



Sikkim: Pawan Kumar Chamling (SDF)

(Came to Power in November 1994)

- Banned plastics after the 1997 landslides in Gangtok. Promoted ecotourism. Open grazing in high-altitude pastures and forests stopped. Stopped commercial felling of timber

- Free distribution of ginger seeds to farmers.
- Rathong – Chu Hydel Project at Yoksum called off. Firing range in north Sikkim scrapped. Ban on smoking in public places.
- Tourism department initiated clean-up campaigns in tourist spots. Afforestation scheme started by the forest department.
- Set up the Civil Defence to promote environmental management. Keen to tap wind energy in south Sikkim. Established a garbage disposal yard 10 km from Gangtok. Waste no longer dumped into the river.
- Social forestry carried out by panchayats.
- Sanctioned loans for planting fruit trees and other valuable trees teak and sal

SIKKIM PAWAN KUMAR CHAMLING THE LONE CRUSADER

From social worker, to government contractor, to politician, and then to the highest political Station of the state. It has been an interesting Journey

Born in Yangang, a sleepy little village in Sikkim's West, Chamling got involved in rehabilitation of landless people after completing school. "In fact, I donated some of my own land to settle landless people" he says recalling his days as an activist. Transition from social work to politics came naturally, more so when the state was witnessing the movement for democracy. "I used to earn my living as government contractor in those days," he says, "but soon politics got me in its throes completely." Chamling was 26 when Sikkim became a part of India in 1975. "It was difficult to keep out of politics at that time." He says.

In 1982, Chamling was elected the sabhapati (president) of his village panchayat. He won his first election to Sikkim Legislative Assembly from Damthang in 1985 on a Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) ticket. In the 1989 assembly elections, Chamling won from Damthang with a whopping 96.26 per cent of the votes cast going in his favour. As a minister in the Nar Bahadur Bhandari-led government, Chamling handled industries, information and public relations and printing.

Soon, differences cropped up between him and Bhandari, in 1992, he dropped from Bhandari's cabinet as well as SSP. "He was dropped because he was seen as rival to Bhandari in SSP" says Jigme N Kazi, editor, Sikkim Observer. A year later, Chamling formed his own party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF). But with Bhandari breathing down his neck, Chamling was forced to go underground in June 1993, only to resurface during the assembly elections the following year.

He returned to the assembly in 1994 with an absolute majority and was elected chief minister. Chamling, however, wears an uneasy crown. The masses see him as a man with the right intentions and vision but lacking support from his people. Tashi Pema, a school teacher in Sikkim, put it succinctly: "He is too sweet and simple to handle them, but if you spare the rod, you spoil the child and that is exactly what is happening here." "He is a man ahead of his times" says Chukie Topden of Concerned Citizens of Sikkim, a non-governmental organization (NGO), "and his steps will be appreciated a decade from now."

Many people believe that the common people might not elect him chief minister the next around. They do not approve of many of the conservation and environment laws Chamling has introduced.

The masses see his efforts at conservation as whimsical decisions. "Commitment to environment is fine, but for Chamling all this is part of a strategy to generate support for himself at the national level. What has he done for the common people? Has any of the steps he has taken made life easy for the common person?" ask Tara Nima, a agricultural labourer from Rangpo town. Common people complain that prices of essential commodities have gone up in leaps and bounds in the state and the government has done nothing to address it.

Basic of Rating: Nearly 90 per cent of the environmentalists surveyed say that the state is moving towards sustainable development. Two-fifths of them gave Chamling full points on a scale of 10 for his contribution towards better environmental management, and another 60 per cent gave him eight.

REVIEW OF WORK

“ The negative work of the previous Sikkim Sangram Parishad government’s 14-year rule is still haunting us. But I do not want the greenery that is still around us to degenerate completely. Prevention is better cure,” says chief minister Pawan Kumar Chamling. He has passed several laws to protect the environment. But only on paper. It is this lack of implementation that mars his projects to protect the environment.

Among the series of Environment-related programmes that the chief minister has initiated in Sikkim are: a ban on use of plastic bags in the state capital Gangtok; large-scale afforestation; integrated pest management; joint forest management-cum-integrated watershed management; grazing ban in forests; and scrapping of hydel power project and of also the army’s G-firing range.

Chamling is seen as someone who has a vision but cannot carry it forward for the lack of team support. MLAs of his party are not convinced about his vision, though he keep insisting that he is trying his best to educate them. At a recent public rally, he said, “As long as these bureaucrats criticize me, it means that I am with you. The day they start praising me, take that to mean that I have lost touch with you.” Environmentalists in Sikkim generally laud Chamling’s zeal to involve community participation in the conservation and development process despite tremendous political and bureaucratic opposition. “But he also loves to pay the martyr,” observes Rajiv Rai, president of *Concern Sikkim*, a NGO, adding, “He keeps saying in public meetings that he receives no support from his party legislators and bureaucrats in addressing environmental issues and that he is fighting a lone battle.”

Afforestation

There is severe water crisis in the chief minister’s constituency, Damthang, in southwest Sikkim. “It was not like this 20 years ago,” says Rajiv Rai, president of Concern Sikkim. “Arbitrary marking of trees by the forest department and felling of trees by smugglers has led to situation where the loss of tree cover has resulted in drying up of streams,” he says.

Immediately after coming to power, Chamling declared the area drought-prone and urged people to work towards conservation and afforestation. He has not started an afforestation programme per se but has been telling people the importance of forests in public speeches and pamphlets. He took out a pamphlet that spoke of bringing about *Harit Kranti* (Green Revolution) through afforestation, conservation and grazing ban in forests. The forests cover of the state 3,129 sq. km, which constitutes 44. 1 per cent of the geographic area. According to the State of Forest Report 1997, there was a net increase of 2 sq. km during 1993-1995. The credit, however, should not go entirely to Chamling; the forest cover increased even during the tenure of former chief minister Nar Bahadur Bhandari.

But what probably tilts the balance on his side is the effort to educate and involve the masses. In all his public speeches, he has focused on increasing public awareness and

has tried to motivate them to participate in the afforestation and conservation process, say local NGOs.

Ban on grazing

Cattle rearing is one of the principal occupations of several communities living in Sikkim. Extensive rearing of livestock is done especially by communities living in the higher altitudes. And grazing is the principal source of animal feed. Livestock is maintained in substantial numbers. As no serious attempt is made to cull unproductive animals, Sikkim has witnessed a drain of biodiversity due to overgrazing.

When Chamling came to power in 1994, he banned grazing in forests. But this was not because he understood that the ecological-sensitive alpine forest and biodiversity were at risk. It was more out of an observation that over the years animals reduce the productivity of the forests. "I have seen what grazing does to forests. Earlier, the forest could sustain itself because the livestock population was small. But now the cattle population almost equals the number of people in Sikkim. At least that is what the 1991 census says" quips the chief minister. As an alternative, he proposed stall-feeding. The graziers have taken the matter to court. But even at the cost of his popularity, Chamling has refused to take the order back.

Environmentalists and NGOs welcome the ban but say there is no scientific evidence to prove that it was warranted. "The ban should have been preceded by a proper study on the effect of grazing in Sikkim Forests. It was arbitrary decision that came from his own observation. And here the bureaucrats are to blame. They did not brief him properly," says Chhezung Lachungpa, a forester and president of Green Circle, a NGO.

ADMIRERS

He may not be sophisticated enough to view environmental problems like a trained activist, but he understands them in his own way. His solutions may sometimes look roughshot but his willingness to learn is his greatest asset. What more can one expect from someone who took over after 14 years of environmental neglect by Bhandari? Chamling has been around for just four years

-Chukie Topden,

Concerned Citizens of Sikkim, an NGO

CRITICS

Commitment to environment is fine, for Chamling all this is part of a strategy to generate support for himself at the national level. What has he done for the common people? Has any of the steps he has taken made life easy for the common man?

-Tara Nima,

Agricultural labourer, Rangpo town

ADMIRERS

The chief minister is very open to ideas and has always given a lot of weight to our inputs on any environment and development-related activity.

-Eklavya Sharma,

Principal Scientist,

G B Pant Institute of Himalayan Environment and Development

CRITICS

Chamling appears to be addressing environmental issues, but it is perhaps more to do with appealing the religious sentiments of the people than a deliberate attempt to conserve the environment.

-Rajiv Rai,

President, Concern Sikkim, an NGO

‘No Plastic bags, no landslides

Seventy-year-old Aitamai has lived in Sichey Busty on the outskirts of Gangtok for over 40 years now. “But I have never seen such a bad landslide,” she says, referring to the one that devastated her house in 1996. Aitamai remembers with horror the day the otherwise-calm jhoras (rapids) that criss-cross the town washed away mountain slopes and brought life to a standstill.

Aitamai blames plastic bags. “Plastic,” she says, groping for words to express the enormity of the devastation that plastic bags brought to her home. They clogged the streams and choked the sewage system of Gangtok. And when the gushing waters finally broke free, they swept away mountain slopes in Sichey Busty. This is when the chief minister passed a law banning the use of plastic bags in Gangtok.

“Chamling has been successful in convincing ever the illiterate masses that plastic bags were responsible” says Tashi Tsering of the Gangtok-based NGO Concern Sikkim. While it is one thing to understand the problem, it is another thing to do something about it. Though there are a few shops which use paper bags, many others continue to use plastic bags. The chief minister blames bureaucrats for failing to implement the law.

However, plastic bags were not the only reason for the landslides, says P Mukharji, director, Geological Survey of India (GSI) in Sikkim: “Sikkim is geologically unstable. It is formed of much younger rock so any unplanned construction banned the allotment of land for private construction in the state capital. Instead, a satellite township at Ranka, 10 km off Gangtok, is being built. Besides, the construction of a waste management plant in Ranipul, 10 km from Gangtok, is in progress.

Integrated pest management

The orchards of Lachen district, one the highest producers of apples in the state, having hardly produced any apples in the past decade. The reason: indiscriminate use of pesticides and chemical fertilizers to fight apple-scab during Bhandari’s regime. “Pesticides and chemical fertilizers have never been popular with farmers in Sikkim. In fact Sikkim is one of the lowest consumers of pesticides in India,” says Chamling.

In 1994, the Bhandari government had initiated an integrated pest management (IPM) project in East Sikkim. The 10-week training-cum-demonstration programme for

farmers was extended to other parts of the state by Chamling. At present, farmer's field schools (FFSS) have been set up in 12 villages. These help farmers recognize their friends (predators, parasites and pathogens) and foes (chemical and fertilizers). A total of 41 agricultural extension officers and 360 farmers have been trained at these schools from 1994 to 1997. The state project, however, does not cover all the villages in the state. Besides, other crops like ginger, cardamom and mandarin orange, which are large revenue earners for Sikkim, are yet to be included in the IPM project.

Joint Forest Management

In May 1998, the chief minister introduced the joint forest management (JFM)-cum-integrated watershed management programme in the state. "Though in the planning stage, it has already generated a lot of interest among the people, especially as they are being involved in the planning process in a large way." Says S B Sing Badoria, conservator of forests, Sikkim

Sikkim has 30 watersheds, Afforestation under JEM and watershed management will be done through a four-tier system that will involve local people. NGOs, panchayats and the forest department. A rural appraisal programme was conducted to spread awareness among the people about the project. "People are being asked to draw the maps and point out rivers, streams, houses, important sites and landslide-prone areas. Official then convert the rudimentary sketches into scientific maps. And as we are heavily depending on local knowledge, there is greater participation and less conflict," says Chhezung Lachungpa, president of Green Circle. However, the efficacy of the project will be judged only after its implementation.

Rathong-Chu hydel project

Pawan Chamling became a hero of the masses in 1994 when he scrapped a major hydel power project in Rathong-Chu in west Sikkim after Rs 15 crore had been spent on it. "For that single act, Chamling will be the hero of environmental activists in the state." Says Chukie Topden of the NGO Concerned Citizens of Sikkim (CCS). "Chamling had been very adamant about carrying on with the Rathong-Chu project till his political adversary Bhandari started backing the movement to scrap the project", says Jigme Kazi, who obviously sees political motivations.

There is a glacial lake in Rathong-Chu and the area is ecologically fragile. "We used to hear up to 36 blasts a days when the work was in progress. It would have been disastrous if the project was completed," says Pema Namgyal of CCS.

But many feel scrapping the project was not a deliberate effort to stop environmental degradation. It would have submerged a Buddhist monastery. Moreover, Buddhists in Sikkim believe the glacier is the home of many of their deities. The monks as well as the common people were against the project. "You could say that the chief minister played to the gallery by scrapping the project. Yet, apart from the social tension that it avoided, it also saved the environment," says Namgyal.

However, the restoration work at the project site is yet to start. A committee, which had been instituted to plan the restoration work, has just submitted its report.

Out of the line of fire

In 1992-93, there was a proposal to construct a G-firing range by the army on forest land in north Sikkim. "But the area is ecologically-sensitive. It is rich in biodiversity, and though the army was ready to compensate us with land elsewhere, the species that we would have lost would not have been regenerated elsewhere. Especially medicinal plants and herbs," says S B Singh Badoria, conservator of forests, Sikkim.

Besides, the forest is the habit of rare animal such as the snow leopard, the musk deer, the Tibetan wild ass and various species of rodents, local NGOs like Green Circle also agitated against the firing range. Chamling stepped in. At his personal initiative and canvassing, the programme was finally scrapped in 1997.

ADMIRERS

Chamling has the will. His efforts deserve great appreciation. His predecessor Nar Bahadur Bhandari did nothing ever though he had 32 out of 32 MLAs, he could have done a lot for the environment. He lacked the will.

-Jigme N. Kazi,
Editor, Sikkim Observer

CRITICS

Chamling lacks determination. It is no use passing the buck on to the bureaucrats all the time

-Mahesh Gurung
Concern Sikkim