



Sikkim on top

A part of India for less than 30 years, Sikkim has nonetheless come to embody the best of South Asia's largest state: engaged and responsive governance, sustained and ecologically-sensitive commercial development, and large-scale investment in the state's people to make it a 21st century development dynamo. Sikkim is unique for its lush and rugged physical setting and human diversity, but it has also made a name for itself as one of the best-managed states in India. Led by Chief Minister Pawan Chamling since 1994, Sikkim has reversed a fiscal slide, taken governance to the people and balanced resources from New Delhi with intelligent local planning. It now stands at the top of the heap and has set a course to continue its impressive advancement in the decades ahead.

A land of beauty and extremes

The erstwhile kingdom of Sikkim joined the Indian union in 1975. With a small physical setting, 7096 square kilometres, and only a half-million people, Sikkim may be among India's smallest states, but its biodiversity, topographical variation and ethnic diversity belie its size. The state is divided into four districts – North, South, East and West – with Gangtok, the capital, lying in the East district. More than three-quarters of Sikkim's borders are international, with Nepal, Tibet (China) and Bhutan bounding this landlocked state to the west, north and east.

The south of Sikkim rises from north Bengal's rolling hills while the northern terrain is highly mountainous; the state's elevation ranges from a mere 300 metres above mean sea level to over 8000 metres. As a result, the variety of flora and fauna within this small state is Himalayan in scale, encompassing the tropical, the temperate and the alpine. The lower areas have an abundance of ferns and bamboo, the northern valleys are draped by pines, oak, chestnut, white magnolia and wild cherries, while in the upper reaches, rhododendrons and orchids, of which Sikkim has 600 species, stamp their colourful mark on the landscape.



*Land of unsurpassed natural beauty:
Tsomgo lake (3753 metres)*



The third highest peak in the world, Kanchenjunga or Khangchendzonga (8598 metres), is on Sikkim's northwest frontier.



A red panda cub

Sikkim is also blessed with a variety of animal life. 35 percent of India's birds are found in Sikkim, and it is the home of such endangered species as the red panda, the elusive snow leopard, the clouded leopard, the blue sheep, the musk deer, the Himalayan tahr, the lammergeyer, the Impeyan pheasant, the Satyr tragopan and the blood pheasant.

36 percent of Sikkim is under forest cover, making it one of the most attractive destinations in South Asia for nature and wildlife enthusiasts. This, along with its towering mountains and famous Buddhist monasteries, of which Rumtek, just outside Gangtok, is only one, have helped Sikkim raise substantial revenue from tourism to invest in its people. Given its reputation for being one of the few places in India, and indeed in the Subcontinent, that has enjoyed uninterrupted peace in recent times, Sikkim has emerged as one of Asia's premier tourist destinations.



Sikkimese rhododendra

People and leadership

Lepchas are thought to be the original inhabitants of Sikkim, and today, they, Bhutias and ethnic Nepalis are the three predominant communities. Apart from these groups, Sikkim has attracted many settlers from the plains including, more recently, migrant workers who have arrived in Sikkim to assist the many ongoing public works projects such as road building. At INR 50, Sikkim guarantees the highest daily wages anywhere in India. The current state government, led by the chief minister, Pawan Chamling, recently succeeded in procuring scheduled tribe status for the Limbus and the Tamangs of Sikkim, thus fulfilling a long-pending demand to protect the interests of these two communities. It has also asked New Delhi to accord constitutional recognition to the languages of the Lepcha, Bhutia and Limbu peoples.

In 1975, Sikkim went from being an independent monarchy to becoming the 22nd state of the Indian union. It has since been fully absorbed into the Indian polity and now, under the governance of the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), prides itself on being a leading example of real, people-based democracy. The SDF has been in power in Sikkim since 1994, and earned re-election in 1999 on an impressive slate of successes. To get a clear picture, in 2001, Sikkim published its Human Development Report, becoming only the third state in India to do so. In 2002, the SDF government successfully completed the first phase of its government-to-people information exchange programme, which was innovatively fashioned after traditional fairs.

As part of its development plan for Sikkim, the SDF government has mapped out a long-term strategy of accomplishing 100 percent literacy, poverty elimination, youth empowerment and sustainable fiscal health. Devolution of power to local communities and previously marginalised sections of the populace such as women are viewed as inalienable components in a programme of bottom-up development. Policy-makers also appreciate that infrastructure development must advance mindful of the natural needs of this ecologically diverse and fragile state. Its unique geo-strategic position makes Sikkim ideally placed for a day when the WTO regime diffuses nation-state boundaries, allowing Sikkim to become the focal point of regional trade between eastern India, Nepal, Tibet (China) and Bhutan.



Rumtek monastery

When the SDF came to power in 1994, its primary objective was to rescue the state exchequer. In 1994, Sikkim had internal revenue generation of INR 40 crore; even meeting the cost of the salaries of government officials was a challenge. With its finances in such a precarious state, contractors and suppliers were loath to work in Sikkim. The SDF realised that the institutionalisation of certain fiscal processes was imperative before Sikkim could achieve badly needed stability in its fiscal regime.

first phase in mid-December 2002 with the chief minister addressing a crowd of thousands in various places in the state. An exercise in direct contact, the Janata Mela is a forum for the chief minister to engage the people of Sikkim on government policies, encourage them to become self-reliant and empower them to ask for responsibility in governance by emphasising that it is the people's money that the government spends. It also provides a site of interaction between senior bureaucrats, who may otherwise not need to step out of Gangtok, and the people of rural Sikkim. At the fair, government departments such as those of animal husbandry, agriculture and horticulture, industries, welfare, health, information technology, forestry, the Sikkim Industries Development and Investment Corporation Limited and the State Trading Corporation of Sikkim, among others, set up stalls to disseminate information to the rural populace of the state.



Bustling Gangtok, meeting point of northeast India, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet (China).

This format of government-people interaction facilitates a two-way exchange allowing people to gather information on government projects and programmes and how to optimally utilise them, and provides a medium through which senior bureaucrats, by appearing in person to meet Sikkim's communities, get direct feedback on policies from citizen-stakeholders.

At the fairs, held in six constituencies in the first phase, the government distributed welfare benefits to people below the poverty line through measures such as Rural Housing Scheme cheques, GCI sheets for roofing, grants to panchayats, land for the landless, toilets, greenhouses and tarpaulin, unveiling food for work programmes, and releasing cheques for old age pensions. The 200 cooking gas connections distributed to impoverished people in each district embody the government's philosophy of balancing human development with ecological sensitivity by reducing dependence on limited forest resources while improving human living standards.



Addressing a thousands-strong gathering in Dentam, west Sikkim, the chief minister laid out the SDF government's development plans for the state and called on citizens to help Sikkim achieve internal revenue generation of INR 1000 crore by the year 2015. Stressing the need for self-reliance on a household-responsibility basis, Chamling unveiled the Chief Minister's Self-Employment Scheme (CMSES), which earmarks INR 18 crore per annum for the next five years for youth-based business proposals. An individual only needs to have passed the metric exam to be eligible for seed capital and technical assistance. Forward-looking programmes such as this one, with the state playing a catalytic role in developing youth potential, are geared toward achieving minimal unemployment by 2015. The chief minister also demonstrated the efficacy of the public meetings by discussing Sikkim's inclusion in the AEZ (Agriculture Export Zone) for ginger, large cardamom, dalle khursani (pepper) and floriculture. In his public interactions, he stressed that farmers must switch to organic fertilisers rather than rely on chemicals to enhance productivity in the short-term.

A state one step ahead

That the present government has a vision of the holistic development of Sikkim is clear from its people-friendly attitude, intelligent planning and responsible administration. The state's income is distributed in such a way as to benefit agricultural workers, rural areas, urbanites and commercial development. Politically, the devolution of power to the panchayats and the pro-active inclusion of women are helping the state to engage all citizens. People's courts, lok adalat,



have been set up in Gangtok, Gyalshing and Mangan districts.

At INR 6 a kilo, publicly distributed rice is cheaper for ration-card holders in Sikkim than anywhere else in India. Free land is provided to landless Sukumbasis, who also receive state assistance in constructing their houses. The Rural Housing Scheme that will cover a total of 10,000 beneficiaries every year has been successfully launched and implemented. 70 percent of total plan outlay has been earmarked for the development of the rural areas of the state. Milch cows, piglets and seedlings are distributed free of cost to poor farmers to increase their purchasing power and eventually make them self-reliant.

In order to encourage school-enrolment, the government provides free primary education. It also distributes school uniforms, textbooks and exercise books free till class five, and a midday meal programme has been launched. The groundwork has already been laid for establishing a medical college in the state.

The results of Sikkim's investments are plain to see in the 2001 Human Development Report. At 69.7 percent, Sikkim's literacy stands above India's national average of 65.4 percent, and female literacy, at 61.5 percent, is considerably higher than the national average of 54.2 percent. Infant and under-five mortality, at 43.9 and 71 per thousand, respectively, are well below the respective national averages of 67.6 and 94.9.

The SDF's governance is based on the principle that Sikkim should be a model state in India for others to emulate. Accelerating economic development in spite of the difficult terrain, inclement weather, impenetrable interiors and other factors, it has ensured the prevalence of the rule of law. An efficient and responsive police force is of course however only the basic safeguard. And the government realises that in order to maintain the tranquillity in the state, economic development that is geared to minimising unemployment is essential. Above all else, Sikkim has relied on its slate of resources – both human and physical – to create a dynamic and well-administered state. With corruption in check, a growing economy and appropriate safeguards for the environment, Sikkim is literally and figuratively near to the top of South Asia.



Groundbreaking ceremony at the future Pakyong airport.



Pawan Chamling