclassification. Groups listed as ‘Backward Classes’ indeed endeavour to be identified as ‘tribal’ and other groups attempt to be recognised as Other Backward Classes.<sup>33</sup> This quest for ‘backwardness/tribalism’ as well as the complexity and overlapping of classifications in Sikkim are illustrated in the following table:

Table 1: Classifications of ethnic groups in Sikkim

SIKKIM “THREE ETHNIC GROUPS” REFLECTED IN RESERVATIONS UNTIL 1979	CURRENT DIVIDE OF ETHNIC GROUPS	IN THE “RESERVATION SYSTEM” (STATE WELFARE)		PERCENTAGE IN POPULATION (2006)
Lepcha	Lepcha	Scheduled Tribes (1978)		37%
Bhutia	Bhutia			
‘Nepalese’	Limbu, Tamang	(2003)		
	Bhujel, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar (including Mukhia), Sanyasi, Thami, and Jogi	CENTRAL LEVEL (DELHI): Other Backward Classes (1995 -> 2000) <sup>34</sup>	STATE LEVEL (SIKKIM): Most Backward Classes (2003) Adding Dewan, and excepting Sanyasi	23%
	Newar	“General”	Other Backward Classes (2001)	23%
	‘High’ castes: In Sikkim:			

<sup>33</sup> As Subba (2012) explains, their reclassification as ST in Sikkim would offer many opportunities: protection of the land, reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly, etc.

<sup>34</sup> Groups declared as OBC by Sikkim state in 1994; Bhujel, Gurung, Limboo, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamangs were included in the Central list of OBC on 25th May 1995, Sanyasi and Thami on 6th December, 1999 and Jogi on 4th April 2000. See <http://sikkimsocialwelfare.org/General/Welfare/StateCommBckWrdCl.aspx>

	Bahun and Chetri		(+ Sanyasi)	
	'Low' castes: in Sikkim: Ka- mi, Damai, Mahji, Sarki		Scheduled Castes (1978)	6,6 %

*Censuses of Sikkim, and the confusion of criteria*

The first instances of an ethnic depiction of the population of Sikkim appear in two Tibetan texts analysed by Mullard (2009 and 2011) dating to the second half of the 17<sup>th</sup> century. This is the era of the first Bhutia king's enthronement, and, in the first document, representatives of three ethnic groups—Lho [Bhutia], Mon [Lepcha], and gTsong [Limbu]—acknowledge the new ruler's supremacy as the head of a single political order.<sup>35</sup> The alliance of these ethnic groups is one of the elements providing a foundation for the kingdom, and that also delimited it. The second text is, in all likelihood, a census produced by the ruling elite for administrative purpose.<sup>36</sup> It lists clans, families and individuals, assembled under the label 'Mon pa.' In contrast to another text from the same time period, 'Mon pa' does not refer to the Lepchas exclusively, but also to Limbus.<sup>37</sup> Mullard comments that this other text "recognized the ethnic plurality of Sikkim, whereas this register fails to distinguish between Lepcha and Limbu groups."<sup>38</sup> He adds that 'Mon' conveys a meaning closer to that of 'non-Tibeto-Sikkimese' [i.e. Bhutia].<sup>39</sup> In other words, the category Monpa was not intended to be descriptive in this case, but it marked otherness from a Bhutia ruling elite's point of view.<sup>40</sup> In this regard, the colonial censuses represent a shift in the perception of social groups, and the isolation of the 'ethnic' category, identified as the main social organiser. Scholars have precisely described the role and use of anthropological representations and knowledge in this process, mainly starting from the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>41</sup> The first Sikkim colonial census dates to 1891, when Sikkim had been under British colonial rule for just over two years, and was "done by the

<sup>35</sup> Mullard 2009: 198.

<sup>36</sup> Mullard 2009: 225-240.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*: 229.

<sup>38</sup> *Ibid*: 239.

<sup>39</sup> *Ibid*: 238-239.

<sup>40</sup> Pommaret (1999: 52) already stated that the term Mon pa could designate groups that have in fact little in common. On the meanings and uses of the term, see also Aris 1979.

<sup>41</sup> Amselle and M'Bokolo 1985, Cohn 1987, Dirks 2001, Middleton 2010 among others.

then political officer in Sikkim [J.C. White].”<sup>42</sup> Simultaneously, in the Sikkim elite’s writing, the old representation of the population, i.e. Lho Mon gTsong, was turned into “the three races living in Sikkim.”<sup>43</sup> The indigenous population was thus defined, and opposed to all the other groups.

Categorisations displayed in later censuses are going to be presented now; there are categorisations from ‘the top,’ reflecting the colonial understanding of social organisation in India and then its adaptation after independence. From 1901 Sikkim censuses were conducted under the auspices of the West Bengal Census Authorities; there was no separate report for Sikkim until 1971.<sup>44</sup>

#### *Bhutia-Lepcha versus Nepalese*

The sparse census data of 1891 regarding the “races or castes”<sup>45</sup> of Sikkim are organised along two criteria. The first expresses the Bhutia rulers’ point of view: the thirteen groups mentioned above were first divided into three categories, namely “more or less allied,” (Limbus, Gurungs, Murmis, Khambus, Mangars), “later immigrants from beyond the Arun [river] in Nepal,” and Bhutia and Lepcha.<sup>46</sup> The text then identified three main “stocks” in Sikkim based on their ancestry of settlement in Sikkim: the Sikkim aboriginal Lepchas, the “next in importance, if not in antiquity commonly called Bhoteas,” and the Limbus, either of “Lhasa Gotra,” i.e. Limbu exogamous groups presumably originally from Tibet, or of “Kasi gotra,” who would ostensibly have come from Benares. The latter specification differentiated the Limbus of ancient settlements in Sikkim from the Limbus who had arrived from Nepal at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. This description of the “main stocks in Sikkim” thus emphasized the foreign origin of “later immigrants from beyond the Arun.” This provided a base for the organisation of the Sikkim population in terms of three categories, which Waddell displayed in summarising the census: Lepchas, Bhutias, Nepalese, etc.,<sup>47</sup> divided between ancient inhabitants (Bhutias and Lepchas) and migrants.

<sup>42</sup> *Census of India 2001, Series 12–Sikkim*, Analytical note: 1.

<sup>43</sup> Thutob Namgyal and Yeshe Dolma 1908.

<sup>44</sup> *Census of India 2001, Series 12–Sikkim*, Analytical note: 3.

<sup>45</sup> *Gazetteer of Sikkim 1894* and *Census of India 1891*.

<sup>46</sup> *Gazetteer of Sikkim 1894*: 27.

<sup>47</sup> *Gazetteer of Sikkim*: 1894: 259. In the language report of 1893, the same distinction is based on language (Baines 1893: 148).



The dichotomy between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese has today become the most common.<sup>48</sup> As Shneiderman explains, “It is intriguing that Tibeto-Burman language-speaking, beef-eating groups of Nepali heritage such as the Tamang, Gurung, Magar, Rai, Limbu and Thangmi were included under the rubric ‘Nepali’, rather than classed with the Bhutias and Lepchas, which suggests that a sense of Nepali national identity already trumped particular cultural identities as criteria for self-identification in colonial Darjeeling.”<sup>49</sup> As far as Sikkim is concerned, the wish to differentiate indigenous people from outsiders—whether to protect the former or “dilute” them, as Risley’s ringing phrase suggests (see fn. 25)—has most probably played a role as well. Moreover, I argue that the conceptualisation of castes and tribes being opposed structured the opposition between Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese in Sikkim, as we shall see now.

*Hill ‘tribes’ as Nepalese castes*

In the Indian censuses from the 1870s, castes were selected as the “fundamental unit of India’s social structure,” and thus they became the basic category used to organise the population counts.<sup>50</sup> At the same time, the British had difficulties in classifying ‘aboriginals’/‘tribes’ of India.<sup>51</sup> In the census of 1901, Risley (the census superintendent) shared out ethnic groups between categories organised in a caste hierarchy<sup>52</sup>:

*Class I—High Castes:*

Brahman  
Khas

*Class II—Intermediate castes*

Gurang [Gurung]  
Limbu  
Manger  
Rajbansi (Koch)

<sup>48</sup> The problems raised by those terms, especially ‘Nepalese,’ have been discussed by several authors, mainly Chalmers 2003, Hutt 1997, Subba 1992, Shneiderman 2009, Sinha 2006. See also Vandenhelsken 2011.

<sup>49</sup> 2009: 268 n19.

<sup>50</sup> Dirks 2001: 49

<sup>51</sup> Middleton 2010: 199.

<sup>52</sup> *Census of India* 1901, Vol. 1—Ethnographic Appendices: 58. This table is entitled “Social Grouping of the Mongoloid Tract of Assam, Sikkim, Koch-Bihar, and Hill Tippera,” and is presented in the section Hindu.

*And Class III–Low castes:*

Chakma  
 Kami  
 Khambu  
 Kuki  
 Lepcha  
 Nama Sudra<sup>53</sup>

Here Risley regarded ethnic groups as various castes of Nepalese society.<sup>54</sup> This concept is later expressed by O'Malley: "The majority of the people in the hills are of Mongolian origin, belonging chiefly to various Nepalese castes, but also including a large number of Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans."<sup>55</sup> The ethnic groups of 'Nepalese origin' are then classified in a separate category than Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans *because* they are considered to be castes. However, although Risley classifies Nepalese ethnic groups as castes, he places "Mongoloid tribes," as, for instance, the Limbus, "outside the Hindu caste system."<sup>56</sup> As Galanter points out,<sup>57</sup> the location of the dividing line between "tribals" and "non-tribals" has not always been free from doubt, a doubt linked to a controversy over the extent to which tribal's were "Hindus."<sup>58</sup> The hierarchical ordering of Nepalese tribes simultaneous to their location outside of Hinduism echoes Ghurye's later view of tribes as "backward Hindus."<sup>59</sup> Since 1891, tribes were indeed associated with the religious category 'Animism.'<sup>60</sup> Hinduism "functioned dually as the default classification *and* dominant reference point against which 'aboriginals'

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<sup>53</sup> *Ibid.*: 59.

<sup>54</sup> Planning Commission, Government of India, 2008: 191 and Subba 1999: 121.

<sup>55</sup> 1907: 40.

<sup>56</sup> *Census of India* 1901, Vol. 1–Ethnographic Appendices: 203. A similar comment is made by S.C. Das: "The Kirata are well known as a tribe of non-Brahmanical people" (1902: 26, third footnote)

<sup>57</sup> 1984: 150.

<sup>58</sup> 1984: 150fn135. Kumar 1999 and Xaxa 1999 also discussed the analogous use of the terms in the early censuses.

<sup>59</sup> 1963: 19, quoted by Galanter 1984: 150fn135. According to Xaxa, Ghurye made his observation "based on highly inadequate data and on the very selective use of the comments and observations of the Census Commissioners" (2008: 76). On the distinction between castes and tribes, see also Bailey 1961.

<sup>60</sup> Middleton 2010: 200. Xaxa explains how, when criteria to identify tribes started to be defined after 1901, religion was the main of them (tribes were "animist" and then, following "tribal religion"). Other dimensions were gradually added with the terms "hill" and "forest tribes." In 1931, though Hutton (the then census commissioner) referred to tribes as primitive tribes, he also thought that, since tribes were identified according to religion, the tribe-caste distinction could be maintained only on the basis of religion (Xaxa 2008: 3 and 14; see the whole chapter 2).

were negatively determined.”<sup>61</sup> Additionally, since Nepal was a Hindu Kingdom, there was even more reasons—if the situation was not observed too closely—to consider its tribes as Hindus.

*A blurred distinction between tribes and Nepalese castes*

Simultaneously, it remained unstable for a long time whether a group was placed in the category of caste or tribe.<sup>62</sup> The ambivalence goes in both directions: in the same text, while Nepalese Brahman are enumerated for Sikkim, Chetris (the Nepalese Kshatriyas) are not; still in the 1931 census, both are enumerated in separate categories, with Chetris often being “Khas returning themselves as Kshatriya.” Finally, under the category “All Tribes” and the sub-category “Tribes of the Himalayas” are listed: Bhutia (of Sikkim, Bhutan, etc.), Brahman (Nepali), Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Jimdar, Kami, Khambu, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Magar, etc.<sup>63</sup> This difficulty in differentiating castes from tribes in this region of the Himalayas is not only due to the view of tribes as the negative counterpart of Hinduism, but also to the difference made between Indian and Nepalese castes: the 1911 census understood Nepalese castes to be “tribal and not functional castes,” because their members adopted any kind of occupation.<sup>64</sup>

*The pre-eminence of the ‘social’ criterion over the racial category of Mongoloid*

Racial criteria, including the racial category of ‘Mongoloid,’ were introduced in the first census of Sikkim; Risley considered Bhutias and

<sup>61</sup> Middleton 2010: 199.

<sup>62</sup> The list of “official” tribes was set up only later: “The first serious attempt to identify the “primitive tribes” was in the 1931 Census [...] In the 1935 Act for the first time provision was made from some representation for “Backward Tribes” in the reformed Provincial Legislatures, and a list of Backward Tribes was promulgated in 1936 for all of the provinces except Punjab and Bengal [...] In 1950, the President promulgated the list of Scheduled Areas, and the list of Scheduled Tribes” (Galanter 1984: 147-149).

<sup>63</sup> *Census of India* 1931, table XII-5 (p. 446). The text defines Nepalese or Nepali groups as “groups of Nepali origin” and includes in this category: Brahmin-Nepali, Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Jimdar, Kami, Khambu, Khas, Khawas, Kisan, Limbu, Mangar, Manjhi, Murmi, Newar, Sarki, Sunwar, Tharu and Yakka (p450). Among them, Rai, Limbu and Gurung have been entered as following tribal religions (1931: 384). As for the “castes and tribes” present in Sikkim, they are Bhutia, Damai, Gharti, Gurung, Khambu, Kami, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Murmi, Newar, Sarki and Sunuwar (1931: 492).

<sup>64</sup> *Census of India* 1911, Vol. 5: 451. This view was supported by O’Malley by his having a Nepalese Brahman groom in his house.

Lepchas to have a “Mongolian origin.”<sup>65</sup> In the 1901 census, further refining this category, he added the category of Kiranti to the ‘Mongoloids,’ defined in 1891 as a “Nipali family of languages,”<sup>66</sup> and in 1915 as “a tribal or national group.”<sup>67</sup> This exemplifies the “confusion of racial-linguistic and cultural criteria in the establishment of the classification.”<sup>68</sup> However, the ‘social’ criterion—the idea that ethnic groups such as Limbu, Gurung, etc. are castes—preceded the Mongoloid-Aryan racial divide, while ‘Nepalese’ was alternatively a race and a geographical origin.<sup>69</sup> Although in the 1911 census, castes were no longer classified according to status,<sup>70</sup> this pattern remained and fixed the representation of the hill’s population for many years.<sup>71</sup>

*The reification of arbitrary classifications despite changes*

In the 1941 census, in which Yeatts regrets the “excessive association of the census with anthropology,” most of the 1931 ‘Hill Tribes’ were not maintained in this category; only Bhutia and Lepcha were. This ‘delisting’ as Hill tribes has become an important issue in claims for the separate state of Gorkhaland in Darjeeling.<sup>72</sup> It was explained as the result of peoples having declared themselves to be Nepali language speakers, while Nepali is classified as an “Indo Aryan language.” Indeed, the tribes of the Hills were no longer identified according to ethnic belonging, but according to language. The association between race and culture had left its mark. However, with regard to Sikkim, in the 1941 census, the table “Variations in population of selected tribes” (which does not include Brahmans) enumerates Bhutia, Damai, Gurung, Kami, Khas, Lepcha, Limbu, Mangar, Newar, Sarki, and Sunuwar.

From 1951, only the newly created categories of Scheduled Tribes and Scheduled Castes were enumerated in India. Bhutias and Lepchas were declared to be Scheduled Tribes<sup>73</sup> (the Sikkim Bhutias and Lep-

<sup>65</sup> Risley 1891: 252.

<sup>66</sup> *Census of India* 1891 - Report: 149. Also in the Census 1901, that identifies three categories of Kiranti: Kiranti (Khambu and Jimdar), Kiranti (Yakha), Kiranti (others), Vol. 1: 343.

<sup>67</sup> Risley 1915: 463.

<sup>68</sup> Cohn 1987: 115.

<sup>69</sup> O’Malley 1907: 43.

<sup>70</sup> Dirks 2001: 223.

<sup>71</sup> See for instance White 1909: 7-9.

<sup>72</sup> See, for instance: <http://www.darjeelingtimes.com/news/news/The-locus-stands-of-Darjeeling-District.html>

<sup>73</sup> When the Scheduled Tribes Order of 1950 was published, “four communities (Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa, Yolmo) out of the approximately 20 ethnicities that make up the Gorkha community [in Darjeeling area] were afforded this designation” (Middleton

chas joined the list only in 1978, after the integration of the Kingdom into the Indian Union),<sup>74</sup> and the Brahman and “Kshatria or Ketri” were declared “non-Backward.” To add to the confusion, in 1951, none of the Sikkimese low castes were included in the list of Scheduled Castes,<sup>75</sup> but some Scheduled Castes were counted in Sikkim (112 people).<sup>76</sup> Scheduled Tribes were also enumerated in Sikkim in 1951 (Bhutias and Lepchas, 29,429 people).<sup>77</sup>

Sikkimese languages and religions were also enumerated, and, still today, those data are used to support the conception of the population of Sikkim as being divided between Buddhist, supposedly represented by Bhutias and Lepchas, and Hindus-Nepalese, which in 1961 included Limbus.<sup>78</sup>

Despite their confusion of criteria to divide caste from tribes, the successive censuses finally gave ground to a divide between ‘indigenous’ and ‘immigrants’ in Sikkim as in Darjeeling. As we have seen, in Sikkim, it was both based on the ruling elite view of Nepalese groups as outsiders, on the confusion between castes and tribes, and on the view of every Nepalese groups as Hindus. The first modern institutions, established in the aftermath of Indian independence, reflect this divide. Indian thought and policies (both colonial and post-colonial) were undeniably used as models and borrowed to modernise the state, but Sikkim, as a distinct sovereign country, also integrated its own history, categories of thought and political factions.

## 2 - ETHNIC LAWS AND POLICIES

### *Reservations versus democracy*

The first law in Sikkim that dealt directly with ethnic groups is probably the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, stating that “no Bhutias and Lepchas are to be allowed to sell, mortgage or sublet any of their lands to any person other than a Bhutia or Lepcha without the express sanction of the Durbar [the Crown].”<sup>79</sup> This law was based on the Order No.1 of

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2010: 57fn1). See the entire part “‘Tribes’ by Law,” Middleton 2010: 223-227 and the Scheduled Tribes Order, 1950:

<http://lawmin.nic.in/ld/subord/rule9a.htm>

<sup>74</sup> Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders, 1978. According to Subba (2012) “[In Sikkim] The same castes were recognized as SCs and the same tribes as STs in Sikkim as those recognized so in 1950s in the hills of Darjeeling in the state of West Bengal.”

<sup>75</sup> See the list in *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 449.

<sup>76</sup> *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 451.

<sup>77</sup> *Census of India* 1951-Vol. 5: 451.

<sup>78</sup> See, for instance Sinha 1975: 10 and Gurung 2011: 76.

<sup>79</sup> Government of Sikkim, Sikkim Code Vol. 2, Part 1: 4.

1897, which had been announced by the Political Officer John Claude White during the period in which the King of Sikkim was dispossessed of his power as a ruler<sup>80</sup> and during a period when conflicts of opinion arose between different factions of the ruling elite over the question of Nepalese settlement in Sikkim. Nevertheless, immigrants were eventually allowed to clear forestland and settle in Sikkim provided they paid taxes.<sup>81</sup>

The reasoning that gave birth to the law somehow heralded the protection by the state of social groups—tribes and castes—considered endangered, mainly through contact with Hinduism. It also heralded definition of Sikkim citizenship by the length of time one settled in the kingdom rather than by residence. The discussion of Revenue Order No.1 in the Administration Report for Sikkim 1933–34 indeed uses ‘heredity’ as a criterion for differentiating Bhutias and Lepchas from outsiders, and positions them as ‘naturally’ subject to being endangered: “A law prohibiting land alienation by the hereditary State subjects (i.e. Bhutia, Lapcha), in favour of non-hereditary subjects such as Nepalese or domicile plainsmen is in force and acts as a very useful check on the former class, which is poor and improvident, being speedily replaced by the latter, who are more subtle and shrewd.”<sup>82</sup>

A series of laws, which have been discussed elsewhere,<sup>83</sup> reified and institutionalised this ethnic divide in the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. They stipulated differences in lease terms for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese landlords’ estates (fifteen years for the former, ten for the latter), until landlordism started to be abolished in 1949,<sup>84</sup> banned Nepalese settlement north of Penlong La and north of Dickchu,<sup>85</sup> restricted the settlement of Marwaris to three towns in Sikkim (Gangtok, Rangpo and Rhenock),<sup>86</sup> set differences of taxation for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese farmers (which from 1958 was gradually equalised),<sup>87</sup> and banned

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<sup>80</sup> Sonam Wangdi 2010.

<sup>81</sup> Sikkim Administration Report 1933–34: 29.

<sup>82</sup> 1933–34: 28. These words reflect an exact reversal of Risley’s policy to use Nepalese immigration as a tool to weaken Tibetan culture in Sikkim.

<sup>83</sup> See for instance Arora 2007, Bentley 2007, Gurung 2011, Hutt 1997, Sinha 1975.

<sup>84</sup> Rose 1978.

<sup>85</sup> Sikkim Administrative Report 1909 and Sikkim Administration Report 1930–31. The banning of settlements north of Dickchu was renewed by a proclamation on 30 August 1956, but after local inhabitants expressed worries concerning the ban with regard to Nepalese being employed on farms, Nepalese were granted permits to settle under the control of the Sikkim Durbar (see notification No. 988/LR of 21 July 1958).

<sup>86</sup> Sikkim Council meeting of 27 October 1908, reinforced in 1913.

<sup>87</sup> Sikkim Administrative Report 1914–15: 3. Regarding this equalisation, see Proclamation of His Highness Sir Tashi Namgyal of 30 August 1956 (in Moktan 2004: 178) and notification No. 1074/LR of 7 November 1960.

the purchase and bequeathing of property to descendants by women married to non-Sikkim subjects.<sup>88</sup>

Over the course of time, the attitude toward castes changed, towards more ostracism in some cases. For example, while caste matters were judged by a Panchayat appointed by the court until 1935, a notification in 1936 put an end to this practice, enjoining “a strict *laissez-faire* policy in all caste matters not appertaining to the State religion.”<sup>89</sup> Later, in the 1960s, proposed resolutions to “abolish caste prejudice”<sup>90</sup> and for reservation of seats in public schools for Scheduled Castes were refused by the Palace representative for the reason that “there is no reasonable ground [...] to assume that any particular section among the Nepalis population is especially backward. Under the circumstances the question of any reservation of seat for any particular caste among the Nepalis population in Sikkim therefore does not arise.”<sup>91</sup>

The benefits for the indigenous population granted by the state were depicted as welfare for backward categories: a proposition for the equalisation of free education among the Bhutias, Lepchas and the Nepalese communities (Bhutias and Lepchas having free education up to class VI, whereas the latter only up to class II) was refused, and the longer free education for the former justified by the need to “inculcate the urge for education [to] the Bhutia-Lepcha who are educationally backward.”<sup>92</sup>

The transformation of ‘hereditary Sikkim subjects’ into a minority to be protected by the state, which paralleled such measures in India, was developed further in a ‘parity system,’ which was implemented by the Constitutional Proclamation of 23 March 1953 (standing for the first Constitution of Sikkim). This arose out of the context of the injustices of landlordism, the decolonisation of India, and the political struggles between the newly formed Sikkim State Congress and Sikkim National Party. This first directly elected state council was composed of twelve elected members, six seats being reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha and six for Nepalese.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>88</sup> Notification No. 1155/H of 1962.

<sup>89</sup> Notification No. 2352 of 1923, No. 3025-175-J of 1935, and No. 2717/J of 1936.

<sup>90</sup> “[...] For, not only is this evil and hampering the development of the nation as a whole, it is also curse to the Scheduled Caste people.” Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 26 April 1960: 17.

<sup>91</sup> Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 25 April 1960: 13.

<sup>92</sup> Proceedings of the Sikkim Council 23 April 1960: 11.

<sup>93</sup> This system was strongly contested, as discussed by several authors; see among others Grover 1974: 46, Hutt 1997. According to Basnet, this “Proclamation [the Constitutional Proclamation of 23 March 1953] had been drafted by Indians, approved by the Government of India, and the Chogyal had merely been asked to sign it” (1974: 168). Gurung has recently ventured the interesting hypothesis that the parity system was drawn on the model of a scheme framed by the Muslim judge Syed

Related to this, according to B.S. Das,<sup>94</sup> quotas were provided in public employment, while the fear that this would also bring an increase in the number of jobs for Bhutias and Lepchas was expressed. ‘Parity’ was also applied to scholarships for education—Lepchas, for instance, were provided scholarships to study in schools outside Sikkim<sup>95</sup>—though the difference of treatment for Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese in education was still in force in the late 1950s.

The role, on both sides, played by the feeling of ethnic belonging in framing the system should not be underestimated. However, in the political arena, the situation was far more complex than the dichotomised representation that had come into being with the parity system. The intricate relationships of influence and ethnic affiliation cannot be reduced by a superimposition of political and ethnic affiliations, and to a binary division, as has been pointed out by Rose:

Prior to accession to India in 1975, Lepcha and Bhutia kaji and mandal [landowning nobility and their local representatives] families that opposed Nepalese migration and supported the Namgyals against both the British and their Sikkimese ‘favorites’ formed the leadership core of the pro-monarchist, strongly nationalist Sikkim National Party. The descendants of the Khangsapa family [another landowning noble family who supported both the British and the Nepalese immigration], and associated Sikkimese and Nepalese families, maintained an ‘oppositional’ posture to the Court, first in coalition with their old Newari Thikadari [landlords] colleagues in the Sikkim State Congress, and later with a menagerie of other peripheral ‘non-establishment’ groups in the Sikkim National Congress. The Newari Thikadari families and their affiliated Nepalese (not necessarily Newari) families joined the Sikkim State Congress and eventually transformed it into an instrument of their communal interests. A number of other non-Newari

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Mahmood of Allahabad in 1896 to provide reservations to Muslims in political institutions (2011: 167). However, no book references are given, and the connection with Sikkim is attributed to the Dewan (Prime Minister and head of the administration) Nari Rustomji. But, though Rustomji was a personal friend to the Sikkim king for a long time, he became Dewan of Sikkim only in April 1954 (see Rustomji, 1987: 37). The parity system was framed during the tenure of the first Dewan of Sikkim, 1949 to 1954, J.S. Lall. It is however right that the contested voting system linked to the parity system was implemented only in 1958 (Royal Proclamation of 16<sup>th</sup> March 1958).

<sup>94</sup> 1983: 8. However, I could not find any confirmation on this claim in legal documents.

<sup>95</sup> Proceedings of the Sikkim Council, 23<sup>rd</sup> October 1962. It has to be recalled that, in India, quotas in education were made possible by an amendment of the Constitution in 1951 (Dhavan 2008: 8).



Nepalese families, who were not traditionally affiliated with the Thikadaris, have become politically active since 1947.<sup>96</sup>

Interestingly, the Sikkim State Congress, which initiated the democratic move, did not demand an ethnic organisation of the Council. According to C.D. Rai,<sup>97</sup> who was part of the event, and was one of the persons who wrote the Sikkim State Congress statement of 1947,<sup>98</sup> the issue was not ethnic representation: “The only communal question the authorities could have in view is probably that existing between the oppressors and the oppressed, the Landlords and the ryots.”<sup>99</sup> But the following three demands of the party—abolition of landlordism, establishment of a democratic government, and the merger of Sikkim with India<sup>100</sup>—were answered by the then ruler by nominating a representative from each of the ‘three communities of Sikkim’ as his secretaries. Thus, political representation of these communities was implemented as an answer to the demand for equity and democracy.<sup>101</sup>

Rustomji describes the Sikkim ruling elite’s interest “to avert Nepalese predominance in the Council and to enact measures to protect and advance the interests of the minorities.”<sup>102</sup> Tensions arose due to the more qualified Nepalis competing in public employment, and the recognition of Buddhism as the only state religion.<sup>103</sup> Moreover, using both colonial terminology and functionalist anthropological theories, Rustomji also explains the fear that the “Bhutia-Lepcha communities [...] were in danger of being engulfed by the extraneous influx.”<sup>104</sup>

<sup>96</sup> Rose 1990: 66. During the period of colonisation, however, the relationship between the Sikkim ruling elite and the colonial powers seems to have been rather ambiguous and more than merely an opposition.

<sup>97</sup> Personal communication on 6 Jan. 2011.

<sup>98</sup> Sikkim State Congress Petition to the Maharaja of Sikkim, 9 Dec. 1947, and “A few facts about Sikkim (1947),” in: Moktan 2004: 106–112.

<sup>99</sup> “A few facts about Sikkim” in Moktan 2004: 109. The Petition however also mentions, “the object of writing this pamphlet [...] is to air the grievances of the downtrodden ryots (subject people) of Sikkim state consisting of Sikkim Gorkhas, Bhutias and Lepchas.” It later states that the “Maharaja Sir Tashi Namgyal, K.C.S.I., is of Tibetan descent, and so are his personal adherents called Kazis, who formed the majority of the Landlords of Sikkim.”

<sup>100</sup> Grover 1974: 35

<sup>101</sup> Later, in 1956, a Council member expressed the idea that the opposition to the parity system was “sacrif[icing] the interest of the original inhabitants of the country in the name of democracy” (Proceedings of the Sikkim Council, 19 May 1956: 3).

<sup>102</sup> Rustomji 1987: 32.

<sup>103</sup> Rustomji 1987: 32–33.

<sup>104</sup> 1987: 29. See also p. 8–9, where he explains the cultural incompatibility between Tibetans and Nepalese, reminding the similar conception of H.H. Risley.

*Shift in the ethnic divide*

The question of ethnic belonging has long been related to the question of citizenship in Sikkim, and both of them were linked to indigeneity to various degrees over time. The Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 defined for the first time the conditions that governed the ‘subject hood’ of Sikkimese people.<sup>105</sup> It granted Sikkim subject hood to “persons ordinarily resident in the territory of Sikkim for a period of not less than fifteen years immediately preceding the promulgation”<sup>106</sup> (the ‘cut-off’ year was then July 1946), and referred to Lepchas, Bhutias and Tsong, but not to Nepalese. The 1961 Regulation has been interpreted at that time and by a number of scholars (including by a king’s supporter like Rustomji)<sup>107</sup> as expressing the Sikkimese king’s lack of desire to “forge a common identity in Sikkim” and excluding the Nepalese.<sup>108</sup> In response to complaint for discrimination, all reference to the communities was deleted from the promulgation in 1962.<sup>109</sup> However, the Regulation brought a change in the existing categorisation of Sikkim population by granting subject hood to people domiciled in Sikkim before 1946. The then king’s concern was to stop ongoing immigration.<sup>110</sup> Additionally, Hiltz has shown how the ‘invention’ of Sikkim national identity in the 1960s involved bringing out a ‘Mongoloid stock’—that is to say ‘culturally Buddhist and not Indo-Aryan’—from ‘ethnically Nepali.’<sup>111</sup> The ruling elite popularized the term of “Tibeto-Burman” understood as a “vague sub-tribal category” bringing together the ‘Mongoloid Tribes’ and the Bhutia-Lepchas in order to withstand Indian hegemony.<sup>112</sup> We find here another form of the relation between the Sikkimese kingdom and ethnic belonging: in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, ethnic belonging was defining the boundary of the kingdom; in the 1960s, it provided a base for the construction of nationalism. However, the latter was not constructed on the dividing line between Nepalese and Bhutia-Lepcha, but the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 started to shift this line to another one between ‘tribes-indigenous-ancestral settlers-insiders’ and ‘outsiders.’<sup>113</sup> Though the ‘ethno-racial’ category of

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<sup>105</sup> Basnet 1974: 120.

<sup>106</sup> Sikkim Subject Regulation 1961 (amended) in, for instance, Moktan 2004: 181.

<sup>107</sup> Hiltz 2003: 175, fn30.

<sup>108</sup> Thapa 2002: 59. See also Datta Ray 1980: 105 and Sinha 1975: 87 on this question.

<sup>109</sup> Rao 1972: 153.

<sup>110</sup> Rustomji 1987: 42.

<sup>111</sup> Hiltz 2003: 73-74.

<sup>112</sup> Hiltz 2003: 74-75.

<sup>113</sup> According to Gurung, the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961 was also questionable because it based the registration of names on the Land Survey Report of 1950-51; “Thus only those who has landed property were considered eligible to be registered as

‘Mongoloid’ was clearly borrowed from the colonial thought,<sup>114</sup> the understanding of tribes as original inhabitants or indigenous people has been expressed since a long time in India through vernacular categories,<sup>115</sup> and, in Sikkim, both provided a base for the attribution of ‘citizenship’ (more precisely: subject hood).<sup>116</sup>

In 1975, Sikkim was annexed by India and became a state of the Indian Union. While it was not included in either the Fifth or Sixth Schedule, article 371F was added to the Constitution guaranteeing, among other special provisions for Sikkim, that “all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or repealed by a competent legislature or other competent authority.”<sup>117</sup> As far as citizenship is concerned, the problem of people having been ‘left out’ from citizenship in 1961 was maintained after the integration of Sikkim within India as, according to the Sikkim Citizenship Order 1975, the Indian citizenship was granted to persons recognized as a Sikkim Subject by the 1961 regulation.<sup>118</sup>

The ‘Indian reservation system’ was also implemented in Sikkim since 1978. This system of ‘compensatory discrimination’<sup>119</sup> provides quotas in public employment, education, and states legislative assemblies to several categories: Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes, Other

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Sikkim Subjects while the ordinary peasants without any substantial landed property in 1936 [1946?] were left out” (2011: 171). It is not mentioned if this was still the case for the revised Regulation of 1962. In the case it was, the Regulation then produced another dividing line according to land ownership between insiders-land owners and outsiders-land tenants.

<sup>114</sup> See Hiltz’s informants’ statements in this regards, who differentiate on one side ‘Mongoloid’ from Tibetans on one hand, and from other Nepalese on the other, just as the colonial census commissioners did (2003: 74, fn24).

<sup>115</sup> See for instance Xaxa 1999.

<sup>116</sup> This question has been analysed elsewhere in anthropology, notably the process of selecting one item supposedly representative of a new group to create social unity and a new political space (see among others Porqueres I Gené 2001). The relations between indigeneity and citizenship and/or nationalism are complex ones, varying from their opposition to their assimilation according to places and historical contexts. The equation of indigeneity and citizenship that the kings of Sikkim attempted to construct in the 1960s represents a particularity in the Indian context where ‘indigenous/tribes’ were for long at the margin of the society.

<sup>117</sup> Article 371f of the Constitution of India.

<sup>118</sup> This problem has been recently revived by the Sikkim government’s proposal to issue a new residential card (see Sonam Wangdi 2011; for a historical outline of this question, see Gurung 2011: 174-176). According to Gurung, part of the problem is due to the fact that, though the people ‘left out’ from the citizenship registration in 1975 were granted Indian citizenship in 1989, the mandatory clauses of the 1961 Regulation were not obliterated (*op. cit.* 175).

<sup>119</sup> Galanter 1984.

and Most Backward Classes, and women. In 1978, Kami, Damai Majhi and Sarkhi were recognized as Scheduled Castes by the Indian central government and the Bhutias and Lepchas of Sikkim were included in the national list of Scheduled Tribes.<sup>120</sup> However, various groups were included in the category of Bhutia that were not considered as such by Sikkimese Bhutias, but by the colonial administrators and ethnologists, like the Tibetans and Sherpas.<sup>121</sup> Despite this fact, the reservation system isolated the former rulers' groups—defining them as 'backward,' 'primitive' and as a minority<sup>122</sup>—in a distinct category, to which special benefits were granted. Though the Sikkimese aristocracy, for instance, fell down from the status of ruling elite to the one of primitive and backward tribe, their special protection by the new state reified the group's boundaries, and provided it with concrete benefits. Additionally, the 'Nepalese' still had seats reserved in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly. The dividing line between Bhutia-Lepchas and Nepalese was then institutionalised again.

The category of 'Mongoloid' did not disappear, and was given a new form and strength from 1979 onwards. Until 1994, those two interconnected set of categorisation—i.e. Bhutia-Lepchas contra Nepalese, and Bhutia-Lepcha / 'Mongoloid' / 'General'—co-existed at different levels. In the frame of the reservation system, in 1979, while Sikkim was under Presidential Rule after a split in the ruling party, the parity system was annulled and replaced by a new formula of reserved seats.<sup>123</sup> The reservation of seats for Nepalese was ended and, in the thirty-two-seat assembly, twelve seats were reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha, one for the Sangha, and two for Scheduled Castes; seventeen were classified as 'general.'<sup>124</sup> This triggered great tension in the state, and a member of an opposition party declared that reserving seats for the "B-L" (Bhutia-Lepcha) and for the 'Sangha' (representative of the Sikkimese Buddhist monasteries) "without making a corresponding reservation for Sikkimese of Nepali origin is violative of the right to equality" and was therefore anti-constitutional; the case was raised to the Supreme Court.<sup>125</sup> The non-reserved seats in the assembly were

<sup>120</sup> Scheduled Castes and Scheduled Tribes Orders, 1978.

<sup>121</sup> See [http://www.sikkimgovtwelfare.org/links/sc\\_st\\_obc\\_mbc.htm](http://www.sikkimgovtwelfare.org/links/sc_st_obc_mbc.htm)

<sup>122</sup> These criteria were selected by the Lokur Committee for revising the list of the Scheduled Tribes in 1964, and included in the Tribal policy, although the bill of this Committee was withdrawn (Department of Information and Public Relations 2008).

<sup>123</sup> Thapa 2002: 4.

<sup>124</sup> Thapa 2002: 74.

<sup>125</sup> R.C. Poudyal And Anr. Etc. Etc vs Union Of India And Ors. Etc. on 10 February 1993: <http://www.indiankanoon.org/doc/745161/>. The Supreme Court decided in

now labelled “General” and opened to all, that is to say including to ‘plainsmen.’ The latter referred both to the traders who had settled in Sikkim in the nineteenth century and newcomers who had arrived since the merger of Sikkim with India. Political debates began to describe these ‘plains people’ as new outsiders, with their ‘influx’ endangering the ancient inhabitants. A ‘son of the soil’ policy influenced a quest for a dividing line between outsiders and ‘indigenous;’ the latter now including ‘Sikkimese Nepalese.’ This category of Sikkimese Nepalese reflects the form taken in Sikkim by the claim raised by Indian Nepalese in general for recognition of both their Indian citizenship and their distinct identity.<sup>126</sup>

From the 1980s, the category of Nepalese was gradually divided into two parts at the administrative and political levels: the ‘Mongoloid’ on one side, the high castes and the Newars on the other. The strength taken in Nepal during the same period by the *janajati* movement, which emphasized and politicized a division between high castes and tribes, had an important influence in Sikkim.<sup>127</sup> The Second Backward Commission, the ‘Mandal Commission,’<sup>128</sup> was also instrumental in this split. It visited Sikkim in 1980, and recommended nine groups to be included in the category of ‘Backward Classes’: the Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Tamang, Sunuwar, Tsong, and Yakthumba (Limbu, Tsong and Yakthumba have been since then declared as being the same group).<sup>129</sup> Those are the groups commonly regarded as ‘Mongoloid,’ and the recommendations of the Mandal Commission finally equated this ethno-racial category to the administrative category of OBC. This is shown by the then opposition in Sikkim of the OBC to the “NBC,” i.e. the Newar-Bahun-Chetri. The latter was only officially enacted in 2003 (see below), but it was widely used in political discourses until then. The opposition between OBC and NBC highlights the equation of administrative categories to ethnic groups in political representations.<sup>130</sup> The category of NBC was even distinguished from the OBC with regard to race, as the NBC were labelled “Aryans.”<sup>131</sup>

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1993 that Bhutia-Lepcha and Sangha reservations were valid. On this subject, see also, among others, Arora 2006: 4065 and n. 16, Bentley 2007, Kazi 1993.

<sup>126</sup> See in this regard Chalmers 2003, Golay 2006, Hutt 1997.

<sup>127</sup> See Hangen 2010, Subba 2012 and 1999.

<sup>128</sup> Regarding the task of this commission in India and the controversy it triggered, see Srinivas 1996: xxvii-xxxiv.

<sup>129</sup> With regard to this paragraph, see Thapa 2002 chapter 4, Phadnis 1980, Chakravarti 1994, B.S. Das 1983, and Datta-Ray 1980.

<sup>130</sup> It is interesting to note that, in Nepal, the Newar were included within the *janajati*, and not associated with the Bahun and Chetri, though it remains a controversial issue (Gellner 2012). The history of the Newar in Sikkim, notably as landlords during the

When V.P. Singh's government decided to implement the recommendations all over India in 1990,<sup>132</sup> the Sikkim state government adopted a resolution rejecting their implementation in Sikkim because they did not cover all the Nepalese, and excluded Yogis and Sanyasi, the high castes Bahun and Chetris, as well as the Newars.<sup>133</sup> The political opponent to the then Chief Minister campaigned for the implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission and won the election in 1994 with the support of the recommended OBC. The victory of the new government, still ruling today, was viewed as a victory of the 'Mongoloid' over the high castes as well as over the former ruling party. Through their reclassification by the state and their insertion within a pre-existing pattern of representations linked to political struggles, the OBC had become a political force that defeated the government that had ruled almost continuously since 1979. From 1994, the recommendations of the Mandal Commission were gradually implemented as follows:

- 2nd June, 1994, recognition as OBC by the Sikkim government of the Bhujel, Gurung, Limboo, Mangar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamangs; added to the central list of OBC on 25th May 1995;
- 6th December, 1999, addition to the central list of OBC of the Sanyasi and Thami; Jogi added on 4th April 2000;<sup>134</sup>
- 2000: addition of the Thami, Yogi and Dewan to the list of OBC by the Sikkim government (Gazette No.94 dated 11th April, 2001).

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monarchy, and their place in society, especially their large representation in the state administration (Gurung 2011: 240), led to their association to high castes.

<sup>131</sup> See Thapa 2002, and Gurung 2011. This racial division was also found in the frame of the *janajati* movement in Nepal and the Nepali writer Gopal Gurung's book *Hidden Facts in Nepalese Politics* (1985, published by the author) played a key role in those events in Sikkim. The book, born of the particularly political situation in Nepal in those years (the "Panchayat Rule"), also describes and strongly contests the domination of high castes over the "tribes" or "nations," and explains it in terms of racial difference between "Aryans" and "Mongoloids." The book was widely spread in Sikkim during the 1994 political campaign (see also Gurung 2011: 243), and Gurungs and Bhutias I interviewed have stated, "It made us understand that we were outside the caste system" (about Gopal Gurung's life, political activities and writings, see Hangen 2010).

<sup>132</sup> See Sharma 2005, Dhavan 2008: 10, Hasan 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Information and Public Relations Department 2003: 6, and *Sikkim Express* 12–19 September 1990.

<sup>134</sup> See the Central list of OBC for the state of Sikkim [ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/sikkim.pdf](http://ncbc.nic.in/Pdf/sikkim.pdf), <http://sikkimsocialwelfare.org/General/Welfare/StateCommBckWrdCl.aspx> and the Sikkim Government Gazettes, [http://sikkim.gov.in/asp/Miscc/sikkim\\_govtgazettes/GAZ/GAZ2011/index.htm](http://sikkim.gov.in/asp/Miscc/sikkim_govtgazettes/GAZ/GAZ2011/index.htm)

Among those groups, Limbu and Tamang have been recognized as ST in 2003 (see below). As regards OBC, the Sikkim government has later declared part of them as “Most Backward Classes” (MBC), and declared other groups as OBC. This has not been yet enacted by the central government. Sikkim ethnic groups have thus different statuses according to the state and the central governments, as shows table 1.

The divide between “Mongoloids” and “Aryans,” then institutionalised by new categories for reservations (or soon to be), interacted with another one in the frame of employment: the divide between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals.’ The latter was still at the core of tensed debates in Sikkim in 2011. Since 1974, a rule states that priority in public employment is to be given to ‘local,’ and “non-Sikkimese nationals may be appointed only when suitably qualified and experienced Sikkimese nationals are not available.”<sup>135</sup> The ‘locals’ were the Sikkim Subjects Card holder; their number was increased in 1991 by the issue of Certificate of Identification. These were granted to Sikkim Subject Card holders, direct descendants and spouses of Sikkim Subjects, people who are landowners and resident in Sikkim, people who have an Indian Citizenship Certificate issued under the Sikkim Citizenship Order of 1975, and descendants and spouses of people employed by the Sikkim government before 1969.<sup>136</sup>

In brief, the Mandal Commission triggered a change in the political alliances, and from here, a movement for reclassifications, as we will see now. It did so by bringing the racial divide between ‘Mongoloids’ and ‘Aryans’ to the forefront, a criterion that had been framed by colonial administrators, but had never become a primary organizing tool of population in Sikkim. Paradoxically, while the arbitrarily constructed category of ‘Nepalese’ was dismantled, another criterion for population organisation in colonial times became dominant: that of race. Simultaneously, while the search for falling on the right side of the divide between ‘locals’ and ‘non-locals’ continued, it was mitigated by a new project of the government of granting reservations to all the former ‘Nepalese’ groups.

#### *From backwardness to tribalism*

A no-confidence motion caused the government to fall on 17 May 1994, whereupon the recommendations of the Mandal Commission were implemented by the next government on 2 June 1994. In his open-

<sup>135</sup> Rule 4(4) of the Sikkim Government Establishment Rule 1974, confirmed by a Supreme Court decision in 1994. The Rule 4(4) is protected by the article 371f of the Constitution.

<sup>136</sup> Sikkim Government Gazette, 8th December 1995, No. 198.

ing address to the Assembly, the Chief Minister elected in November 1994 (and still governing today), Mr Chamling, revealed his concept of the OBC category as being a bridge towards the ST category.<sup>137</sup> He also expressed the idea that the inclusion of Sikkim as member of the North-Eastern Council<sup>138</sup> will facilitate the process of providing “all possible facilities hitherto peculiar to Tribals of the state” to current OBCs. According to Sinha,<sup>139</sup> Chamling here referred to the “tribal states,” where more than half of their population is recognized by the Union Government as Scheduled Tribes. The Indian Constitution provides two possibilities for areas where there is a preponderance of tribal population: the Tribal Areas under the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution (which guarantees special political, judicial and financial schemes for tribal majority areas), and the Scheduled Areas under the Fifth Schedule of the Constitution (that mainly allows protective and economic measures for tribal people). The “Tribal Areas” are from the north-eastern states of Assam, Meghalaya, Tripura and Mizoram.<sup>140</sup> In 2010, Chamling, on his side, expressed the wish that all Sikkim subject certificate holders are given tribal status in order to be exempted from income tax.<sup>141</sup> In November 1994, he had additionally linked the recognition of distinct cultures to the reclassification of the OBC as ST.<sup>142</sup>

The demands from certain former Nepalese groups for inclusion in the category of Scheduled Tribes was not new. As early as November 1990, Tamangs, Rais and Limbus had brought forward such a demand. These groups based their demands on the fact that historically and culturally they had more in common with Bhutias and Lepchas, and that their identity was separate and distinct from the rest of the other Nepalese communities.<sup>143</sup> This was welcomed by a number of Bhutia-Lepcha political organisations that stressed “distinct identity and unity among all hill tribes” and supported the Limbus’s demand for ST.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>137</sup> Proceedings of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly, first session, fifth assembly, 29 December 1994: 14.

<sup>138</sup> The nodal agency for the economic and social development of the North Eastern Region which consists of the eight States of Arunachal Pradesh, Assam, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland and Tripura.

<sup>139</sup> 2006: 10.

<sup>140</sup> For more details on the Fifth and Sixth Schedules, see Galanter 1984: 148 fn121, and Roy Burman 2006.

<sup>141</sup> <http://www.in.com/news/current-affairs/fullstory-chamling-seeks-tribal-status-for-sikkimese-people-12398655-in-1.html>

<sup>142</sup> *Op. cit.* The declaration of the Tamangs, Rais, Gurungs, Mangars, Sherpas and Newar languages as official languages of the Sikkim state was enacted in 1995.

<sup>143</sup> *Sikkim Express* 5 November 1990.

<sup>144</sup> *Sikkim Express* 5 November 1990.



Simultaneously, in the 1990s, an important movement of ethnic revival developed among the Bhutias and Lepchas.<sup>145</sup>

Chamling government's programme expressed in 1994 was gradually implemented. In 1995, reserved seats for OBC were instated in public employment, educational institutions for professional courses, Panchayat and municipality boards. Sikkim joined the North Eastern Council in 1998. As we have already seen, in 2000, the Sikkim state added Thami, Yogi and Dewan to the list of OBC. The Government of India also added these communities to the central list of OBC, with the exception of Dewan.<sup>146</sup> In 2003, Limbu and Tamang, previously OBC, were granted ST status, and other OBC were declared 'Most Backward Classes' by the Sikkim state government (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar and Thami). In brief, all of these groups have been included in the central list of OBC, except Dewan, and in addition to Sanyasi.

Still in 2003, pursuing the project of having all the Nepalese groups included in reserved categories, the high castes Bahun and Chetri, as well as the Newars and Sanyasi, were declared OBC by the Sikkim government.<sup>147</sup> A year later, a commission was set up to examine the feasibility of including the then "MBC" into the Scheduled Tribes category, and the state OBC into the central list of OBC.

Tables 2: lists of Sikkim OBC and MBC

List of Sikkim OBC according to the Central Government	List of MBC according to Sikkim state	List of OBC according to Sikkim state
Bhujel, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar, Sanyasi, Thami, Jogi	Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar, Thami, Jogi	Newar, Bahun, Chetri, Sanyasi

Another census was published by the government of Sikkim in 2006, based on "social groups" (Scheduled Castes, Tribes, etc.) and "commu-

<sup>145</sup> Balikci 2002, see also in this regard, Thapa 2002.

<sup>146</sup> See the central list of OBC: <http://www.ncbc.nic.in/backward-classes/index.html>

<sup>147</sup> Notification No. 54/SWD/WD dated 17 Sept. 2003.

nities” (Limbu, Tamang, etc.).<sup>148</sup> Since “The Indian census enumerates for mother tongue but not for ethnicity,”<sup>149</sup> the 2006 Sikkim census broke with Indian current practices in enumerating for ethnic groups. This accompanied the support for affirmation of distinct ethnic identities, that itself accompanied the process of reclassification.

Interestingly, the Sikkim state pattern of reservations was applied to educational institutions at post-matriculation level outside the state of Sikkim, with 21% reserved on merit, 33% for Scheduled Tribes, 21% for Most Backward Classes, 14% for Other Backward Classes, 6% for Scheduled Castes, and 5% for “Others” (only for locals with Sikkim Subject Certificate/ Certificate of Identification).<sup>150</sup>

With regard to reserved places in state public employment, as approved by the Governor of Sikkim, until today (2009) these have been divided as follows: Bhutia-Lepcha 22%; SC 7%; MBC as declared by the Sikkim state 21%; OBC 21%; and ST (Limbu-Tamang) 14%.<sup>151</sup> However, the Sikkim state categories of OBC (Bahun, Chetri, Newars and Sanyasi) and MBC (Bhujel, Dewan, Gurung, Jogi, Kirat Rai, Mangar, Sunuwar and Thami) are not yet recognised as such by the central government, and reserved places in public employment according to the central scheme are only provided in other states of India based on the pre-2003 pattern (according to which the Sikkim state MBC are on the central state list of OBC, and the Sikkim state OBC are ‘General’ according to the central state, and do not benefit from any quotas in the rest of India).

In other parts of India, violent debates started in 2005 over the introduction of reserved seats in private educational institutions and central government educational institutions for OBC.<sup>152</sup> The question of reserved seats for the Limbu and Tamang in the Sikkim legislative assembly was raised and strongly opposed by the Bhutia-Lepcha, who were reluctant to share their seats with the new ST. Constitutional experts advised that, in accordance with the old Sikkim laws, seats in the assembly be reserved for Bhutia-Lepcha as a special category, and not for the ST and thus not for the Limbu and Tamang.<sup>153</sup> It is since then discussed whether additional reserved seats should be created for the new ST in the Legislative assembly without changing the number of seats, or the size of the assembly be increased.

<sup>148</sup> Department of Economics, Statistics Monitoring and Evaluation 2006.

<sup>149</sup> Turin 2011.

<sup>150</sup> Gazette No. 251, 26 June 2004.

<sup>151</sup> Gazette No. 322, 27 August 2009

<sup>152</sup> See Sharma 2005, Hasan 2010.

<sup>153</sup> See Gurung 2011: 296-300. The same experts decided that the percentage of reserved seats in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim could exceed 50% without “affecting the provision of the article 14 of the Constitution” (*Ibid.*).

### *Conclusion*

The categories of the colonial censuses developed over the years were instrumental in designing the categories ‘Nepalese,’ ‘Aryans,’ ‘Mongoloid,’ etc. and, more particularly, in dividing the ‘Nepalese’ from the Bhutia-Lepcha, and arbitrarily selecting caste as the central organising criterion. The importance given to caste in the early censuses appears to have led to the notion of groups identified as ‘Mongoloid’ or Kirant as being sub-castes of the Nepalese. In Sikkim, this representation of the population combined with that of the ruling elite opposed to more Nepalese immigration. One of the results has been to shift the Limbus from the indigenous category to that of immigrants. These categories determined the first ‘modern’ policies and institutions of Sikkim, providing a frame to answer claims for more democracy in terms of reservations for local people.

The invention of Sikkim national identity in the 1960s, and then the Mandal Commission recommendations in the 1980s led to a shift in the dividing line of the ethnic categories, which came to lie between the racial categories of ‘Aryan’ and ‘Mongoloid.’ The Mandal Commission recommendations also indirectly led to equating the proposed ‘Backward Classes’ to the ‘Mongoloid’ as viewed since colonial time; this greatly contributed to their development into a powerful political force, and enabled them to form the government in 1994. A new social hierarchy was thus created within which the position of the ancient Bhutia-Lepcha nobility was weakened, the high status groups of Newar-Bahun-Chetri were politically isolated, and the ‘Mongoloid’ (or ‘Kirant’) were given a place proportional to their numbers in Sikkim. It also triggered demands for reclassifications of various groups as ‘backward’ or ‘tribal,’ claims that were also part of the political program of the state government since 1994. The ‘Mongoloid’ based their claims on their cultural closeness to Bhutia-Lepchas, who already had the Scheduled Tribes status that they were coveting.

This history of classifications in Sikkim shows that the dichotomy Bhutia-Lepcha versus ‘Nepalese’ has never been the only form of categorisation of the Sikkim population. However, this pattern is often the main one monopolized to analyse Sikkim political and social relations in scholarly literature. It has been shown here that this pattern was historically constructed, and that, paraphrasing Brubaker,<sup>154</sup> it is a matter of ethno-political practice, but not an analytical tool. This dichotomy always cohabited with others categorisations—like the so-called ‘Mongoloids’ versus ‘Aryans,’ which was given a political colouring by the king of Sikkim in the 1960s in the frame of construction of Sikkim na-

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<sup>154</sup> 2004.

tional identity—and was brought to the front scene to various degrees over time. The cancellation of the ‘Nepalese’ seats in the Sikkim legislative assembly, the political struggle between the previous and the current Chief Ministers, the Mandal Commission, and the political debates in Nepal (especially the *janajati* movement) from the 1980s combined to give precedence to the ‘Mongoloids’ versus ‘Aryans’ pattern of representation of Sikkim population. This shift enabled the election of the current government, and was instrumental in the starting of the process of reclassification of Sikkim ethnic groups.

More recently, the history of ethnic categories in Sikkim took another turn with the CRESP report, which introduced a number of new concepts, like decentralisation and the criteria of harmony with nature, which have been borrowed from the policy and agendas of the United Nations. In doing so, it attempted to replace the former divides of Sikkimese society, and inserted Sikkimese ethnic categories in a “new global political space”<sup>155</sup> by linking them to indigenous issues. Further studies will show if and how these new concepts have been included, rejected or transformed by the various ethnic groups in Sikkim, and thus, whether or how they have become part of discourses claiming distinct ethnic identities and equal rights.

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<sup>155</sup> Karlsson 2003: 404.

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