

SOCIAL HISTORY AND INTER ETHNIC RELATION OF KIRATI KHAMBU RAI COMMUNITY AN 'ASPIRING TRIBE' OF NORTH BENGAL

Abstract

Following a social history approach, effort in this paper is to situate the origin of the Khambu Rais in Eastern Nepal and their subsequent move towards Darjeeling hills. With the help of folk narratives and local sources gathered from the field and also on the basis of secondary materials a historical narrative has been prepared to account for their migratory history and the relevant changes that have occurred in the social imagination of the Khambu Rais(community) by virtue of being placed in a new socio economic-political situation (i.e.in Darjeeling).The paper discusses in detail how all these have impacted greatly the intercommunity relations between the Khambu Rais and other hill communities in the Darjeeling hills.

Keywords: Community; caste; tribal status; culture; identity

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I. COMMUNITIES AND COMMUNITY IDENTITY IN DARJEELING HILLS: BRIEF HISTORICAL BACKGROUND

The Nepali speaking population comprises of Caucasoid racial groups like the Bahuns (Brahmans), Chhetris, Thakuris (speaking Indo-Aryan languages) and Mongoloid racial groups like Rai, Limbu, Yakha, Mangar, Gurung, Tamang, Yolmo, Thami, Bhujels and others (speaking Tibeto-Burman languages). All these communities of various racial stocks generally fall under one umbrella community known as Indian Nepali / Gorkha. Besides these broad racial classification the Indian Nepalis are also divided into two groups popularly known as *Tagadharis* (representing higher caste groups like Bahun, Chhetri, Thakuris among others) and *Matwalis* (communities who practice teetotalism and are fond of drinking liquor like Rai, Limbu, Mangar, Gurung, Tamang and others). Despite having these internal divisions the communities have sustained their integrity as a single unified community for many long years. 'Nepali' is an Indo Aryan language whereas the languages of the Mongoloid groups belonged to Tibeto-Burman language family. Similarly festivals like *Dasain* (Dushera), *Tihar* (Diwali) etc. also known as Hindu festivals which however, everyone including the Mongoloid groups in Darjeeling celebrates, besides having their own elaborate system of rites and rituals and languages. On the contrary, the Nepal situation is different where throughout the history the Nepali language as well as Hindu Nepali culture and *tagadhari* (upper caste) dominance have been patronised by the ruling regimes throughout the history. Compared to this Hindu/ Brahminic dominance in Nepal the Nepalis of Darjeeling were placed in a much liberal and apparently secular social order since the middle of nineteenth century (Sarkar:2014).

Excepting the Newars all other communities belonging to Mongoloid race, generically referred to as *matwalis*, did not have any elaborate system of caste. The absence of upper caste hegemony on the one hand and the predominant numerical presence of the *matwalis* and their significant role playing in all possible spheres of social life on the other enabled Darjeeling maintain a social system which was relatively free from the strict observance of caste principles (Sarkar: 2014). Findings of several foreign scholars have also endorsed this fact. Besides this, instances of inter caste and inter-community marriages did receive social sanction from the very beginning in Darjeeling, which were hardly approved in the then Nepal. The laxity of caste system in early Darjeeling was noted in one of the earliest Gazetteers (1907) by O'Malley in the following words: "The caste system is however, by no means strict among the Nepalese domiciled in Darjeeling, where the Brahman (*Bahun*) may be found working as a cultivator, a labourer (. . .) There is an extra ordinary laxity in ceremonial observance; they will eat and drink things which are an abomination to the orthodox Hindu of the plains, and many of them are great flesh eaters, relishing even beef and pork" (O'Malley 1999: 43).

II. EMERGENCE OF COMMUNITY BASED ORGANIZATION IN DARJEELING: SEARCH FOR A TRIBAL IDENTITY

Unlike Nepal the caste-system, its rigidity, hierarchy and the degree of exploitation associated with it hardly had taken roots in Darjeeling. History suggests that the Mongoloids (*matwalis*) were more active and played dominant role in different cultural and political movements taken place in Darjeeling like the *Bhasa-Andolan* (Nepali language movement) or the Gorkhaland movement. The 'Nepali/ Gorkha community' of Darjeeling never got

segregated either in caste, language or in ethnic terms. Nepali as a whole included everyone – be they the *tagadhari* (twice born) castes or *matwali* (alcohol drinkers) communities or *sano jaats* (lower castes like Kami, Damai and Sarki). However, this does not mean that caste dynamics was absent in Darjeeling or for that matter community identity issues were altogether absent. The point is that there were issues relating to any caste or community but that hardly had taken the shape of a group phenomenon. We can even trace the existence of caste/community organisations much before emergence of tribalism phenomena in recent time. This scenario started changing particularly since the early 1990s when the ethnic community based organizations started flourishing by popularizing the claim of 'tribal' (*janajati*) status. The decade of 1990's was of particular significance not only in Darjeeling hills but also in neighbouring states of Sikkim, if not for the whole of India. We will elaborate this particular point in detail in the course of study.

These processes have encouraged different Nepali communities to revive their respective traditional culture and the dormant community differences started cropping in a manner that they seem to have endangered the unity of the Indian Nepali/ Gorkha community itself. Recognition of Tamangs and Limbus as Scheduled Tribe first in Sikkim (in 2001) followed by West Bengal (in 2003) has added fuel to this burning cauldron of tribalism in Darjeeling hills. Among the various hill communities, a strong movement for tribal-status is being carried out by the Khambu Rais since the 1990s.

However, it needs to be qualified as to whether the process in which these various hill communities including the Khambu Rais are engaged may be termed as 're-tribalisation' or the way they are simultaneously shedding off their linkages from the mainstream Hindu practices in Darjeeling can be labelled as 'de-sanskritisation' in any meaningful sense. Such claims have been made by scholars like A.C Sinha (2006), R.S Mukhopadhyay (2014) in their respective studies. Since the 1990s Darjeeling hills has been experiencing the mushrooming of community associations raising the demand for tribal status. Almost all the hill communities are inclined to plead their own culture, beliefs and practices either by reviving or by building up their own respective community organizations. All these have created a situation of what we propose to term as 'tribalism' in Darjeeling hills.

III. SITUATING THE KHAMBU RAIS IN DARJEELING HILLS: SOCIAL HISTORY OF MIGRATION AND INTER COMMUNITY RELATIONS

The Khambu Rais are generally considered as a Kirata community and the origin of the Kiratas have many references in epics texts like *Mahabharata*, *Ramayana*, *Atharvaveda* and *Yajurveda* (Chatterji 1998: 36). The early history of Kiratas in general and Khambus in particular suggest that they were the earliest tribes to have settled in the north eastern belt of India from there they have moved to the Eastern Himalayas. These groups of people are belonging to Mongoloid race who left their early traces in places like Tibet/ China (Wright: 1958: 27). Kirat (variously termed as Kirata/ Kiratis) is a conglomerate of a number of communities belonging to Mongoloid race like Rai, Limbu, Magar, and Yakhas. Some even included the Koches, Meches, and Bodos as Kirats. Notwithstanding the debate regarding their origin there seems to have been a consensus in considering them as one of the highlander tribes of the Himalayan region. Again some of the myths and stories of the Khambus ascertain these facts that they had their presence in mountainous jungles of the Himalayas and in the adjoining areas. The epic age which in fact was the period of

Aryanisation or progress of Hinduism in particular, left clues of the presence of the so-called Kiratis or non-Aryan people who were very close to nature with their unruly behavior. The epics like *Atharvaveda* or *Mahabharata* is a proof of this reality that the lord Shiva with his consort Parvati (generally regarded as Brahmin) had once disguised and appeared in the form of tribal couple (Kirat) who were encountered by different Pandava brothers like Bhima, Nakula, Arjuna and others (Chatterjee: 1998/1951: 26-31). This kind of incidence is being supported by the Khambu myths where they place their whole humanity to begin with 'ninamma' (the ultimate sky) which was the real abode of *Paruhang* and *Sumnima*, the supreme deities of the Khambus. These deities who resemble the Hindu God and Goddess Shiva and Parvati, in fact, is claimed to be Kirat God and the basis of Kirat dharma which revolves around the naturalistic/ animistic practices find their relation with lord Shiva (as described in Hinduism). So, the popular myth of the Khambus tells them that Paruhang and Sumnima from whom they have descended were actually the tribal incarnation of Lord Shiva and Parvati. Recalling the myth again the first descendent of Sumnima and Paruhang on earth was named as Hecchakuppa/ Koktisala and the generation followed giving rise to various brothers who later divided into different lineages tracing their line of descent with different male ancestors and in the process Khambungwa is believed to be the ancestor of Khambus who entered the eastern hills of Nepal through the Barakshetra gorge of the Kosi valley, the natural gateway into the region through the Mahabharata Range. Ultimately they were divided into various clans and sub tribes and these clans were purely formed on either taking the name of the place of residence or by marriage with another clan (that used to create a new clan). The creation of fresh clans on the basis of peculiarity of mannerism, speech, or habits and its continuation for long time have made it extremely complex and perhaps impossible to find out the exact number of Khambu clans (Vansittart 1896: 170-76).

IV. THE ORIGIN OF THE KHAMBU RAIS: THE EASTERN NEPAL CONNECTION

These Khambus who later became numerically dominant in the Khambuwan region (majh, middle, central Kirant) of Eastern Nepal survived with different victorious Khambu rulers maintaining their distinctiveness in the form of religion, culture, language etc. Yeluhang or Yalambar was the first Khambu king who was successful in establishing his supremacy over the whole Nepal kingdom after defeating the rulers of Gopal and Mahishpal dynasty. It is a well accepted that Nepal was ruled for more than thousand years by the Kirat dynasty with its twenty-nine rulers and the last of them was probably known as Gasti who seemed to be weak and was defeated by the Lichhavis (Rai 2011: 75). The end of Kirati sovereignty over Nepal did not reduce their prominence in the eastern frontier, they continued to enjoy their independence uninterruptedly. The following dynasty after Licchavi started the Hinduisation process in Nepal and the Kirat (Khambus) who were the slaughterer of cows were regarded no more than a Rakshas (demons) by the Hindu people. Later, during the dynastic rule of Sena, or for that matter the King of Gorkha Prithivinarayan Shah who with his annexationist policy started unifying Nepal since 1768. It is said that about seven years of wars could only end their struggle, with the strong resistance provided from Khambu rulers like Balihang and Ulihang the rulers of Majh (central) Kirat at that point of time.

After the Gorkha conquest of Khambuwan, some of the Khambus were conferred with titles of 'Jimi' meaning Jamindar or holder of their *Kipat* land and another title 'Raya' (tribal chief) given to them by the Sena was changed to titles like 'Rai' (derivative of Raja)

was conferred upon the Khambu chiefs by Prithivinarayan Shah (Pradhan 1991: 53). In 1774, though the Kirats were assured that the 'status quo' would be maintained but gradually Gorkhali rulers usurped their political and economic power that made the Khambus powerless.

Again the encroachment of their *Kipat* land (land tenure system where land was vested on one particular ethnic groups) started since the project of Gorkha conquest started confiscating communally owned land holdings and the tribal autonomy enjoyed by the Khambus and the infiltration of the high caste Hindus also galvanized the situation (Rai 2011: 129). Gradually the *Kipat* land was brought under arrangement of various tax systems reducing the sovereignty of the Kiratas over their land. Along with it in the social hierarchy, they were reduced to a lower status forcing them to conform to the norms of the Hindu law. The kind of oppressions that followed after this conquest have compelled many Khambus either to accept subjugation by entirely embracing Hindu laws besides beliefs and practices or to be ready to get punished for disobeying the prescribed laws. Alina Pradhan writes 'Even tribes like Kiratas were assigned to the status of Sudras and were subject to the Brahmin-Chettri tyranny. Strict rules of caste had to be followed otherwise they would be socially ostracized' (Pradhan 1991: 177).

It is known that the rulers from the time of unification never recognized the ethnic, religious, cultural, linguistic and economic diversity of Nepal. Rather an effort from all side was made to unify these diversities through various mechanisms (Hinduisation was one such mechanism). In the process some of the Kirats had undergone thorough Hinduisation/Sanskritisation although they had their own distinctive tribal social structure (Pradhan 1991: 180). Again, the spread of Hinduism that followed after the conquest made the life of the Kirats unbearable, as it was seen that these Khambus who used to love cow-meat had to quit the same as it has been considered as an offence as severe as inviting death-sentence (Pradhan 1991: 185). Under state patronage Sanskritisation was worked out where the Hindu rulers started promoting the supremacy of Hinduism and rewarding the non-Aryan for accepting the same. The kind of suffering the Kiratas in general had to suffer ranged from enslavements, mutilation of organs, and confiscation of property, degradation of caste, exile and even death. The kind of Gotra category seen among the Khambus can be traced out from this vantage point when the conversion policy of the Hindu rulers were ongoing then, some of the Khambu people were forcibly captured and were taken to Kasi (holy place of the Hindus) and over there the water of Ganges was sprinkled on the Khambus by the religious practitioner proclaiming them to have become under a Kasi gotra from that day onwards. As regarding the Lhasa-gotra, the term Lhasa means those 'who comes back'(in Khambu dialect), thus those Khambus who had left their land and place to escape the forcible conversion into Hinduism by the rulers came to their homeland after many years were considered to be belonging to Lhasa *gotra* (those who came back again). This kind of forcible integration and creation of common identity for the Tibeto-Burman groups of people (Khambu Rai being one) who professed their own cults and creeds did lead to some degree of unanimity in spirits and thought. The elaborate system of ancient beliefs, customs and dialects which was although mutually unintelligible did register cases of resistance mostly when the integration was externally imposed.

This kind of opposition was the regular feature of Kirat Pradesh, who shared a culture which often assumed the form of 'political ideology' (Pradhan 1991: 223). The Khambus

who had no such stratification or hierarchical arrangement but were said to be have a unity of their own epitomized by such phraseologies like '*Dus Rai, Dus boli Ek bhansa*' (meaning there are various Rai clans having different language but having similarity in their culture). This is symbolized by a terms of addresses like '*Kirawa*' used by one Khambu Rai to refer to the other irrespective of their clans. But under the Hindu rulers in Nepal, the traditional Kirat *Mundhum* (oral tradition of sacred versical prayers) suffered a setback and they were compelled to live in fear, anxiety as they were discouraged and not allowed to celebrate their own festival like Sakela, Sakewa, etc. instead were forced or encouraged to celebrate *Dusshera, Tij* and other Hindu festivals. Different kinds of exploitation including the usurpations of land, heavy taxation and impositions, indebtedness and bondage, and slavery forced many to emigrate and leave their ancestral land permanently. The hegemonic apparatus of the *Bahuns* (Brahmins) led to the eviction of many ethnic groups from their land, and these evicted groups found Darjeeling (in British India) as a suitable place to settle (Sangay Tamang: 2018: 34). Unable to resist the extreme oppression of the Hindu rulers Kirati Khambus left their places of origin to settle in different areas of north-eastern region and continued to practice their traditional ancestral belief system.

V. DEMOGRAPHIC PRESENCE OF THE KHAMBU RAIS IN DARJEELING HILLS

Kirats including Khambu Rais since early time were having considerable demographic strength and in contemporary time they are one of the largest hill communities in Darjeeling. Besides they are also found in the adjoining states of Sikkim and North Eastern India. Their easy access from the adjoining Eastern Nepal has been seen as a reason of their greater concentration in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Colonial records mention that during 1840-1860 around 12 to 15 percent of the Kirat moved from their land to Darjeeling (Pradhan 1991: 211). Their population steadily increased since then where in 1901 it rose to 20 percent and still they constitute the largest community.

In 1911 out of a total 40,409 Rais of Darjeeling district 39,448 were recorded as speaking the Khambu dialect. The Khambu Rais have always been numerous in the district and their numbers have steadily increased. They are distributed throughout the district wherever Nepalis are found. The increase of the Khambu Rai population in the district up to 1951 census can be realized from the following table. However, the record of the KKRSS (Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan) claims that there are around four lakhs Khambu Rais in the district. It appeared however that the use of Nepali was spreading and the people of the district rely more and more upon it for the use outside the family.

Table 1: Population Distribution in Darjeeling District (1872–1951)

| Caste/ Community | Year | | | | | | |
|---------------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| | 1872 | 1901 | 1911 | 1921 | 1931 | 1941 | 1951 |
| Rai | 6,754 | 33,133 | 40,409 | 41,236 | 47,431 | 56,794 | 63,745 |
| Chhetri | -- | 11,597 | 12,599 | -- | -- | 25,941 | 30,463 |
| Sanyasi | 267 | 1,151 | 1,060 | -- | -- | -- | 1,085 |

| | | | | | | | |
|-----------------|-------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|--------|
| Bahun | 904 | 6,470 | 6,195 | 8,174 | 8,791 | 8,999 | 11,317 |
| Bhujel | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 5,816 | 5,745 |
| Yogi | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 454 | 474 |
| Magar | 3,020 | 11,912 | 12,451 | 14,934 | 16,299 | 17,262 | 19,413 |
| Newar | 1,120 | 5,770 | 6,927 | 8,751 | 10,235 | 12,242 | 14,827 |
| Tamang | 6,567 | 24,465 | 27,226 | 30,450 | 33,481 | 43,114 | 49,890 |
| Gurung | 3,687 | 8,738 | 9,628 | 9,575 | 11,154 | 15,455 | 17,864 |
| Limbu | 4,663 | 14,305 | 13,804 | 14,191 | 16,288 | 17,803 | 19,835 |
| Sunar | 1,194 | 4,428 | 3,820 | 3,691 | 4,055 | 4,822 | 4,803 |
| Yakkha | 242 | 1,143 | 1,119 | -- | 850 | 824 | -- |
| Damai | 252 | 4,643 | 4,453 | 5,781 | 5,551 | 8,162 | 9,116 |
| Kami | 1,886 | 9,826 | 10,939 | 11,779 | 11,331 | 16,272 | 19,432 |
| Sarki | 328 | 1,823 | 1,992 | 2,036 | 2,432 | 2,778 | 2,932 |
| Gharti | 1,419 | 3,448 | 3,584 | -- | 2,053 | 496 | 998 |
| Majhi | 275 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 327 |
| Thami | 13 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | 804 |
| Thakuri | 56 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Thapa | 447 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Gurkha | 51 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Paharia | 92 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |
| Parbatia | 21 | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- | -- |

Source: Pradhan 2005: 32

VI. KHAMBU DISTINCTIVENESS AND THE HISTORICITY OF ETHNIC RELATIONS IN THE HILLS OF DARJEELING

Following Kumar Pradhan and Gérard Toffin's arguments it may be noted that among the different *janajatis* – who constitute the Nepali nation in Darjeeling – the Khambu Rais did not completely lose their distinctiveness and particularities. Though the Rais have embraced Nepali language almost wholeheartedly as their mother tongue much like the other *matwalis*, they kept on frequently using their respective ethnic dialects (*janajatiya boli*) particularly in maintaining kinship terminologies. Without taking much pain one can show the prevalence of such usages in the kinship terminologies (vide Chapter three for a detailed account on kinship terminologies) as practiced by the Khambu Rais of Darjeeling at the level of social structure even today.

Besides the use of community dialects in kinship terms, the Khambu Rais in Darjeeling did also carry out their indigenous beliefs and practices, rites and rituals relating to

marriage, birth and death ceremonies. While *Bahun purohits* (Brahmin religious specialists) performed parts of their religious customs much of their indigenous beliefs and practices relating to ancestor worshipping were still performed by their own religious specialists (known as *Mangpa/ Mangma*). There is no doubt that historical forces have impacted a lot in bringing the Khambu Rais close to Brahmanic value systems but the efforts with which they successfully kept alive their rather 'faded' religion in the day to day life can hardly be considered as superficial and thus ignored. It is not out of place to mention that researchers like Gaenszle have pointed out that the term *Jat* (meaning caste in Nepali) has no equivalent term in Mewahang Rai language (Gaenszle 2000: 92).

They have not repudiated all those ritualistic practices related to the birth, marriage, death and continued to maintain the same besides adopting themselves to the mainstream (Hindu, Buddhist, Christian) beliefs and practices. The Gazetteer of 1907 mentions thus, "broadly speaking, the Hinduism professed in the district is nothing more than a thin veneer over animistic beliefs. Beneath this veneer the real popular religion can be seen in the worship paid to the host of spiritual beings whose attributes are ill-defined, but whose chief power is to cause evil to their votaries. The religion prevalent is in fact demonolatry, of which exorcism and bodily sacrifices are the most prominent feature" (O'Malley 1907: 60). The same Gazetteer further mentions that "Throughout the hills there are signs of the prevailing fear of demons, such as the little offering in the middle of the path to bar the progress of the evil spirit or the living sacrifice being offered to propitiate another, or the flattening rice image of a demon supposed to be causing sickness or the burning of the rag before the door, over which the friend step when they return from burying a relative, to prevent any accompanying spirits from entering with them" (O'Malley 1907: 60).

The fact that from the early twentieth century the Nepalis of Darjeeling began to realize the importance of common language and the socio-cultural acculturation between the discrete communities there. This had led to the establishment of platforms like Nepali Sahitya Sammelan premised on linguistic unification of all the Nepalis in India. Consequently there emerged the feeling of common identity as an Indian Nepalis or Gorkhas rooted in these sentiments. Darjeeling situation depicts that a need for a common identity (Gorkha) and language (Nepali) for the communities there at the initial stage did not lead towards the obliteration of individual community identities. It continued in a parallel way though sometimes one subsumed the other and vice versa. The political imperative of Gorkhaland movement emphasized solely on Indian Nepali identity as one and to be identified through Gorkha identity and this requirement was so strong that the primordial identities of different hill communities were muted. But the attachment and emotions towards one's origin cannot be removed from a group having a commonality of origin (Pradhan 2004: 11). What has been their past might had lost its spatio-temporal relevance but some residues of it always remained intact and never got eroded. Till 1920s it was believed that ethnic communities including the Khambu Rai were living with their respective community identity as exactly as was the case at the places of their origin (Pradhan 1982: 28).

By 1854, a substantial Nepali population had migrated to Darjeeling; thus, caste norms were only followed in rudimentary forms, and social relations were not determined by caste and commensural rules (Pradhan 1982: 32). Except a few community like Bahuns, Chettri, Thakuri, Kamis, Sarkis and Damais who really identify themselves as the 'Nepali' the rest of the ethnic communities in Darjeeling came under the fold of 'Nepalis' only after

1920's (Subba 1992). Similarly followed the blurring of the differences between the two categories of Nepali society i.e, between the sacred thread bearing castes, the '*Tagadhari*' and those of the alcohol drinking mongoloid group, the '*Matwalis*'. The intermingling of these two categories in Darjeeling context is to be understood in terms of their migrant status, common place of origin, the bond established by the Nepali language and the common challenge thrown by the host society. These factors led to the formation of less sharp boundaries between these diaspora communities (Subba 1999: 68). With the social unity and cohesion followed the questions of security and protection, which led to the rise of political views/opinions on separate political arrangement for the Nepali settlers of Darjeeling. Consequently the drive initiated for a separate set up during pre independence period, which after independence gained momentum and strength and culminated in the movement for separate state of Gorkhaland under the leadership of late Subhash Ghising. A strong sense of identity had developed among them primarily based on Nepali language, which became a common means of communication for the Nepali settlers of both *Tagadhari* and *Matwali* variety. Earlier Nepali language has in fact, became an important factor of identity of the different communities settled in Darjeeling where it became a '*Jatiya bhasa*' for all. "However when they came to Darjeeling, caste distinctions did not matter. The absence of domination by any one group gave them a strong community character as Nepalis. Irrespective of their ethnic diversity, the Nepali settlers in Darjeeling developed a common feeling of identity around their lingua franca Nepali. In Nepal, Nepali had become the *Rashtriya Bhasa* whereas in Darjeeling it became the *Jatiya Bhasa*" (Pradhan 2007: 50).

VII. SHAPING OF INTERCOMMUNITY RELATIONS IN DARJEELING HILLS: MIGRATION AND OTHER FACTORS

No doubt various push and pull factors have worked for the settlement of Nepalis in Darjeeling hills where, their (Nepali) population gradually outnumbered the indigenous communities like Lepchas, Bhutias and others. Since the mid nineteenth century Darjeeling incorporated multiple population stock with a heterogeneous background beside the other hillmen (Lepchas, Bhutias, Tibetans), people of other races were also attracted like Madhesis, Marwaris, Jews, Bengalis, Punjabi, Chinese and so on. Migration history and the development of community relation at the early period can be understood from some sources like the different Gazetteers and writings of O'Malley, A.G Dash, E.C Dojey and others while contribution of historians like Kumar Pradhan and anthropologists like T.B. Subba provide some valuable insights in this regard. Generally it is the Lepchas who are considered as the earliest settler in the region but opinions varies and Bhotiyas are also considered first as a migrant to Sikkim who came initially from Tibet. It is generally regarded that Nepalis migrated to the Darjeeling Himalaya mostly after the British intervention in Sikkim's affairs and after the cession of Darjeeling in 1835. The lack of authentic sources with regard to the pre colonial history of Darjeeling one is compelled to rely on the available colonial sources which mentioned the place (*Dorje-ling*) as uninhabitable with only a few scattered settlement of about 100 souls probably of Lepcha origin. The three communities Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis have lived side by side for more than a century and the kind of interaction and interdependence that had developed witnessed the formation of a new structure of a society which transcended the rigidity of ethnic boundaries. Though the nuances of 'insidious feel' for a certain caste or community might have been operative at individual level but the effort to build a larger identity as Gorkhas or Indian Nepalis had relegated their indigenous identity a backseat. Of course modernization, new methods of

communication, transport and education all have brought a closer link between all groups. Though there has been a sort of cultural convergence amongst them, but group differences still prevail. The Nepalis have always retained their Nepali identity, their separate religion, culture and language (Pradhan 2007: 148). The process of 'being Nepali' for any community (whether *Tagadhari* or *Matwali*) was only an effort to be identified with certain identity rather than subscribing to an exact definition of what is meant by 'Nepali' in its true sense in Nepal. Thus the social formation of Darjeeling was out and out a resultant effect of the very process through which one's self was identified in relation to a 'greater self'. In such a situation interdependence between one another was realized more than the differences of caste/ culture/ religion/ language etc.

All these gradually resulted into a socio-cultural environment where *Tagadhari* and *Matwali* did exchange many of their cultural traits with one another and ultimately creating a totally different 'Nepali social system' compared to Nepal. Thus, Nepali community in Darjeeling has fostered as a single unified community though it is proper to mention that categories of differences in terms of race, culture and tradition (what we know as between the Indo-Aryan group and Mongoloid group or between *Tagadhari* and *Matwali*) did persist. This cannot be denied that each and every singular mongoloid community despite having their elaborate culture/ customs made selective choices while following the practices of the higher castes. However, both the *Tagadhari* and *Matwali* communities did celebrate *dussehra* (*dasain*) and *diwali* (*tihar*) which were quintessentially Hindu festivals. O'Malley has remarked in relation to the Limbus (which is equally applicable for the Rais) in the following words: "the phlegmatic and utilitarian which is characteristic of the Mongolian races comes out conspicuously in the nonchalant attitude of the Limbus towards religion. Where their surroundings are Hindu, they describe themselves as *saivas* and profess to worship, though with sparing and infrequent observance, the deities most favoured by the lax Hinduism of Nepal. In the Buddhist neighbourhood the yoke of conformity is still easier to bear: the Limbus has only to mutter the *mantra*, *Om mani Padme hum* and to and moderate tribute to the Lamas, in order to be accepted as an average Buddhist. Beneath this veneer of conformity with whatever faith happens to have gained local acceptance, the vague shape of their original Pantheon have survived' (O Malley: 1907: 63). Likewise the so called higher castes (*Tagadhari*) too developed to form somewhat liberal outlook towards the *matwali* practices that led to the formation of altogether a different 'Nepali society' in Darjeeling unlike that of Nepal.

VIII. ETHNO HISTORY OF DARJEELING HILLS: CASTE, COMMUNITY, LANGUAGE AND IDENTITY

The ethno-history of Darjeeling thus presents a unique case, where caste and ethnic identities are often conflated within the ambit of the larger Nepali or Gorkha community (Chettri 2018: 71). For instance O'Malley writes 'cut off from his home, the Buddhist Nepali soon adopts the religious beliefs of their neighbours and, in the absence of the Buddhist priest it is fair to accept the ministrations of Brahmans and to enroll himself, nominally at least, in the rank of Hinduism (O'Malley:1907: 62). Here, it is again not to be missed that Brahmins (*Tagadhari*) were altogether tolerant with all the *Matwali* practices although some degree of 'purity pollution' did exist. Similarly *Matwalis* did retain their traditional beliefs and practices intact. "Rais, for instance, go to Hindu temples and have Brahmin priests: but they have their taboos, viz., some will not eat goats meat, others, the flesh of some other animal"

(Dash 1947: 60). The acceptance of Brahmins as a priest is very common, yet tribal customs however still persist in the death ceremonies which are rather elaborate. Rather it was a situation of harmony between these two sections where there was reciprocity as well as some reservations of their respective culturo-religious traits. Various factors have contributed towards the formation of this environment like, exposure to colonial situation followed by the arrival of the missionaries, absence of Brahmanical domination and loosely organised caste system, etc. Again, the high caste Nepalis who were believed to have migrated with the opening of tea gardens in the hills, were less in number at the initial period. '*chya ko boat ma paisa falcha*' (money can be earned by working in tea gardens), ascertains that most of them belonged to the same kind of economic condition or belonged to working class category. Mona Chhetri writes 'the sense of injustice and helplessness can also be attributed to the hierarchical class system which has been inherited and internalized by generations of workers. Historically, hierarchy at the work place coincided with the social world. Difference in physical features of the British planters, the Bengali Babus and the multi-ethnic, Mongoloid group was used successfully to homogenize different ethnic groups into different classes. However, this very segregation was successful in the eventual construction of a meta-identity of the Gorkha (Chhetri 2013: 125). Needless to mention that similar historical past and similar work condition prepared the ground for a situation where boundaries based on religion, caste or language became increasingly insignificant. Rather diffusion or intermingling of different caste categories as no one among them were an oppressor group, created an occasion of tolerance towards the practices of each other's culture. Thus the development of strong feeling of one identity and their integration as a 'single unified Nepalis of India' was not the imposition of any section rather it was a self-perpetuated and self-generated one (Pradhan 2004: 11).

Since the beginning of the nineteenth century, the gradual development of identity based on 'Nepali language' was spearheaded by the indigenous educated section from among the Nepalis who were instrumental in the formation of a cultural organization known as *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* (1924). *Sahitya Sammelan* emphasized on the need of education in Nepali medium and also urged linguistic unification as the way to preserve the culture, tradition and the very existence of the Nepali speaking community subdivided into various other micro communities who had their own dialects or *kuras*. This indicates that some literary figures have begun the search for 'reclaiming the originality'. Among the eight objectives of *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* (NSS) one as stated by President Hari Prasad Pradhan was the search for the primitive languages and literature of Nepal (e.g like that of Newar, Lepcha) along with studying their primeval works and publishing a great literature in order to preserve it from being extinct. Different communities have been living together, working together, marrying one another and speaking one colloquial language to make life easier despite the existence of community organizations like Biswakarma Samaj (1919), Tamang Buddhist Association (1922) and Newar Samaj (1924).

The arrival in Darjeeling of a large section of people from Eastern Nepal might have relieved them from the exploitation and suppression meted out by them in Nepal, yet they were not free completely. Communities soon after their arrival in Darjeeling became more concerned with their survival and existence where they no doubt were free from the exploitation of the landlords but not from poverty and deprivation. Again, there lied no scope for spread of education until it was realised by the missionaries and the colonial rulers, who emphasized on the need of education for the natives encountering the difficulty in

communication with the ruled population. Thus missionaries and colonial rulers though had their own purpose in spreading education in the hills (medium of education was Hindi, initially) but attaining the same education some of them became the prominent figure to develop Nepali language and literature. The attachment with a new land (Darjeeling) got reflected in the folk literature composed by them. As mentioned earlier those communities who migrated to India (*Muglan*) were basically from the north-eastern region (of Nepal) thus what can be deduced that the flourishing of Nepali language as well as literature was altogether a resultant effect of the contribution made mainly by the *Matwalis*, unlike Nepal where *Tagadhari* groups with a highly refined knowledge of Sanskrit predominated the scene. The development of language and literary works during the early years in Darjeeling had its own distinctiveness (*maulikta*) that emphasized on the emergence of different kind of a selfhood cherishing 'we-feeling' (*afnopan*). It can be seen that on the one hand an effort was made to build language and literature free from Sanskritic influences while on the other language and literary activities got coloured with more local contents and local contexts. Hence reflections on caste, Hinduism did get space as a reality but not purely as a 'dominating force'. Certainly Hinduism and caste system did prevail in early Darjeeling but they were fashioned in such a way that their influence in determining the larger courses of social living was not impacted in the way it used to be the case in Nepal.

In fact, communicating language of the Nepalis in Darjeeling was formed out of an intermixture of different languages. Rupnarayan Sinha, one of the office bearers of NSS, commented in the NSS Patrika (1936, Vol. 6, Issue 1): 'Although we speak Nepali language, but what we speak as Nepali here in Darjeeling that is not only Nepali but a strange language of its own kind. In this language we find a smell of English, touch of Bengali and soft colour of Hindi'. He again writes, 'Among the speakers of Nepali language the numbers of Rai, Mangar, Limbu, Tamang were greater so their language has also impacted the way Nepali is spoken in Darjeeling hills. Consequently Nepali appeared to be a language of all communities where the communities like Chettri, Bahun, Kami, Damai, Sarki (Hindu castes) started speaking a strange form of Nepali and this strangeness continue to influence the Nepali language whose implication can be felt even today. It seems that the way Darjeeling became the platform where communities with the diverse linguistic background interacted with each other and the different dialects, cultures and customs contributed towards the need of having a single language and a singular linguistic identity for a diverse population.

With the gradual spread of education and the rise of the literary activities Nepali language gained ground as a common link to unite the diverse groups within the fold of a Nepali identity. The whole hearted support of the Nepalis living in different corners of India for the recognition of Nepali language in Indian Constitution created an occasion to experience the strength of the linguistic bond that held the dispersed Nepalis throughout India together. This linguistic sentiment has also hugely contributed in sharpening the cause of Gorkhaland movement. The Gorkhaland movement or for that matter the Gorkha identity emphasized on the Indian citizenship of the Indian Nepalis or Gorkhas who were otherwise being confused as citizens of Nepal. Again it was believed that the problem can be resolved by the establishment of a separate state in the name of Gorkhaland that would guarantee Indian citizenship to the Nepalis of Indian origin or the Gorkhas. At that point of time the issue to be identified first as an Indian citizen gained more significance where the emergence of the political parties carrying the cause as 'Gorkhaland' achieved immense support. While the threat for the Nepalis was about their being a 'foreigner' or belonging to a different

country, a long time was spent on persuading their demand for Gorkhaland (carried out by a political party Gorkha National Liberation Front and later on by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha). The demand indeed remains suspended. The Gorkhaland movement and the Gorkhas/ Indian Nepalis in particular having seen all the faces of suppression and denial from the part of the Government gradually shifted to the agenda of 'tribalism'. However, it cannot be denied that the agenda of Gorkhaland seemed to be dormant in the last couple of years while the Nepalis have adopted a flexible stand by shifting from one identity to another yet the effort sometime is to be both i.e, 'Gorkha' and 'tribe' at the same time. The oscillating nature of identity in Darjeeling hills from pan –Nepali or Gorkha identity to tribal identity, and from caste identity to tribe, is reflective of the flexibility of a community's boundaries and the capability of the community elites or leaders to manipulate identity issues as per contextual requirement (Tamang 2018: 37).

The case of the Khambu Rais therefore has to be viewed in the light of the historical context. The paper discussed the historical processes which were instrumental in the emergence of a singular Nepali/ Gorkha identity for a diverse stock of population who held their own language and cultural distinctiveness. The necessity of a singular identity necessary for a community having a migratory past has made the unification and later on the assertion of that unified identity possible. Again in a context where the singular identity based political assertion appeared to be a failure, communities in the hills found reason to bring back their distinctive community identities as a viable political resource. The idea of going back to the tribal roots is indeed demanding a new imagination to be consolidated in the Darjeeling hills and the community organizations have been actively engaged with such processes. Needless to mention that the Khambu Rais are part of these processes and the demand of tribal status raised by the Khambu Rais since the 1990s is but the tip of the iceberg.

IX. NOTES

1. Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS) was established on 29th October, 1994.
2. By 1924 three community associations did emerge in Darjeeling viz. *Biswakarma Samaj* (1919), *Tamang Buddhist Association* (1922), and *Newar Samaj* (1924). Followed by them *Bharatiya Gorkha Khas Hitkari Sammelan* was established in 1934 and *All India Nepali Scheduled Caste Association* (AINSCA) was formed in 1947.

Since 1990s several new associations have emerged while some older ones were revived. *Akhil Bharatiya Tamang Buddha Sangathan* (All India Tamang Buddhist Association), *Kirata Yakthung Chumlung* (Association of the Kiratas), *Kirati (Khambu) Rai Sanskritik Sansthan* (Kirati Khambu Rai Cultural Association), *Yakha (Dewan) Association*, *Gurung Tomu Chonj Dhi* (Association of the Gurungs), *Magar Lafa Sangh* (Association of the Magars), *Kiratbansi Sunuwar (Mukhia) Koinchbu* (Association of the Kirati Sunuwar-Mukhias) are some such examples.

Among the two demands of our reference the first was a political one that involved the political urge of a separate state for the Indian Nepalis, which somehow got settled in the year 1988 with the formation of a sub-state level administrative arrangement known as Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). The second demand was cultural in nature as it concerned with the claim of Constitutional recognition of Nepali language. In

1992 Nepali language was included in the Eighth Schedule of Indian Constitution as one of the India's scheduled national languages.

3. The area lying in between the Likhu, river dudhkosi to Arun river in Eastern part of Nepal is known as *majh* (central) Kirant.
4. *Kipat* is the land owned by the community and only members of the particular community could use it through their traditional rules. Landownership under the *Kipat* system was limited to certain communities of mongoloid origin such as the Limbu, Sunuwar, Rai, Danuwar and Tamang mostly living in the Eastern and Western Hills of Nepal. This was abolished in 2023B (1966 AD).
5. The enumeration of community based census was done last in the year 1951. Thus the absence of population data on Khambu Rai after that led the researcher to rely on the record provided by the Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS) an organizational platform of the Khambu Rais. The organization claims the total population of the Khambu Rais to be around four lakhs at present.
6. This fact too is debatable as the settlers are basically thought to be Lepchas but the history conceals its reality in itself.
7. Clerical staff pattern in the colonial tea plantations area invariably filled up by Bengali educated middle class people. The head clerk in the office were known as Bara Babu (office clerical head) and the hierarchic work organization in the plantation system have had served such Babus in different sectors like Bagan Babu (clerical head of field), factory Babu (head clerk at factory), godam Babu (clerical head of store). The details of this kind of hierarchic work organization can be found in plenty of literatures available on tea plantation industry [for example vide ,Bhowmick (191, 2001), Dasgupta (1986), Xaxa (1985) among others]. It needs to be mentioned throughout the Darjeeling hills, tarai and dooars same pattern prevailed it is still in operation.
8. Nepali Sahitya Sammelan was established in 25th May 1924. Later under the initiative of this organization demand for use of Nepali language for official works was initiated.

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