

## Sikkim: The Sounds of Silence

**Wangchuk Namgyal unofficially acknowledged as new Chogyal of Sikkim**



*Crowds of Sikkimese wait outside the palace: Well-timed emotional outburst  
(Photograph: Raghu Rai)*

On the crest of a barren hill overlooking Gangtok, Sikkim's miniature capital, a 300-year-old dynasty was slowly coming to an end. Inside a freshly whitewashed cement funeral pyre at Luksyama royal crematorium high above Gangtok, the mortal remains of Mewang Palden Thondup Namgyal, the former Chogyal of Sikkim, were being reduced to ashes.

After seven long years of sullen silence, Sikkim (population 3.15 lakh) was once more back in the news. But it was not the funeral of a dead king that ensured Sikkim's return to the headlines but another ritualistic ceremony that was quietly being played out in a gabled Victorian cottage seven km away from the cremation ground, where his son Wangchuk Namgyal, 29, an

earnest bespectacled young man, was being unofficially acknowledged as the new Chogyal.

Days before the cremation, Gangtok had been buzzing with rumours that he was to be 'crowned' immediately after the cremation ceremony. According to sources, two initial ceremonies had already taken place quietly, the first on February 7, a week after the Chogyal's body was flown back from New York, and the second on February 18, the day before the cremation.

In any event, on the morning of the funeral, a prominent member of the palace staff had made a point of informing journalists covering the event that the new Chogyal would be acknowledged by the people at 3 p.m.

### **Traditional Acclaim:**

Against that background, it is fairly obvious that Wangchuk was not as surprised, as is being made out, when he returned to the palace from the cremation to find hundreds of people gathered in the palace grounds.

Ushered inside the palace drawing room. Wangchuk seated himself and one by one the people waiting outside, including 10 MLAs, were conducted inside where they presented Wangchuk with the traditional scarves, thereby acclaiming him as the 13th consecrated Chogyal of Sikkim.

The ceremony was unmistakably provocative and left nobody in any doubt that it represented homage being paid to a new king. Outside the royal palace, prominent lamas from various monasteries huddled together like ageing choirboys chanting benedictions and prayers for the success of the new 'monarch'.

Though dignified and deliberately low-key, the 'investiture' ceremony took on ugly undertones when high-spirited students caught up in the drama of the moment, marched around the palace grounds singing the banned Sikkimese national anthem and yelling 'Long live the Chogyal'.

For a spontaneous act of defiance, the monarchists could not have chosen a better emotional moment. But viewed objectively, it was an act that was as foolhardy as it was provocative. According to royal custom, the official 'coronation' of the new Chogyal is supposed to take place exactly a year from now.

But considering the strategic importance of Sikkim and the fact that it has been a state of the Indian Union since 1975, it is hardly likely that the Indian Government will stand by and watch that happen.

It is equally obvious that the Indian Government was aware that the investiture ceremony was going to take place and even though it was unconstitutional, decided not to interfere. For one, with emotions running high owing to the cremation, any attempt to stop the ceremony would have surely triggered off violence and reopened old wounds.

By playing the 'coronation' down and accepting it as a spontaneous, innocent reaction to the sorrow at the death of the former Chogyal, the state Government was convinced it was doing the right thing.

More important, however, is the fact that even if the new Chogyal was announced, it matters little in political terms. In Sikkim's fragmented politics, Wangchuk wields as much power as a village headman. "He is a sort of vague symbol of unity among the hard core Lepcha and Bhutia minorities in the state, nothing more", says a political observer.

### **Secular Education:**

In fact, it was painfully obvious that Wangchuk was really basking in reflected glory and the tribute being paid was more in the memory of his dead father than any personal charisma of the son. Most of Wangchuk's 29 years have been spent abroad, mainly in England where he attended Harrow as a schoolboy.

His later education was deliberately diverted into areas that had very little to do with the rites of royalty. Instead of Emily Post, Wangchuk was absorbing Peter Drucker while boning up for his Master of Business Administration, obviously with a view to managing the family's diverse business interests which include cardamom plantations, real estate, hotels and business partnerships abroad.

Wangchuk, in fact, was pretty much of a stranger to his own country and only returned four years ago to Gangtok to join his father. In that time, he has been maintaining a low profile and largely leading a cloistered life in the palace, rarely venturing out.

Against that backdrop and Wangchuk's limited personal contact with the people, it is evident that the sudden rush of nationalistic blood on the part of those who invested him with an unofficial crown was in reality a salute to a symbol rather than the man.

"They (the Sikkimese) are really a simple and superstitious people. The trouble is

they are too easily led astray by the politicians in the state who are as crooked as any of their breed elsewhere”, says Bhuvanesh Kumari.

### **Family Curse:**

But if Wangchuk was being used to feather other nests, there was ample exploitation available in the naivete of the populace. It is widely believed, for instance, that there is a curse on the house of Namgyal and only Namgyals with physical imperfections can rule the former kingdom.

Wangchuk's grandfather, Sir Tashi Namgyal, was nearly blind in one eye. The last Chogyal, Palden Thondup, had a speech impediment. In fact, there is a startling similarity in the father and son situation.



*The former Chogyal with Wangchuk Namgyal: Reopening old wounds (Photograph: Pramod Pushkarna)*

P.T. Namgyal, the former Chogyal, was the second in line of succession and inherited the throne due to the death of his elder brother, who was physically perfect, in a plane crash in 1941. Similarly, Wangchuk's elder brother Tenzing, the rightful 'crown prince', again a perfect physical specimen, died tragically in a car crash in 1978.

Significantly, Wangchuk has a physical defect in that he wears glasses. That alone was enough to ensure that the superstitious minds of the local population were easily manipulated by vested interests.

Despite his provocative and defiant statements to the press, Wangchuk was evidently being used as a pawn by certain elements in the state, probably without his knowledge.

On one side were the monarchists, who though few in number, have lost no opportunity in raking up the issue of India's so-called 'annexation' of Sikkim in 1975. To them, Wangchuk's investiture was a heaven-sent opportunity to resurrect their ranking grievances and place the Indian Government in an embarrassing position.

There was also covert pressure on Wangchuk from a second front - political elements opposed to Sikkim's present chief minister, the dapper and controversial Nar Bahadur Bhandari, 36. By creating trouble and tension in the state at what was a highly charged moment, they hoped and in some measure succeeded in undermining Bhandari's position by raising doubts about his part in the 'conspiracy'. As it is, Bhandari's political views have been inconsistent. He was firmly opposed to the merger of Sikkim with India and was originally considered pro-Chogyal and pro-Nepal.

As recently as December 1979, Bhandari told India Today in an interview that his party (the Sikkim Janata Parishad) was opposed to the merger and insisted vehemently that "Sikkim is for Sikkimese". After the 1980 elections, Bhandari orchestrated his own little merger, of his party with the Congress(I) and crossed the political fence with no visible moral qualms.

Now, his political opponents are accusing him of being pro-Chogyal once again and

using the investiture of Wangchuk as a handy lever. It was Bhandari who persuaded the Centre to fork out the Rs.20 lakh spent for the late Chogyal's funeral and this makes him overly vulnerable to such accusations.

As far as the first pressure group, the monarchists, are concerned, the effect of their manipulations is transient and by last week had already receded into the background. In fact, they have negligible support for the kind of popular movement they would like to spearhead.

A vast majority of the local population, of whom over 70 per cent are immigrants from Nepal, are totally apolitical. Even if Wangchuk or the monarchists are taking advantage of the sudden tightening of political and emotional reflexes by talking of an independent Sikkim and a restoration of the monarchy, the rhetoric can hardly go beyond that.

#### **Archaic Dream:**

For one, there are approximately 40,000 Indian troops currently stationed in Sikkim. For another, they are unlikely to get help from any of the political parties. Even those elements opposed to Bhandari are convinced that a monarchy system in Sikkim today is an archaic and unworkable dream.

"We have a certain sympathy for Wangchuk because of his father's death, but in our opinion monarchy is a childish concept in today's context", says R.C. Poudyal, president of the Sikkim Congress(R) party which has 7 seats in the 32-member Assembly.

For Bhandari to support the Chogyal openly would be nothing short of suicide. He owes his allegiance to the Congress(I) High Command. But though his party commands 23 out of the 32 Assembly seats, efforts to unseat him have gathered strength in recent months. It was significant that six MLAs out of the 10 who 'recognised' the new Chogyal in a special petition belonged to his own party and it is obvious that Bhandari faces opposition even from within the party.

An articulate man who has risen from an ordinary teaching job in a school to the chief minister's post and its attendant perks - like one of the three Mercedes cars in Sikkim (the other two belong to Governor Homi Talyarkhan and the former Chogyal's family) - he is a controversial figure and his political future currently hangs in the balance.

In a recent petition to President Sanjiva Reddy and Prime Minister Indira Gandhi, leaders of Sikkim's opposition party, the Congress (R), listed an 11-page documentation of alleged corruption and related charges against Bhandari. "He is so confident that he makes no attempt to conceal his blatant misuse of power", says Poudyal.

#### **Sensitive Issue:**

Bhandari's current problem, however, is how exactly he should deal with the six rebels who acknowledged Wangchuk as the new Chogyal. If he goes easy on them, he could be accused of being anti-Indian and pro-Chogyal. If he takes action, he could alienate a large section of the populace who would be easily convinced that he is indifferent to the institution of the Chogyal who was a religious head as well as the former king.

Bhandari had originally stated that he was considering bringing sedition charges against the rebels but observers believe that the Centre will prevent him from carrying out his threat. The obvious reason is that public opinion would be aggravated by their arrest.

By last week, however, there were already signs that the messy affair was quietly being swept under the carpet through some frantic backstage horse-trading. According to reports from Gangtok, the six Congress(I) rebels who signed the petition have withdrawn their support to the Chogyal and confessed that it was done in a moment of inebriation.

Similarly, Wangchuk, after his initial enthusiasm, has withdrawn back into his shell and possibly regrets the entire affair by now. Even the Centre, according to

sources, has decided to ignore the matter and keep it as low-key as possible.

### **Main Handicap:**

Wangchuk, on his part, would hardly like to live out the rest of his days like his father did after 1975, or, more important, repeat the mistakes that his father made which led to the merger of Sikkim with India and the abolition of the monarchy. Though a man of considerable ability, intelligence and personal charm, the former Chogyal's main handicap was his obstinate reluctance to change with the times.

He refused to give adequate representation to the majority Nepali community and favoured the Lepchas and Bhutias. He also failed to maintain personal contact with his people and when the final crunch came, they abandoned him in favour of a merger.

"His trouble was that his speech impediment embarrassed him far more than people believed", says Bhuvanesh Kumari, "eventually it got so bad that he virtually stopped speaking and people mistook that for indifference."

Sikkim's history has been an unfortunate series of convoluted events and though its eventual merger with India was inevitable, it was clearly the late Chogyal who accelerated the process. Originally a British protectorate, Sikkim first entered the Indian embrace when it became a member of the Indian Chamber of Princes which included India's erstwhile princely states.

In 1947, when the other princely states signed instruments of accession and merged with the dominion of India, Sikkim refused to accede to India's demands that it do the same. It was only three years later, in 1950, that Sikkim recognised the advantages and under the Indo-Sikkim Treaty signed that year between the Chogyal Sir Tashi Namgyal and the Indian Government, recognised itself as a protectorate of India.

Under the agreement, Sikkim's defence, external affairs and communication were to be looked after by India but the kingdom would enjoy autonomy with regard to its 'internal affairs'. The Chogyal, however,

continued to steer a dangerous course and his second wife, Hope Cooke, an American socialite, added to the crisis with motivated allegations being freely aired that she was connected to the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA). The Indian Government, however, was more concerned with the Chogyal's relations with the Chinese and set out to stir Sikkim's political cauldron.

### **Campaign:**

They were helped considerably in their efforts by the then chief minister, Kazi Lhendrup Dorji, who considered the Chogyal a power-mad despot and launched a campaign against the Chogyal which culminated in bloody demonstrations in 1972 and 1973.

In desperation, the Chogyal was forced to ask the Indian Government for help to control the law and order situation under the May 8, 1973, agreement. The agreement called for a "more democratic constitution" and elections on the basis of one-man-one-vote were introduced.

Though the Chogyal bitterly opposed India's moves, it was obvious even then that the die was cast. In April 1975, for what are still hazy reasons, the Indian army surrounded the Chogyal's palace in Gangtok and placed him under house arrest, eventually sealing him off effectively from the rest of the population.

A day later, the Sikkim Assembly spearheaded by chief minister Dorji abolished the institution of the Chogyal and declared Sikkim a constitutional unit of India.

In the referendum held five days later, an overwhelming vote approving the merger sealed the Chogyal's fate and a week after the referendum, Sikkim became the 22nd state of the Indian Union.

With the Chogyal's death last month, the wheel has come full circle and it is now his son who is reopening old wounds and flexing his comparatively puny political muscles. But if past events are any indication, it will cause merely surface ripples on Sikkim's placid face.