



# Political Participation: A General Over View Of Assembly Elections In Sikkim (1979-2024)

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**Abstract:** Sikkim became a representative democracy after its union with India in 1975. With Sikkim's union with India, a democratic framework was set in place. Consequently, ten periodic elections have been conducted since the year 1979 to constitute the Sikkim State Assembly, the Legislature for the state of Sikkim. The electorates involvement in the process of voting is crucial to the success of democracy. To have a greater understanding of political participation, it becomes important to study the participation of people in the act of voting. The electoral outcome indicates people's support for different parties and policy choices available. The study of general overview of elections from 1979 till the recent elections of 2024 for constituting the Sikkim State Assembly seeks to unravel the extent of the electorates involvement in the act of voting as well as their support for broad policy outlines put forth by different parties. A study of election results enables us to understand the electoral performance of national parties, independent candidates and the state parties in Sikkim as well as women's involvement in the process. This study is important primarily because it covers the research gap in the study of political participation in the state of Sikkim.

**Key words:** Sikkim, Political, Participation, State, Election, Legislative, Assembly.

## INTRODUCTION

In 1947, India emerged as an Independent nation, and on 26<sup>th</sup> of January the constitution, which had been framed by the constituent Assembly, was enforced. In the preamble of the constitution, it was specified that the people of India had resolved to make India into a '...Sovereign Socialist Secular Democratic Republic' (pg. 73, Arora and Goyal)<sup>1</sup>. 'Democracy' in simple terms means rule by the people, and this requires involvement of people in Political affairs of the state. Democracy as a form of government has been practiced since ancient times. The city states in ancient Greece practiced a form of direct democracy. This was possible because of the small number of citizens in these City states. However, modern states with their vast territories and population could not practice a direct form of democracy. This led to emergence of representative democracy. The electorate in this form of democracy chooses representatives periodically to not only govern but also make policies and decisions on their behalf. India is an example of a representative democracy. Sikkim, after it became part of the Indian Union, became a representative democracy in a truer sense of the term.

In representative democracies, the process of election is crucial. Representatives are elected and recruitment to political offices are made. In other words, it is through electoral participation the electorate gives mandate to the political elite and '...consent is granted or withdrawn in a democracy'

<sup>1</sup> Secular was added by the 42<sup>nd</sup> Constitutional Amendment Act, 1976

(Mukhopadhaya, p.362). The conventional understanding is that through elections, the political elites are held to account periodically and made to introduce policies along the lines of public opinion. However, writers like Ginsberg view elections as a way through which '...political elites can exercise control over population, making them...governable' (Andrew Heywood, p.227). Irrespective of how one view elections, there is no denying that in democracy, it serves to legitimize the rule of the governing elites who acquire the mandate of the people periodically. Elections, however, require political participation of the citizen of the state.

Political participation may take many forms. It may range from being an active member of groups like a pressure group, participating in fundraising, occupying political post within political parties, forming canvassing groups, joining different wings like the women's wing, attending party meetings, communicating directly with party candidates and leaders, and disseminating of political opinions. Contesting for party posts and political office as well as voting are also other forms of political participation. Lester Milbrath broadly categorized different forms of political participation into Gladiatorial, Transitional and Spectator activities. Gladiatorial activities were engaged by party activists that is contesting elections, holding party office, fundraising, canvassing and joining part campaigns. Whereas the Transitional activities would be contributing to the party, attending party meetings and coming in contact with party personnel. Similarly, Spectator activity would involve voting, influencing others etc. (Rahlan and Lambat, pp.244). Bhattacharyya mentions the fourth category of Lester Milbrath's political participation as the politically apathetic. These consist of people who shun politics and do not participate in the political process. This could result from lack of awareness, disenchantment with the political alternatives and the system in general, or because of extreme radical ideology (pp.394). Participation of citizens in the affairs of the state, however, may be determined by the kind of political system that exists. The liberal democracies provide opportunities for citizens to be a part of the process of choosing leaders, and there is a general understanding of existence of 'popular sovereignty' wherein the political elite derive their power from the people. The opportunities and the level of participation in any form of government may not, however, be indicative of the qualitative involvement of people in the political affairs of the state. Seymour Lipset in 'The Political Man: The Social Bases of Politics', writes that a totalitarian leader may involve his followers to attend meetings and engage them in reading political literature and encourage them to be involved in activities that could help in indoctrinating them. He gives an example of the communist labor leaders of whom he says that they '... are not anxious to encourage and deepen internal democracy in their unions, but rather recognize that by multiplying the controlled activities of the members they are increasing their own chances to reach and indoctrinate them' (pg.180). Bhattacharyya on similar lines states that participation in the ex-Soviet Union and the former East European States, as well as China etc. gave a wider opportunity for people than in liberal democracies. However, the control of the leaders of the communist party and their hold over power did not result in qualitative participation of the people (pp.391). Regardless of the nature of participation, the act of voting constitutes an important and a crucial element in political participation. Lipset writes, '...the act of voting is usually only the final stage in the process of paying attention to politics-reading, talking, and thinking (Lipset, pg.180). Therefore, for any study of political participation, the electorate's involvement in the act of voting is important. This study, therefore, focuses on political participation of the electorate in the process of voting after Sikkim's union with India.

### **The Sikkim State Legislature**

The Sikkim State Legislature is a unicameral house with the Sikkim Legislative Assembly as the legislature of the State. Members to the house are elected from 31 territorial constituencies and one seat is allocated as the Sangha constituency<sup>2</sup>. This is one of the unique features of the State Assembly of Sikkim.

The assembly that was constituted after the election of 1974 was 'deemed to be the legislative Assembly of the state of Sikkim duly constituted under...constitution' (Kharel, Bhutia & Subba:100). The government was led by L. D. Kazi. However, five years after the elections of 1974, President's rule was

<sup>2</sup> Sangha Constituency is a functional electoral constituency wherein monks choose their representatives.

imposed for the first time on the 18<sup>th</sup> of August 1979 in Sikkim, and elections to constitute a new assembly was held on the 12<sup>th</sup> of October later that year.

### A brief overview of the elections in Sikkim

Sikkim has faced ten elections since the election of 1974. By and large periodic elections have thrown up popular governments which have successively ruled for more than a term of office.

**Table No 1. Political participation through the process of voting (1979-2024)**

| Year<br>s | Numbe<br>r of<br>elector<br>s                    | Number<br>of electors<br>who voted                                              | Percenta<br>ge of<br>electors<br>who<br>voted | Numbe<br>r of<br>male<br>voters | Number<br>of male<br>voters<br>who<br>voted | %of<br>male<br>voters<br>who<br>voted | Numbe<br>r of<br>female<br>voters | Number<br>of female<br>voters<br>who<br>voted | % of<br>female<br>voters<br>who<br>voted |
|-----------|--------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|---------------------------------|---------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|-----------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------|
| 1979      | 117157                                           | 76299                                                                           | 65.1                                          | 65913                           | 42626                                       | 64.6                                  | 51244                             | 33673                                         | 65.7                                     |
| 1985      | 155041                                           | 99435                                                                           | 64.1                                          | 83806                           | 56512                                       | 67.43                                 | 71235                             | 42923                                         | 60.25                                    |
| 1989      | 192619                                           | 139227                                                                          | 72.28                                         | 100942                          | 76874                                       | 76.1                                  | 91677                             | 62353                                         | 68.01                                    |
| 1994      | 217743                                           | 178023                                                                          | 81.75                                         | 114315                          | 95706                                       | 83.72                                 | 103428                            | 82317                                         | 79.58                                    |
| 1999      | 255377                                           | 208983                                                                          | 81.83                                         | 132591                          | 111855                                      | 84.35                                 | 122786                            | 97128                                         | 79.1                                     |
| 2004      | *24895<br>9 (of<br>28<br>Constit<br>uencies<br>) | *192933 +<br>(postal<br>votes-<br>4313)<br>Total<br>=197246                     | 79.2                                          | *12915<br>9                     | *100668                                     | 77.9                                  | *11980<br>0                       | *92265                                        | 77.01                                    |
| 2009      | 300584                                           | 245857+(P<br>ostal<br>votes-<br>6879)<br>Total=252<br>736                       | 84.08                                         | 157362                          | 127259                                      | 80.87                                 | 143222                            | 118598                                        | 82.80                                    |
| 2014      | 370770                                           | 299572+(P<br>ostal<br>ballot-<br>10563)<br>Total=310<br>135                     | 83.6                                          | 191017                          | 153407                                      | 80.3                                  | 179753                            | 146165                                        | 81.3                                     |
| 2019      | 434128                                           | 339914(+P<br>ostal<br>Ballot-<br>13573)Tot<br>al=353487                         | 81.4 <sup>3</sup>                             | 222109                          | 173742                                      | 78.2                                  | 212018                            | 166172                                        | 78.3                                     |
| 2024      | 466643                                           | 389302(inc<br>lusive of<br>third<br>gender and<br>postal<br>ballot-<br>370609+P | 83.4                                          | 234871                          | 185637                                      | 79.03                                 | 231769                            | 184970                                        | 79.8                                     |

<sup>3</sup> 80.37% according to ECI.

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|  |  | ostal votes<br>-18693). |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
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Source: Election Commission of India.

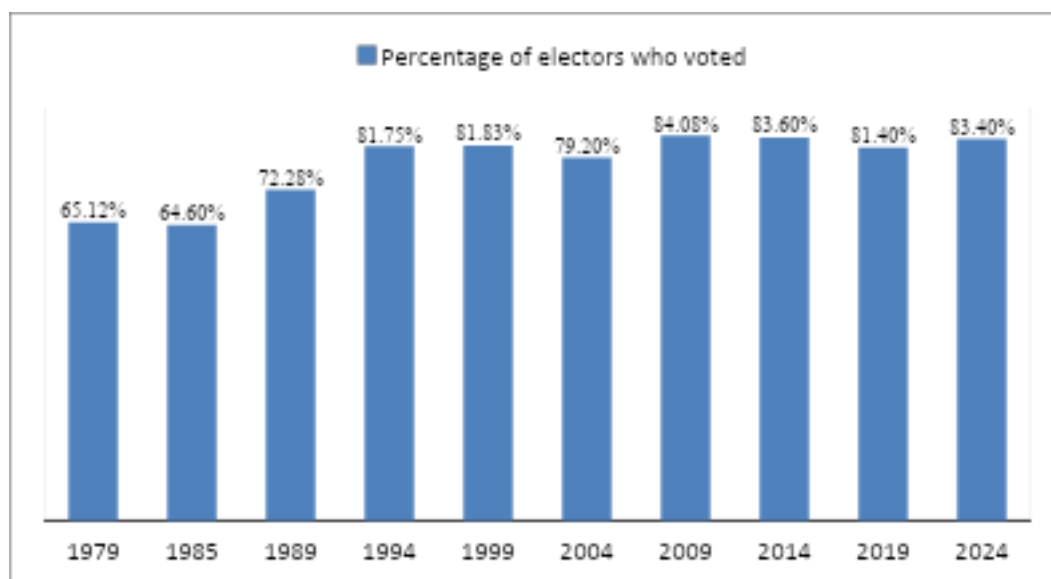


Figure No.1. Year wise percentage of electors who voted

Source: Election Commission of India.

The first election after the assembly was constituted in 1974 was held in 1979. It was an important election. Approximately 65.12 % of electors voted of which 65.7% of female electors took part in the exercise while 64.6% male electors cast their vote. There were three national parties, Communist party of India (Marxist), the Indian National Congress and the Janta Party in the electoral fray. Two state parties, Sikkim Scheduled Caste league and Sikkim Congress (R) also contested the election. The registered unrecognized parties were Sikkim Janta Parishad and Sikkim Prajatantra congress. Independents candidates also contested the election. This election brought the Sikkim Janta Parishad to power replacing the L. D. Kazi government.

Of the 244 contestants in 1979, 233 were males while 11 were females. Despite a slightly higher percentage of women turnout [65.7%] as voters in comparison to men [64.6%], those competing for political office was very low (4.5% of the total contestants), while men contestants on the other hand were higher with 95.4% of the total contestants. Consequently, the Sikkim State assembly results after 1979 elections had 32 out of 32 male members with no women getting elected to the legislature. There were 11 seats contested by women. One female candidate Ruth Karthak Lepchani contested from three constituencies (Tashiding, Central Pendam-East Pendam, Martam).

None of the national parties were able to secure any seat, 11 seats were secured by SCR [Sikkim Congress (R)] - a state party which had contested 27 constituencies. The Sikkim Janta Parishad won sixteen of the 31 seats it had contested. SPC [Sikkim Prajatantra Congress], which was another unrecognized but registered party, secured 4 seats. 108 seats were contested by independent candidates of which only one could secure a seat in the assembly. The Sangha seat was won by an independent candidate-Lachen Gomchen (Statistical Report on General Election, 1979). Lachen Gomchen was a part of the N.B. Bhandari government ministry.

The election witnessed the emergence of 33year old Nar Bahadur Bhandari as the leader of the two years old Sikkim Janta Parishad (SJP) which won 16 seats out of the 31seats it contested (excluding the Independent candidate from the Sangha seat)<sup>4</sup>. It was a case of a hung Assembly but for the support from the Sangha MLA for the SJP. The new government had contested the election asserting the 'sons

<sup>4</sup> Sikkim Sangram Parishad official page states that N. B. Bhandari became the chief minister at the age of 39. The Sikkim express carried writing of the SDF spokesperson who states that Bhandari became the chief minister of Sikkim at the age of 43 (6, July, 2022).

of the soil' policy<sup>5</sup> (Chawla, 1979, para 2-3). Bhandari was sworn in on 18<sup>th</sup> October after the expiry of the President's rule imposed on 18 August earlier that year. The President's rule had expired on 17<sup>th</sup> of October, 1979 at midnight (Report 1979-80, Government of India, Ministry of Home Affairs, New Delhi (www.mha.gov.in: pp.64.)). The SJP led by Bhandari, merged with the Congress (I) which also was the ruling government at the centre. The then Governor, Talyerkhan dissolved the Bhandari government and appointed B.B. Gooroong as the new chief minister. N.B. Bhandari resigned from the party and on 24<sup>th</sup> of May, 1984 and with the support of sixteen legislators who had quit the congress (i) he announced the formation of the Sikkim Sangram Parishad<sup>6</sup>. This move reduced the 13 days B. B. Gooroong government to a minority (Sen: 3). President's rule was imposed for the second time from 25<sup>th</sup> May, 1984 till 8<sup>th</sup> March 1985 (Subba: Para 6)<sup>7</sup>. Thereafter, the Assembly election was conducted in 1985.

1985 elections saw a slight dip in the voting percentage with 64.1% of the total electorate exercising their right to vote. 67.4% of males took part in the voting process while 60.2% of females voted. Four national parties contested the election, Communist Party of India, Communist party of India (Marxist) Indian National Congress and Janta Party. Sikkim Prajatantra Congress and the Sikkim Sangram Parishad contested as state Parties. Independent candidates also contested the election. An Independent candidate, Balchand Sarda was elected from Gangtok, defeating Dil Kumari Bhandari, wife of the then chief minister. Sarda was and is till date the only member of State legislature belonging to the plainsmen community. However, the rest of the constituencies barring Kabi Tingda saw a clean sweep for the leadership of N. B. Bhandari. From amongst the national parties the Congress won the Kabi Tingda seat as Kalzang Gyatso became an MLA. Thirty, out of the thirty two seats was won by the newly formed Sikkim Sangram Parishad headed by N. B. Bhandari. Eleven women contested however, none were elected to the state legislature.

The election of 1989 election saw 72.28% of electors participating in the process of election. 76.15% male electors participated in the voting process while 68.01% of females voted. Sikkim Sangram Parishad, led by N.B. Bhandari, won 32 out of 32 seats.

Only one national party contested the election that is the INC. State parties contesting the election were the Rising Sun party and the Sikkim Sangram Parishad. The registered but unrecognized party in the fray was the Denzong Peoples Chogpa. Independent candidates also contested the election. Four women contested the election of which one was elected to the legislature.

The 1994 election saw an increase in the voting percentage. 81.75% of the electorate voted, of which 83.72% were male while 79.58% were females. Three national parties, the BJP, CPM and INC contested the election. The Revolutionary Socialist Party, Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) and the Sikkim Sangram Parishad contested the elections as state parties. Independent candidates also contested the election. Nineteen seats were won by the newly formed SDF, one seat was won by an independent candidate and two seats were won by the Indian National Congress while 10 seats were secured by N.B. Bhandari led SSP. Nine women contested of which one were elected to the state legislature.

The election led to the emergence of Pawan Kumar Chamling of the Sikkim Democratic Front as the leader of the single largest party in the legislature. The party manifesto promised to safeguard the rule of Law. The catchy slogan 'Janta ko Raj ma Jantai Raja' (Syangbo, pp.170-178) seem to suggest the ushering in of substantive democracy.

In the 1999 elections 81.83% of the total electors voted of which 84.35 % were males and 79.01% were females. Two national parties contested the elections ie. Communist Party of India (Marxist) and the INC. The Sikkim Sangram Parishad and the Sikkim Democratic Front were the two state parties which

<sup>5</sup> 'Sons of the soil policy' "advocated recruitment to government service for only the Sikkimese, and the commerce and trade to be 'by and large, owned by the local people' (N. B. Bhandari interview to Prabhu Chawla).

<sup>6</sup> An angry Bhandari defiantly stated that he had '...brought the congress (1) flag into Sikkim in 1981 and if the high command continues to behave in the arbitrary manner then I will see to it that flag does not flutter here anymore' (Sen: 1).

<sup>7</sup> March, 1985 (Subba: para 6). Bhandari as the leader of his newly formed SSP once again entered the fray. Meanwhile in 1984 December, the general election was held in the month of December. N.B. Bhandari contested the lone Lok Sabha seat from Sikkim and won the election. Some months later the state Assembly election was held in the Month of March which was contested successfully by the SSP.

contested the election. Independent candidates also contested. Twenty four seats were won by the SDF while seven were won by the SSP. One independent candidate, Palden Lama from the Sangha seat secured an assembly seat, whereas Six female candidates contested but only one won.

The 2004 election was slightly different from the rest as the Electronic Voting Machines, EVMs began to be used, simultaneously for elections to the State Assemblies and the Lok Sabha (Chief Electoral officer, Sikkim Statistical handbook on Simultaneous General Election to Lok Sabha & Assembly - 2004). Sikkim Assembly elections of 2004 also saw the use of EVMs. The electoral data presented in Table No.1 for the first time and from then on reflects postal ballots along with votes cast in the polling booths. However, the data provided for the postal ballot does not make reference to the gender of the voters. Consequently, the male/female voter count data does not take into account the postal ballots from 2004 onwards.

Another unique feature of the 2004 elections was that Four assembly seats were won by the SDF uncontested (Wak, Melli, Damthang and Kabi Tingda)<sup>8</sup>. Of the thirty-two constituencies (281937 electors) only in 28 constituencies (248959 electors) elections were conducted and the voter turn-out was registered at 79.2%% of which 77.9% males participated, while 77.1% females cast their vote (These male and female percentage figures do not however take into consideration the postal ballot). The SDF won 31 of the 32 seats. It also won the lone Lok Sabha seat. Three National parties contested the election, BJP, CPM and the INC. The only state party to contest was the SDF. Registered unrecognized parties were the Sikkim Himalaya Rajya Parishad (SHRP) and the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). Independent candidates also contested. Thirty one seats were won by the SDF while the Sangha seat was won by Tshering Lama of the INC. Out of the six women that contested, three won. The 2009 elections had a high percentage of voting with 84.08%% of which 80.87% were males and 82.80% were females (The male and female percentage figures do not however take into consideration the postal ballot). The SDF led by P.K. Chamling won 32 out of 32 seats. Four National parties BJP, CPM, INC and the NCP participated. SDF was the only state party which contested while Registered unrecognized party were three in number Sikkim, namely Gorkha Prajatantric Party, Sikkim Jan-Ekta Party and Sikkim Himali Rajya Parishad Party. Independents candidates also contested the election. Of the Fifteen females who contested all four female candidates who won belonged to the SDF Party.

The 2014 elections had two National parties which contested, the INC and the BJP. SDF was the sole state party while the All India Trinamool congress -other states party, also contested. The Registered unrecognized party was Sikkim Krantikari Morcha in this election. Independents candidates also contested the election. Out of the 83.6%% electors who voted, 80.3% were males who voted and 81.3% were females (These male and female percentage figures do not however take into consideration the postal ballot). SDF won 22 seats (Kashyap: para 2) while SKM won 10 seats. Eleven women contested of which three won.

The elections of 2019 was another milestone in the democratic politics of Sikkim.<sup>9</sup> The SKM won 17 seats while the SDF won 15 seats. SKM was successful in ending the 25 years long SDF dominance of electoral politics.

Two National parties contested the election, the BJP and the INC. Two state parties in the electoral fray were the SDF and the SKM. Registered unrecognized parties were Hamro Sikkim Party, Jai Maha Bharat Party, Sikkim Republican Party, Sikkim Rajya Manch Party and Sikkim United Front. Independent candidates also contested the election.

For the first time in the Assembly elections, an elector was registered as a third gender. However, only males and females took part in the process of voting. The voter turnout was the lowest since 1994, barring 2004 when only 28 constituency data was taken into account as a result of four candidates winning seats in the assembly uncontested.

<sup>8</sup> Wak constituency -Chandra Bahadur Karki was elected, Damthang - Pawan Chamling-, Melli- Girish Chandra Rai was elected, Kabhi Tingda- Thinlay Tshering Bhutia was elected.

<sup>9</sup> . It was in a sense a fruition of a long and arduous struggle that started at Rolu in 2009 where P.S. Golay gave out a clarion call for 'parivartan' or change. Rholu, a place located in Jorethang -Melli highway is considered the 'birth place' of the movement for change in some sense. After almost ten years the SKM through the electoral process was able to finally score a victory over the SDF and end its 25 years rule (Dixit: para1-5)).

81.4% of the electorate cast their vote. 78.4% males voted while 78.3% females voted (These male and female percentage figures do not however take into consideration the postal ballot). Three female candidates were successful in securing seats in the Assembly. SKM secured 17 while SDF won 15 seats. BJP secured two seats in the bye- elections, the Gangtok seat was secured by Y.T. Lepcha and the Martam-Rumtek seat was won by Sonam Tshering Venchungpa. The said two seats fell vacant as Kunga Nima Lepcha of SKM had already secured the Shyari seat while D.T. Lepcha had secured the Gnathang Machong seat.

The 2024 Assembly election had two contesting national parties, the BJP and the INC, whereas Sikkim Democratic Front and the SKM party were two state parties in the electoral fray. Citizens Action Party -Sikkim and the Sikkim Republican Party were the two unrecognized registered parties which contested the elections. The SKM party won 31 out of the 32 seats. The SDF MLA who won the election, switched over to the SKM party, therefore the state legislature as it stands has all MLAs belonging to the ruling party. Fourteen women candidates contested, of which four women of the SKM party won the election. However, with the resignation of the candidate from Namchi -Singhithang, there are three women state legislative members. 83.4% of the electorate voted of which 79.3% males voted while 79.8% females voted (These male and female percentage figures do not however take into consideration the postal ballot). This election had three third gender registered voters of which only two cast their vote.

### **The National Parties and the Independent candidates in the electoral politics of Sikkim.**

The National parties have contested all elections since 1975. The INC is the only political party which has contested every election to the State Assembly since 1979 but has been unable to garner much support as it has won only four seats in all these years. An interesting fact to be highlighted is that the results of all the State Assembly election have opted for state based political parties to form the government.

The initial years also saw the CPM contest in the Sikkim Assembly elections. Despite fielding candidates for almost three decades, no candidate from CPM ever secured a seat. On the other hand, the BJP, a late entrant to Sikkim politics made its debut in 1994 and won two seats in the 2019 elections.

**Table. No. 2. National Parties in Assembly elections in Sikkim**

| Year | Name of the National Parties that Contested | Seats won       | Name of the National Party | Name of the Candidate                             | Name of the Constituency  |
|------|---------------------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1979 | CPM, INC, JNP                               | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |
| 1985 | CPI, CPM, INC, JNP                          | 1               | INC                        | Kalzang Gyatso                                    | Kabi Tingda               |
| 1989 | INC                                         | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |
| 1994 | BJP, CPM, INC                               | 2               | INC                        | 1.Namkha Gyaltzen Lama.<br>2.Sonam Chyoda Lepcha. | 1.Sangha<br>2.Dzongu      |
| 1999 | CPM, INC                                    | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |
| 2004 | BJP, CPM, INC                               | 1               | INC                        | Tshering Lama                                     | Sangha                    |
| 2009 | BJP, CPM, INC, NCP                          | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |
| 2014 | BJP, INC                                    | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |
| 2019 | BJP*, INC                                   | -2(by election) | BJP                        | Y.T.Lepcha and S.T.Venchungpa                     | Rumtek Martam and Gangtok |
| 2024 | BJP, INC                                    | -               |                            |                                                   |                           |

**Source: Election Commission of India.**

Table No.2 shows the performance of National parties in the Assembly elections of Sikkim. Of the six seats secured by National parties, four seats have been won by the Congress candidates. The first

national party (Congress) candidate to have made his entry into the Sikkim State legislature was in the year 1985. Similarly, the year 1994 saw another two Congress candidates secure seats in the Assembly, one of whom was a Sangha representative. The last candidate from the Congress to have won an assembly election in Sikkim for the Sangha seat was in 2004. Further the election of 2019 saw two BJP MLAs being elected in the bye-election.

**Table. No. 3. Independent Candidates**

| Year | Number of Independent Candidates | Seat Won | Name of the Candidate | Constituency |
|------|----------------------------------|----------|-----------------------|--------------|
| 1979 | 108                              | 1        | Lachen Gomchen        | Sangha       |
| 1985 | 94                               | 1        | Balchand Sarda        | Gangtok      |
| 1989 | 20                               | -        |                       |              |
| 1994 | 76                               | 1        | Ashok Kumar Subba     | Yuksom       |
| 1999 | 09                               | 1        | Palden Lama           | Sangha       |
| 2004 | 16                               | -        |                       |              |
| 2009 | 25                               | -        |                       |              |
| 2014 | 05                               | -        |                       |              |
| 2019 | 09                               | -        |                       |              |
| 2024 | 08                               | -        | -                     | -            |

**Source: Election Commission of India.**

As indicated in the table above the number of Independent candidates who contested the elections has declined from 108 in 1979 to just 08 in 2024. The first Independent candidate to win an election was Lachen Gomchen who served as a cabinet minister in the Bhandari government. The second Independent candidate to have won was Balchand Sarda who won the election in 1985 from Gangtok. He belonged to the Marwari community. He is the only MLA from the Marwari community to have secured the Assembly seat in the Sikkim Assembly. After a consistent dip during the Bhandari period, the year 1994 an increase in the number of Independent candidates as 76 of them contested and one won from Yuksom constituency.

The year 1994 was a political watershed in that the electorate voted N.B. Bhandari's government out of power after a period of almost three terms. It heralded the arrival of P.K. Chamling as the undisputed leader of the SDF which formed the government. The party was consecutively voted to power and stayed for five full terms. Despite the domination of SDF in the electoral politics, an Independent candidate won the Sangha seat in the year 1999. The Sangha MLA served as the deputy speaker in the legislature.

The SDF's electoral domination of state politics is evident when in 2004 four seats were won by the party uncontested. The 2009 elections saw Chamling's SDF secure 32 out of 32 seats in the Assembly elections. Their consecutive victory was accompanied by a decrease in number of Independent candidates contesting. The number of independent candidates contesting 2004 was 16 and 25 in 2009. However, from 2014 onwards the number of independent candidates contesting entered single digit with 5 candidates contesting on an Independent ticket.

The year 2019 is significant in the electoral history of Sikkim. It witnessed not only the arrival of the Sikkim Krantikari Morcha (SKM) government but saw the slow demise of the SDF in electoral politics. The decline in the number of Independents went from 09 candidates in 2019 to 08 in 2024.

### **Women Representation in Sikkim state legislature**

Women constitute a sizeable portion of the electorate. In 1979, 43.7% of the electorate were females, while in 2024 women constituted 49.6% of the same. Despite their strong presence in the electoral roll only 65.7% of the total women electors exercised valid votes in the year 1979. In 2024 the percentage of valid votes cast by women rose to 79.8% of the total women electorate for the year.

**Table No. 4. Women contestants and MLAs in the Sikkim State legislature**

| Year | Number of Women contestants | Seat secured | Name of the candidate and Party                                                                      | Name of the Constituency                                                              |
|------|-----------------------------|--------------|------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|---------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| 1979 | 11                          | -            |                                                                                                      |                                                                                       |
| 1985 | 11                          | -            |                                                                                                      |                                                                                       |
| 1989 | 04                          | 1            | Chong Lhamu Bhutia (SSP)                                                                             | Rinchenpong                                                                           |
| 1994 | 09                          | 1            | Rinzing Ongmu (SSP)                                                                                  | Ranka                                                                                 |
| 1999 | 06                          | 1            | Kalawati Subba(SDF)                                                                                  | Yoksam                                                                                |
| 2004 | 06                          | 3            | 1.Manita Thapa(SDF)<br>2.Kalawati Subba(SDF)<br>3.Nimthit Lepcha (SDF)                               | 1.Loosingh Pachekhiani<br>2.Yoksam<br>3.Ranka                                         |
| 2009 | 15                          | 4            | 1.Chandra Maya Subba (SDF)<br>2.Tulshi Devi Rai (SDF)<br>3.Tilu Gurung (SDF)<br>4.Neeru Sewa (SDF)   | 1.Maneybung-Dentam<br>2.Melli<br>3.Namthang Rateypani<br>4.West Pendam                |
| 2014 | 11                          | 3            | Chandra Maya Limboo (SDF)<br>Tulshi Devi Rai (SDF)<br>3.Tilu Gurung (SDF)                            | 1.Yangthang<br>2. Melli<br>3.Namthang Rateypani                                       |
| 2019 | 16                          | 3            | 1.Sunita Gazmer(SKM)<br>2.Farwanti Tamang (SDF)<br>3.Raj kumari Thapa (SDF)                          | 1.Salgari<br>2. Melli<br>3. Rangang Yangang                                           |
| 2024 | 14                          | 4            | 1.Krishna Kumari Rai (SKM)<br>2.Raj Kumari Thapa (SKM)<br>3. Pamin Lepcha (SKM)<br>4. Kala Rai (SKM) | 1. Namchi Singhithang<br>2. Rangang Yangang<br>3. Gnathang Machong<br>4. Upper Burtuk |

**Source: Election Commission of India.**

The above table on women contestants and representatives indicate that 1979 and 1985 legislatures had only male members in the Assembly, while 1989, 1994 and 1999 Sikkim State Assemblies respectively had single female MLA. Also 2004, 2014 and 2019 saw three female MLAs being elected to the legislature. The elections of 2009 and 2024 had the highest number of women being elected to the state legislature<sup>10</sup>. It is apparent from the above table, that women who have won elections to the legislature contested elections as candidates of SSP, SDF and the SKM. So far, no women Independent candidate has won any election to the Sikkim state legislature.

Despite women constituting almost half of the electorate, their presence in the legislature have been proportionally low. Although one can argue that women are under-represented but some have held important posts in the legislature and the government making them politically visible. And there are those women who along with men do not take part in the electoral process despite being eligible to vote. This segment of the population whose names are registered in the electoral roll but do not exercise their voting rights, constitute the 'Apathetic'. Their non participation may be because of disenchantment with the

<sup>10</sup> Krishna Kumari Rai has resigned from the assembly seat (Namchi-Singhithang) and so the legislature of 2024 has three female MLAs.

system, boredom or a plethora of other reasons of which a lack of faith in the system and ignorance can also be important factors. Some do not go to vote because they do not like the candidates in their constituency. In order to encourage their participation in the voting process a move was made in 2013, wherein a civil rights group approached the Supreme court with a writ petition that an option of NOTA be provided. As a consequence ‘The court then directed the Election Commission of India (ECI) to include the NOTA option on ballot papers and electronic voting machines (EVMs) for elections to the Lok Sabha (the lower house of India’s Parliament) and the respective State Assemblies’ (Gupta:para 2). NOTA (meaning, None of the Above) button on the Electronic voting machine may indicate the non preference in choice of the candidates and the option for NOTA was introduced in a few states namely in Chattisgarh, Mizoram, Madhya Pradesh and Rajasthan as well as Delhi (Ibid:para 4). The 2014 Sikkim Assembly election enabled the electorate to portray their non preference through the NOTA button. A total of 4460 NOTA votes were registered in 2014, while in 2019, NOTA votes decreased to 3039. In 2024, it further decreased to 3813. The exercise of NOTA button may be an important way of showing the lack of faith in the candidates contesting but it is still a form of participation and is different from the ‘Apathetic’.

**Table No. 5. The Apathetic and voters who opted for NOTA**

| Year               | Registered voters | No of people who did not vote | percentage | NOTA |
|--------------------|-------------------|-------------------------------|------------|------|
| 1979               | 117157            | 40858                         | 34.8%      | -    |
| 1985               | 155041            | 55606                         | 35.8%      | -    |
| 1989               | 192619            | 53392                         | 27.7%      | -    |
| 1994               | 217743            | 39720                         | 18.2%      | -    |
| 1999               | 255377            | 46394                         | 18.1%      | -    |
| 2004 <sup>11</sup> | 248959            | 51713                         | 20.7%      | -    |
| 2009               | 300584            | 47848                         | 15.9%      | -    |
| 2014               | 370770            | 60635                         | 16.3%      | 4460 |
| 2019               | 434128            | 80641                         | 18.57%     | 3039 |
| 2024               | 466643            | 77341                         | 16.5%      | 3813 |

**Source: Election Commission of India.**

Apart from figures of NOTA, table No 5. indicates the non participation of voters in the voting process. The election of 1979 shows 34.8% of people did not vote. There was a steady decline in percentage of non-voters in the first five periodic elections. The data for 2004 shows higher percentage of people not voting in comparison to 1994 and 1999 elections. This could be because the data takes into account only 28 Constituencies that went to the polls as four MLA seats were won without contest. The election of 2009 saw 15.9%. The election of 2014 saw 16.3% of voters not casting their vote while in 2019, 18.57% did not vote. The percentage of non voters declined in 2024 elections as only 16.5% abstained from voting.

### Conclusion

The 1979 elections, the 1994 elections and the year 2019 elections were three crucial elections. These elections brought about a change in government leadership. The 1979 election was won by N. B. Bhandari led Sikkim Janta Parishad. His main electoral appeal was on the Sikkim centric issue such as advocacy for ‘sons of the soil’. The 1994 election that brought Chamling led SDF to power shifted to the issue of democracy or the lack of it in the then Sikkim. Chamling sought to portray himself as the spokesman of ‘Janta’, the public. His rhetoric ‘Janta raj ma Jantai Raja’ helped him retain power for 25 long years. 2019 election saw the emergence of P. S. Tamang led Sikkim Krantikari Morcha which formed the government.

<sup>11</sup> The total electorate for 2004 indicates voters from 28 constituencies from where elections were conducted, as four constituencies chose their representatives without an electoral contest. The figure for 2024 does not take into consideration the results of bye-election after resignation of seats of the candidates of Namchi-Singhithang and Soreng-Chakung constituencies.

The focus shifted once again to Sikkim centric issues with the SKM party manifesto's poll promise to prevent the weakening of Art 371F. SKM's style of governance which focused on education, health and employment resulted in a resounding victory in the election of 2024 as the SKM formed the government for a second term. As one looks at the electoral trends post 1979 period, all three Chief Ministers who were voted to power have been given mandate by the people for more than a term of office. All three leaders, N.B. Bhandari, P.K. Chamling and P.S. Tamang have emerged as the undisputed leader of the party they have led to victory at the polls, reinforcing the electorate's support for the promises made in the party manifesto for their respective terms. A general over view of assembly elections in Sikkim (1979-2024) thus seems to suggest an increasing faith of the electorate in the representative democracy as is testified by a greater participation in the voting process in the latter years in comparison to the election of 1979. One significant aspect of electoral outcomes suggests that mandate to run the government has been given to the state parties despite participation of national political parties in the electoral process in Sikkim.

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