

Towards a modern self reliant SIKKIM

“ The Sikkim Democratic Front government has been successful in removing the distortions, accumulated from the past that were hampering the establishment of a true, democratic welfare State. The last four years have seen a correction of these distortions, a restoration of sanctity of the democratic institutions and a vigorous implementation of pro-poor development schemes. The government believes that it has been successful in reaching a threshold level of development in a short of four years from where it can now launch an ambitious program to make Sikkim modern and self-reliant in the next 25 years. This article is an outline of achievements and some of the policy initiatives that have been taken. The focus is on the aspirations of the different sections of society. The Sikkim Democratic Front, and indeed its leader, Shri Pawan Chamling, is seized of the need to accelerate the pace of development.”

On the Threshold

Sikkim will soon complete a quarter of a century as a full-fledged member of the Union of India. The foremost task that has faced it since merger into Indian Union has been that of putting in place a democratic welfare State in harmony with the Constitution of India and capable of addressing the long felt needs and aspirations of its people. Indeed, Sikkim has, indeed, come a long way since the time when it ranked low on almost all counts of human development. Let us pause for a while and reflects at this ‘threshold’ of development.

First things first, it is indeed a tribute to the common sense of our people that the State has maintained complete peace and communal harmony. The turbulence generated by increasing sectarian conflicts, divisions in the society, religious intolerance manifests elsewhere in country is completely nonexistent in Sikkim. This has been a major factor contributing to rapid development witnessed in Sikkim. The advent of planned economic development coupled with flow of resources from the Central government has seen a tremendous improvement in respect of all human development indices. The literacy rate in the State has risen to 56% and there is a primary school at a distance of every 4 kilometers. The network of Junior High, Secondary and Senior Secondary Schools is also quite impressive. The State has a well-established network of health centers a Primary Health Sub center for every 3000 population and a Primary Health Centre for every 19,000 population.

The infant mortality rate has declined to 45 per thousand live births.

The State can justifiably be proud of 100% rural electrification. The power generation capacity has increased to 40 MW, which has so far proved adequate to meet the demand in the State. It will be a Power Surplus State very soon once the 60 MW Rangit Hydel Electric Project gets commissioned in the year 1999. The State has been able to cover all habitations with the provision of potable has drinking water supply. The agricultural production has consistently increased over the past 25 years., Successful extension activities have seen ginger, potato and other vegetable crops emerge as important cash crops besides large cardamom. Extensive network of Stockman centers and VLW centers have been put in place to cater to various requirements of the farmers to take care of livestock. The road network in the State has been well developed and today most places of importance are connected by road. The diesel jeeps now seen plying everywhere fill in the transportation need of every citizen thanks largely to an effective road network.

However, as the Sikkimese people set about finding their feet as citizens of this great country, an element of distortion was created by the misrule of previous regime. This misrule distorted the democratic tradition of our society, defiled the sanctity of our institutions and allowed complete mortgaging of the development process to vested interests. As a result, a vast majority of poor and downtrodden remained untouched by the development process and was at the verge of losing its faith in democracy. The sagacity of common people of Sikkim threw out this misrule and installed Sikkim Democratic Front government four years ago. For such poor and neglected people, the

fundamental shift, the Sikkim Democratic Front government held out a ray hope- a hope of raising their head high with dignity, a hope of true freedom and a hope of meaningful improvement in the quality of their lives.

It is indeed a matter of great satisfaction for the Sikkim Democratic front government that it has succeeded in achieving these cherished objectives in the last four years. True to its promise and people's aspirations, this government has been able to bring about the much-needed fundamental shift in the style of governance during the last four years. The last four years, period of Sikkim Democratic Front government has seen consolidation of development gains in all sectors. The government has set and followed an ambitious agenda for development of a modern Sikkim geared towards citizen's needs in the twenty first century. The Sikkim Democratic Front government is a people centric government. Governance is value based with clear focus on fulfilling the aspirations of the people – all sections of the people of Sikkim. Thus the last four years have witnessed tremendous strengthening of all the democratic institutions. The Government has ensured that the Fundamental Rights of every individual as enshrined in our Constitution are protected. It is indeed a tribute to the good sense of Shri Pawan Chamling, Chief Minister and founder leader of the Sikkim Democratic Front government, who acknowledged that there had been a major dilution of these institutions in earlier regime. He took it upon himself to restore sanctity of these institutions. The success of various steps taken by the State Government in this regard is evident from the fact that complete peace and communal harmony prevails in the State. The constitutional safeguards as enshrined under article 371F of the Constitution of India have been fully preserved.

The most important feature of government policies during the last four years has been vigorous implementation of pro-poor schemes. Through these beneficiary oriented schemes such as Rural housing Scheme, Employment Assurance Schemes, Land Bank Scheme and other Plan schemes, the government has launched a frontal attack on poverty. The strengthening of grass-root Panchayati-raj institutions, has enhanced people's participation in development activities, emphasis on pro-poor schemes and transparent implementation of schemes have been predominant themes in all the programs of the Sikkim Democratic front government during the last four years.

Recognizing the need of 'Shelter' as a very basic need, the Sikkim democratic Front government launched a unique Rural Housing Scheme to benefit the poor and downtrodden in the rural areas. The innovative scheme envisages convergence of direct inputs from various schemes such as distribution of GCI sheets, land under Land Bank Scheme and a onetime grant of Rs. 20,000/- to enable a poor person to realize his dream of owning a house. This scheme, which is the only one of its kind in the country, has changed the face of rural Sikkim and is now being emulated by other States in the country. This is a telling example of the leadership role the Chief Minister is playing in this arena.

Accompanied with the Rural Housing Scheme, is another innovative scheme of "Land Bank". Under this scheme, the landless people in the State have been identified and are being provided with half-acre land sites by the State government. The oppressed 'sukumbasis' benefited under the scheme can today hold their head high and lead a life of dignity.

Sikkim is among the few States in the country that took lead in implementation of the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendments. The Sikkim Democratic Front government enacted the new Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1995 and conducted elections to the Panchayati – raj institutions in accordance with the new Act. Under the new act, women have been given 33% reservation in the Panchayats at all levels. The State today can boast of a woman Adhakshya and up-Adhakshya. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has further decided to devolve upto 30% of department budgets directly to Panchayats to ensure planning and development at the grass-root level. This thread of

democratic decentralization of powers is common to all programs of the Sikkim Democratic Front government. This again is another fine example of empowering the people by deed and not by rhetoric alone.

In another landmark development, the Sikkim Democratic Front government successfully convinced the Central government to include Sikkim as the eighth member of the North Eastern Council (NEC). It is the firm belief of the Sikkim Democratic Front government that inclusion of Sikkim in the North Eastern Council will bring much needed development focus to our State besides additional plan resources. This can already be seen in the new Helicopter Service from Gangtok to Bagdogra, which started recently with the help of 75 percent subsidy from the Central government. The tangible benefits in many other infrastructure development sectors will soon be evident.

True to its pro-poor policies, the Sikkim Democratic Front government revised the daily wage rate of muster roll labourers. Democratic Front government accepted the report of the Third Pay Commission of Sikkim and gave its employees handsome increase in their pay scales. Here too, the Class 'D' staff, the poorest of the poor, got the most preferential treatment. Sikkim is, perhaps, the only state in the country to adopt a system of permanent and continuous Lok Adalats at all the district and sub-divisional level headquarters. The Sikkim Democratic Front government took lead in framing the rules under the Legal Services Authorities Act and in institutionalizing a system for extending legal help to the poor and the weak. This system of Lok Adalat harmonizes both the traditional and modern judicial system of adjudication of disputes for speedy delivery of justice.

Preparing for meeting the needs of the citizens in the next century, the Sikkim democratic Front government has taken various concrete steps to create modern infrastructure in the State. Here again the rural and hitherto neglected sections of the society have received the focus of governmental activities. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has started construction of modern 100-bedded hospitals at West and North district headquarters. A Central Referral Hospital cum Medical College has started functioning at the State Capital. The 560 MW Teesta stage V hydroelectric projects has been cleared for construction by the NHPC. New infrastructure in the education and vocational training sector has been added in the State. Many new roads, economic important have been added to the existing road network. A branch of computerized Passenger Reservation System on India Railways had opened at Gangtok. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has added infrastructure for promoting tourism in the State. New pedestrian over-bridges, ropeways, theme parks, tourist lodges and related infrastructure has been planned in the coming years. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has successfully convinced the Central government to further relax the Inner Line Permit regime and many more interior areas are now open to visiting tourists. Even as opening of these restricted areas continue the Sikkim Democratic Front government realizes the important of maintaining the pristine environment and ecology of this place. Hence the approach to improving the value of the Sikkim's natural beauty is being done with care and careful consideration of environmental degradation fallouts. A fine balance is being maintained.

The Sikkim Democratic Front government has made focused efforts in the agriculture and horticulture sector. The emphasis has been on the high-value cash crops. Concerted efforts have seen ginger, potato, vegetable crops emerge as important cash crops besides Cardamom. Imported varieties of Lilies have been successfully imported and floriculture activities are getting a big boost. The food grains production has shown consistent growth trend.

The Sikkim Democratic Front government has taken many steps to restore the dignity of women in Sikkim and for their economic and social upliftment. New policy initiatives such as 'Mahila Samridhi Yojna', 'Small Family Scheme' have been successfully introduced. Thirty – percent reservation in government jobs has been extended to women. First women minister was inducted in the Cabinet by the Sikkim Democratic Front government. Women

have found 33% reservation in the Panchayati – raj institutions. There in one-women zilla Adhakshya and one-women up-Adhakshya.

The Sikkim Democratic Front government has all along been stressing the need for better emotional integration of Sikkimese people with the rest of the country. The government has moved the Central government for expeditiously opening a branch recruiting office of the Armed Forces at Gangtok so that the youths of the State could participate in the defense of the country.

The Leap forward

Truly, the gains from the past four years of Sikkim Democratic Front government have been many. It is indeed a matter of great satisfaction for the people of Sikkim, who have been equal partners in the Sikkim Democratic Front Government, that the development process has been now set firmly on track. The sanctity of the democratic institutions, which was defiled during previous regime, has been restored. The developmental agenda, which seemed to have been hijacked by vested interests, has been put back on the rails with focused attention on the poor and downtrodden. Having done so much in the first four years of its rule, the Sikkim Democratic Front government firmly believes that an ideal and strong foundation is now ready for a quantum leap on the path to building a modern self-reliant Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has chalked out an ambitious program to make every Sikkimese self reliant in the next 25 years. Jawahar Lal Nehru once said, “ A leader must have a vision, a dream’ . In the leader, Shri Pawan Chamling, the Sikkim Democratic Front Government has a visionary who is committed to the ideals of a democratic, modern and self-reliant Sikkim. Let us look at this perspective vision of Sikkim Democratic Front government for the next 25 years in greater detail.

It is to be noted that two major initiatives have been taken by the Central government in recent times in the area of public administration. These are economic liberalization under the New Economic Policy and people centered development through decentralization enshrined in the Panchayati Raj Act. The fundamental objective of economic reforms is to bring about rapid and sustained improvement in the quality of life of the people of India. Central to this goal, is the rapid growth in incomes and productive employment. The only durable solution to the curse of poverty is sustained growth incomes and employment in Farms, Roads, Irrigation, Industry, Power and above all, in People. Successful and sustained development depends on continuing increase in the productivity of our capital, land and labour. The objectives of people centered development (Panchayati Raj) is to bring about a rapid development of rural areas through Panchayats. Village panchayats are now to be vibrant, living institutions performing necessary development, regulatory and general administrative functions.

As a result of these two initiatives there will be a sea change in the role of governance. A comprehensive renewal of governance thus becomes necessary. The Sikkim Democratic Front government fully appreciates the need for policy innovations, in the light of these initiatives at the Central level. Indeed, it must be acknowledged that few States such as Andhra Pradesh and Kerala have already taken lead in identifying their priority sectors for a leap forward. These States are now trying to set up a completely new high growth pace of development to ensure rapid economic growth. Sikkim will not be allowed to be left behind.

Keeping in consonance with these policies, the Sikkim Democratic Front government has drawn up an ambitious program to put Sikkim on the fast track of development in the next twenty-five years. This program identifies key sectors of economy, which will be the major instruments to bring about speedy development in Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has planned major policy initiatives in these key sectors of the economy to kick-start a process of unprecedented economic development.

Certain sectors of the economy, which are showing signs of growth, will continue to receive active support. Foremost on the government's agenda is the promotion of tourism in Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has planned an aggressive campaign to market Sikkim is again on the air map of the country with starting of the Helicopter service. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has set up a Tourism Development Corporation to actively create tourist infrastructure. Information dissemination will be done using all the modern techniques that are available. Suitable nexus is being developed with other Associations in the Eastern Himalayas to develop lateral linkages to promote tourism. The government has accepted a Tourism master plan, which synthesizes actions of different wings of the government to promote tourism in a big way. The Sikkim Democratic Front government fully realizes the employment generation potential of tourism industry and is committed to promote it to generate incomes and productive employment for the Sikkimese people.

The Sikkim Democratic Front government has planned to exploit the vast hydel potential of Teesta river and sees generation in future. The sincere efforts of government in this direction are evident from the fact that it has been able to get the 560 MW Teesta stage – V hydel project going. The National Hydro Power Corporation (NHPC) has already started work on the project for which funds are being provided by the Planning Commission. More importantly than these few big projects, the Sikkim Democratic front government has identified over 100 potential locations where micro or mini hydel power projects can be constructed. These small projects would harmoniously coexist with the local environment and generate precious revenue for the State.

Recognizing the industrial sector as a major source for income generation and productive employment, the Sikkim Democratic Front government has committed to bring technology-intensive industry to Sikkim. Sikkim offers ideal climate for such industries, which will blend well with our pristine environment. Much needed infrastructure such as a satellite township to Gangtok, ropeways etc. are already in the offing and much more, such as industrial zones, captive power generation plants, new industrial training institutions, is planned. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has already announced its New Industrial Policy and Information Technology policy, which announce major initiatives for attracting investment in the State in these areas. The perspective plan for 25 years that this government has drawn will completely revolutionize this sector of the economy, which has so far been neglected.

The Sikkim Democratic Front government fully realizes that increase in agricultural productivity is a potent tool to improve lives of the rural people. This government has chalked out an innovative plan of action to promote value-added horticulture and floriculture crops. Much success has been achieved in promotion of Gibber, Potato, and Vegetable crop as important cash crops in the last four years. The government is aware that unpolluted soil conditions coupled with traditional system of farming in Sikkim which encourages use of organic manure provide ideal conditions for promoting export-quality premium agricultural products. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has on its anvil an innovative plan to improve grading, processing and packaging facilities to market premium agricultural products of Sikkim. Modern biotechnology tools are to be introduced to increase quality and quantity both. The government plans to establish agricultural commodities market at Rangpo in the near future to provide strong forward linkages. The Sikkim Democratic Front government has further planned to promote intensive development of agro-based micro-enterprises all over Sikkim to consolidate gains from this sector. The government is fully geared to take up these technology-extension activities and create an entrepreneurial culture in Sikkim.

The Sikkim Democratic Front has put in shape an aggressive policy framework to develop educational institutions as a potent instrument to generate incomes and productive employment for Sikkimese people. A beginning has already been made in this line with establishment of a Sikkim Manipal Health & Technological University. Many more such institutions at all levels are being planned. These institutions will not only make quality education within the reach of our people, but also generate incomes and productive employment thereby strengthening the local economy.

Indeed, full elaboration of the perspective plan for next 25 years envisaged by the Sikkim Democratic Front government will be brought later. Nonetheless, an outline of the things to come in future has been presented above. The Sikkim Democratic Front government believes that Sikkim is entering a very crucial age in the history of its development. The strong foundation that this government has laid during the past four years will be an ideal platform for it to take a quantum leap on the path to a modern self-reliant Sikkim. The Sikkim Democratic Front government renews its commitment to the people of Sikkim to provide a government which is more caring, more compassionate and more responsive to the concerns of all sections who had hitherto remained far removed from government focus during previous regime. To the Sikkim Democratic Front government, this will not just be a matter of human beings, their lives and their aspirations.

Thus the Sikkim Democratic Front rededicates itself to the onerous task outlined above and will prove to be worthy of the trust reposed in it by the people. People centric planning and execution of schemes and programs by empowering the people and then to collectively harvest the fruits of these initiatives is the mission and goal of the Sikkim Democratic Government.