

CHAPTER- 5

SOCIAL AND CASTE STRUCTURE OF THE HILL REGION OF NORTH BENGAL DURING COLONIAL RULE

I

The hill region is constituted by the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling district viz. Darjeeling or Sadar sub-division, Kurseong and Kalimpong sub-divisions. The hilly portion is the northern most region of North Bengal. Geographically, historically, culturally and ethno-linguistically this region maintains a clear distinction compared to the fourth sub-division of the district of Drajeeling i.e. Siliguri sub-division or Terai region as well as the other parts of North Bengal. It is due to this fact we will study the social and caste picture of the region in a brief manner.

The creation of Darjeeling was completed in 1866. The cession of ‘Dorjeling’ area from the Raja of Sikkim on February 1835 at the ‘repeated and prolonged persuasion of the British Government’ gave rise to the foundation of Darjeeling town and the District, which was then associated with only a village¹. Further annexation was made in 1860 as a result of the ‘fighting’ with the Sikkim Raja which was followed by the annexation of territory in the hills and added to the Darjeeling tract, thus brought the boundaries to the Nepal frontier on the Terai was also added (the social and caste picture of the Terai region has already discussed in chapter – 1). Lastly under the treaty of November 1865, Kalimpong was ceded from Bhutan and it came to the hands of the British Indian authorities. The ceded territory was placed under the Deputy Commissioner of the western Duars. In October 1866 it was transferred to the jurisdiction of the Darjeeling district, thus in this way the shape of present day Darjeeling district was completed².

Geographically the hilly portion of North Bengal is entirely different from that of the other parts of it. It is mentioned earlier that (chapter – 1)

geographically and historically this region bears a distinct background and characteristics. Ethno-linguistically the hilly zone was connected with the sub-montane countries viz. Tibet, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan etc.

It is said that when the British first acquired this hill territory in 1835, 'it was in fact estimated that the whole of the tract comprising 138 sq. miles contained only 100 souls'³. There were about 100 Lepchas in and around present Darjeeling town, about two thousand Lepchas in the Kurseong-Mirik area and about three to four thousand Lepchas and Bhotias in the Kalimpong area. Therefore it can be said that prior to the establishment of the British colonial rule, the area was entirely under forest and most of the area was uninhabited and the Lepchas and Bhutias were the early inhabitants of this part. Like the western Duars of North Bengal, in this hilly portion also migration in a significant way took place during the British rule. The migration increased so phenomenally that within a span of thirty four years namely between 1835 and 1869, tremendous growth of population took place in the region. One thing has to be mentioned in this regard that the major portion of the migrants were Nepalese. According to 1941 census, Nepal provided 45 percent of migrants to India. According to 1961 census the number of migrants per 100 persons over the period between 1931 and 1961 averaged around 35 persons in the hill areas of Darjeeling⁴. So it can be said that after the formation of the district, migration increased in a considerable extent resulted in the emergence of a new era in the history of this region.

II

In order to understand the caste society of the hill region, we must study the courses and causes of migration that took place during the British rule which is still in a continuing process. Without studying the causes of migration it will not be possible to make a clear concept of the caste picture and social composition of the region. Because unlike other parts of Bengal, the society of the hill areas was absolutely an immigrants' society which had similarity only with the Western Duars of Jalpaiguri district and Sylhet and Kachar districts of Assam so far as migration was concerned, but the composition of the society had been different.

Before entering into the study of the caste and society of the hilly region we will cast our eyes over the factors that promoted the cause of migration. Firstly, the introduction of tea plantation economy and its unprecedented boom during the eighties of the nineteenth century paved the way for immigration of people into the region from Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim etc neighbouring countries⁵.

Secondly, the development of hill resort and sanatorium in the hilly zone gave an opportunity to the immigrants from outside to take part in the process of development⁶.

Thirdly, Darjeeling was situated as a gateway of business between India and Tibet, Nepal and China etc. conducted by the British Govt. of India. Moreover, the hill of Darjeeling was part of the Sikkimese Kingdom. Therefore a bulk of migrants from Nepal, Sikkim, Tibet and China entered and began to settle in this part during the British rule. One thing must be

remembered in this context that Tibet had trade relations with Bengal prior to the establishment of British rule and the staying of a few Tibetans on temporary basis was a natural phenomenon⁷.

Fourthly, the development of transport and railway communication gave another impetus to migration. The Darjeeling Himalayan railways were constructed in the second half of the nineteenth century (1866-1881), the P.W.D. work of construction and maintenance of roads, the management of the forests and other such works grew considerably in course of time which demanded a huge strength of manual labour. The early settlers viz. Lepchas, Bhutias and Tibetans were less willing to do this hard physical work. Therefore the British Govt. encouraged migration to meet the requirements by providing a number of facilities to them⁸.

Fifthly, the Anglo-Nepal war (1814-16), confrontation with Sikkim and the Bhutan necessitated the establishment of military cantonment to keep watch on the boundaries of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. The establishment of military cantonment in the hills of the region provided opportunities to the immigrants to get job in the military services as well as other services of maintaining such establishment⁹. It is clear that almost all the developments took place in the hills depending entirely on the labour of migrants, as the area was sparsely populated and the earlier settlers did not show any interest to participate in such activities. Thus we see that various factors necessitated migration into the region.

Sixthly, it is said that each European settled in the hills required a number of porters. During seasonal migration of the British officials a huge number of porters were required. In order to get this service the migration was encouraged and the Govt. recruited them to such services¹⁰.

III

Here we will study about the various caste groups as well as the social structure of the hill region. It has already mentioned that the major portion of the migrant population was the Nepalese. Other important caste groups among the migrants were Bhutia, Tibetan, Chinese etc. and the earlier inhabitants of the region were the Lepchas. Thereafter the Limbus came and settled. Along with the above mentioned hill men, there were a significant number of plain people. Among the Plainsmen Hindus, mostly of them were Bengalis, a good number of Marwari's, Hindustanis, a few Muslims were the inhabitants in the hills. A few Europeans were also there during colonial period that constituted a part of the hill society¹¹.

Lepchas :

The Lepchas were the original inhabitants of the district. According to the Lepcha tradition their original homeland was a place called ‘Mayal’ which was situated in an inaccessible valley of a mountain that is normally known by its Tibetanized name as Kanchenjunga¹². According to another tradition, which perhaps developed later under the influence of Lamaist Buddhism, the place of the origin was holy mountain Kailash (ti-se). It is found in the Gazetteer of A.J Dash that ‘when the British first acquired Darjeeling it was then reported that they formed two-thirds of the population of Sikkim. They were not very numerous in the hills of Darjeeling, near about 100 Lepchas were there at the time of British annexation of the area’. They were basically cultivators.

O'malley mentioned that 'at the time of 1872 census there were only under 4000 Lepchas in the district, where as at the census of 1901 their numbers were found to be nearly 10,000. He further mentioned that they are not as prolific as the Nepalese; their numbers are indeed practically the same as in 1891. They got intermarried with other races, especially with the Limbus and Sikkim Bhotias, who stood higher in the social scale and in this way they (Lepchas) contributed to their self-effacement'¹³.

The Lepchas were divided into two branches – Rong and Khamba. The former claims to be original inhabitants of Sikkim, while the Khamba are believed to have migrated some 250 years ago from the kham province of China¹⁴.

Limbu :

The Limbus are believed to have migrated from the eastern part of Nepal. They belonged to the Kirati group¹⁵. According to Risley they are the descendants of early Tibetan settlers. It is believed by the Limbus that they came from Kashi or Benaras. Whatever may be the exact history of their origin it can undoubtedly be said that they were the ancient inhabitants of Darjeeling and a number of scholars have traced their origin as Mongoloid¹⁶. Though they consider themselves as a military race, they were not ranked among the regular fighting tribes of Nepal¹⁷. Prior to 1887 most Gorkha regiments enlisted the Limbus but after the formation of two Eastern Nepal Gurkha Regiments they together with Rais were enlisted exclusively in the Eastern Nepal Regiments of the Gorkha Brigade¹⁸. They did trade and agriculture too. The Limbus was divided into thirteen endogamous sub-tribes, each of which was again sub-divided into a number of exogamous

groups¹⁹. With regard to the religion, they were the followers of Buddhism. In this respect they maintained their distinctiveness from other faiths.

Tibetan:

It has already mentioned that Tibet had a profound influence over the region from time immemorial. Buddhist Lamas came into the region along with Sikkimese territories to spread the lessons of Buddhism among the hill men. They also encouraged education to these people to chant the Tibetan texts of Buddhism. Moreover, long before the establishment of the British rule in the region the Tibetans controlled the major portion of Indo-Tibetan trade. The important centre of trade was Kalimpong before 1864-65²⁰. Therefore the migration of Tibetans took place through the religious and trade relations. Before the advent of the British there remained a good number of Tibetans at the time of the development of habitation in this part and there was much influence of the Tibetans over the Lepchas of Darjeeling and Sikkim²¹. Thus at the time when the British intervened politically into the region there was already established the domination of Tibetans including Bhutanese in the area over the aboriginal Lepchas²².

Bhutia :

The Bhutias of Darjeeling consisted of four classes 1) Sikkimese Bhutias are a mixed race descended from Tibetans who settled in Sikkim some centuries ago and inter married with Lepchas. 2) Sherpa Bhutias or Bhutias of Nepal who came from East or North-East of Nepal. There was a minor sub-division among them called Kagate. They were also called Kagate-Sherpa as they were engaged in paper making when they first came in Nepal from Tibet. 3) Drukpa Bhutia or Bhutias of Bhutan and 4) Bhutias of Tibet or Tibetans²³.

Nepalese: There are a number of sub-castes among the Nepalese viz. Khambu, Newar, Rai, Tamang, Gurung, Manger, Sherpa, Sunuwar, Yakha and others. Here we will discuss about few important caste groups of the hill region.

Khambus :

The most numerous group among the Nepali castes inhabited in the hills are the Khambus. Their original home was in Eastern Nepal²⁴. It is observed by a few scholars that the term was originally geographical and was applied to a race of aborigines which according to Newar tradition came into Nepal from the east that is from Tibet²⁵. Another name applied to them was Kiranti. It is also a geographical term applied to all the races i.e. Limbus, Yakhas as well as Khambus, living in Kirat, a tract in the east of Nepal which is bounded by the river Dugh Kosi on the West and by Arun or the Tambar River on the east²⁶. Suniti Kumar Chatterjee has mentioned the people living in the mountains, particularly the Himalayas and in the North Eastern areas of India were of mongoloid origin²⁷, so it can be derived from this delineation that the Khambus are Mongoloid by their origin. They claim that they were one of the fighting groups i.e. Jimdars and bear the kiranti title of Rai, Subba etc. So far as their religion is concerned, Risley mentioned that the Khambus like other many Nepali castes enrolled in Hinduism and their ancestral religion was Buddhism²⁸. Landowning and cultivation were there traditional occupation, but a certain number of them adopted military service and entered Gorkha regiments under the title of Rai.

Murmis :

The Murmis claimed to be among the earliest settlers of Nepal. So far as their origin is concerned, Risley said that ‘their exogamous divisions bear, Tibetan names seem to lend support to the opinion that they are descended from a Tibetan stock modified more or less by intermixture with Nepalese race’²⁹. According to Col. Dalton, the Murmis were a nomadic and pastoral branch of the Bhotias, who had an alliance with the Nepalese³⁰. They had exogamous society. A few of them were believers of animism. But most of them were Hindus by religion. It is believed that Buddhism was declined from their religious believing and practices. They were basically agricultural cultivators; many of them however served in the police and in the British Army and a very large proportion in the hills of the district of Darjeeling were employed as labourers in the tea gardens³¹. So it can be said that they were the believers of Buddhism and gradually adopted Hinduism.

Sherpa:

The Sherpas had their original home in North-Eastern Nepal. They were the descendants of Tibetan race³². In Tibetan language the term Sherpa means the inhabitants of the East. They also have a number of sub-groups. Their language is Tibetan. According to scholars they are of Mongolian origin³³. By religion they were the believers of Buddhism. According to the census of 1941 their number was 6,929 in Darjeeling; Risely mentioned them as a section of the Murmis in Darjeeling. Till 1951 the Sherpas enlisted their names as mountaineers in Darjeeling. Thereafter they continued their activities from Nepal.

Khas :

The Khas or khasas who had the surname of Chhetri was one of the three dominant warrior groups of Nepal (other two were the Mangars and the Gurungs), which had overthrown the Newar dynasty in 1769³⁴. They were regarded as an Indo-Aryan groups and it finds mention in many ancient Sanskrit texts along with other frontier tribes living in the North-Western periphery of Indian sub-continent. They were referred to as degraded Kshatriyas in Manusmriti³⁵. In 1941 there were 25941 Chhetris in the district. According to A.J. Dash, ‘they were probably a large admixture of Aryan blood and their language which is acquired from the Brahman and Rajput refugees has now become the Nepali of current use’³⁶.

Tamangs :

Tamangs were a Mongolian or semi-Mongolian group of people, who claim to be among the earliest settlers of Nepal. It is believed by a few scholars that they were probably descended from a Tibetan stock modified by intermixture with Nepali race³⁷. They basically followed Buddhism as their religion, though a few of them became the followers of Hinduism in the later phase. They were found in a large number in tea gardens. They were also recruited in the Gorkha regiments. According to Risley, they were a thar or Sect. of Murmis in Darjeeling. The term is sometimes used to denote the whole caste³⁸.

Gurung :

The Gurungs were a nomadic pastoral race of Nepal. They helped in 1769 to overthrow the Newar dynasty and Gurungs of Nepal were recruited to

combatant rank in Ghokha battalions. They were divided into two endogamous sub-castes and a number of Sects³⁹. The caste was once Buddhist and became Hindus during the early British period. A few of them still profess animism which they professed before their conversion to Buddhism. The Gurungs are well distributed throughout the district and a large number of them had been recruited in the tea gardens in the hills.

Mangar :

Nothing can be said specifically regarding the origin of the Mangars. According to their own tradition “they came from Bokim a land behind Nepal some where in Tibet.”⁴⁰ It is generally believed that they are the descendants of Mongolian people. The Mangars are found throughout the district wherever there are Nepalese. They were one of the three dominant warrior castes as mentioned earlier in Nepal, who overthrew the Newar dynasty. As per their religion Risley said that ‘the religion of the Mangars may best be described as lax Hinduism tempered by survivals of an earlier animistic cult’. Agriculture, trade and sold- earing had been the chief occupation of the Mangars⁴¹.

Newar :

The Newars ruled in Nepal until 1769, when the dynasty was overthrown by Khasas, Mangars and Gurungs. It is said by a few scholars that they were the early settlers of Austric origin⁴². ‘The Newars are a highly intermixed group both religiously and racially. There are hindu and Buddhist newars and racially they are drawn from the Abhiras, the Kiratas, the Lichhavis, the vaishya Thakuri and the Karnatakas’, apart from the fact that there might have been some ethnic group which provided the foundation for the present

Newar type,⁴³. It is difficult to say, however, who had been the forerunners of the present Newars. They were recruited in the Gorkha regiments. They were numerous in tea areas of the sadar and Kurseong sub-divisions and in the Kalimpong Khasmahal areas⁴⁴.

Nepali Brahmans:

The Nepali Brahmans in the hill are of Indian origin. It is said that the Brahmanas along with some Rajputs from Kanauj, Chittore and some other Places of Northern and Western India came to the Western hills of Nepal during twelfth century when they were dislodged by the Muslim invasions⁴⁵. The Nepali Brahmans were fairly numerous in the hills of Darjeeling. According to the census of 1911 their number was 8,999 in the area. No Nepali Brahmans were recruited in the Gorkha regiments. They inhabited largely in the Khasmahals in Kalimpong sub-division.

Sanyasis : They had the surname as Giri. The fact is their number was very few compared to other Nepali castes migrated into the areas of Darjeeling. They were also recruited in the British army⁴⁶. Their number was 1,335 in 1941.

Kamis, Damis, Sarkis :

The Kamis were blacksmiths and recruited in the Gorkha regiments as armourers. They were quite numerous in the district. They are found in all areas in the hills but are particularly numerous in towns, on tea estates and in the Kalimpong khasmahals. They were regarded as ‘untouchables’⁴⁷. They have Aryan features and considerable cultural affinity with the Brahmans and Chhetris.

The Damis belonged to the Tailor caste and were recruited to Gorkha battalions only as ‘darzis’. The word ‘Damai’ is derived from the word Damaha which is the chief musical instrument of those people.

The Sarkis were leather workers and were recruited to Gorkha regiments only as such. “Exact origin of these occupational castes is obscure as is that of their counterparts among Newars⁴⁸”. All the three above mentioned castes were regarded as ‘untouchables’. Among these three caste groups the Kamis seem to be numerically the most dominant. Their total population in Darjeeling was 16,272 in 1931 while the Damis had only 8,162 and the sarkis 2778 in the same year and place. All the three groups had been enrolled as scheduled caste category in 1956.

Ghartis :

They were considered the descendants of freed slaves⁴⁹. According to the 1941 census their number was 2,393 persons. Risley mentioned them as a section of Kamaras and a sub-group of Mangars etc⁵⁰. Among the various caste groups, the most numerous lower castes were the Kamis, Damis, Sarkis and Ghartis.

Sunuwars : They were a cultivating race who were originally hunters and recruited from Nepal to combatant rank in Gorkha regiments. They are also of mixed origin. According to Chemjong they migrated from Tibet in more than one groups and settled in Nepal via Kashmir, the Brahmaputra river region etc.⁵¹ Regarding their caste rigidity Risley mentioned that ‘though in theory the sunuwars were a strictly endogamous group, intermarriage with Mangars and Gurungs is tacitly recognised’⁵².

Yakhas :

The Yakhas are regarded as Kirata, non-Aryan like the Limbus, Rais etc. They were an agricultural caste group calling themselves Diwan. They came from the same area of Nepal as the Rais and Limbus. They were also recruited in the Gorkha regiments. Like the Giri. They are not numerous in the district⁵³.

Bhujels :the Bhujels were originally slaves in Nepal. Their status had improved and during the First World War some of them had been recruited in the Gorkha regiments. Their social and religious activities indicate a mixed origin⁵⁴. In 1941 their number was 5,816 in the district. Risley mentioned them as a thar or sect of Mangars in Darjeeling.

Yogis :

It is found in the census of 1941 that the Yogis were 454 in number in the hills of Darjeeling. A J. Dash observed that the Yogis are not strictly a caste or tribe but only a group of those who have taken to a religious life.

It has to be kept in consideration that all the above mentioned caste groups had a number of sub-divisions. Moreover there emerged a number of new mixed castes as a result of the inter-caste marriage in the hill areas of the district.

Although Neplai castes are divided into a number of ‘parts’ which is treated by scholars as ‘whole’ which can hardly be ignored to understand the society, yet what is interesting is that after their migration in the hill the

Nepalese had thrown out their traditional caste rigidity or in other words, they had to adjust to the new social, economic and political environment of the region⁵⁵. Perhaps due to this reason they compelled to lose their adherences to the tradition. Therefore the nuances of interrelationship with the society gradually had shaped into a new structure. As it is well known that migrants in everywhere themselves create a new society with significant characteristics, in which inter-caste marriage and relations not only provide scopes for social mobility but also for the emergence of a number of new mixed castes though each of them try to maintain their own socio-cultural identity with adequate laxity. The caste structure of the Nepalese society is therefore as follows:-

High Caste: Brahman, Thakuri, Chhetri etc.

Middle Caste: Newar,Rai, Limbu, Yakha,Tamang, Manger,Gurung, Bhujel, Sunuwar,Sherpa, Yalmu etc.

Low caste: Kami, Sarki,Dami etc.

Others: Lepcha, Bhutia, Dukpa,Marwari, Bihari etc⁵⁶.

There was also a significant diversity among the plains people who came to the hills to grab the benefits of the developments of the area during British rule.

Bengalis came in the hilly zone with the establishment of British administration and the introduction of tea plantation economy in the district. They basically served the intellectual needs. As they picked up the opportunity of English education and knowledge in English language, they obtained the posts of officials, clerks, supervisors etc, in various offices and institutions⁵⁷. But gradually with the emergence of middle classes the

Nepalese too took their position in the Govt. services. Even after independence the Bengalis were numerous there in several Govt. and non-Govt. services, but gradually with the emergence of the Nepalese as part of middle class they found their places in Govt. services as they had the equal zeal for obtaining English education⁵⁸. It is found that the number of Bengalis in services in the hills gradually decreased, though there were other factors too behind this change which is not the concern of our study. Nevertheless, it can undoubtedly be said that the Bengalis migrated in the hills with the establishment of the British rule as part of their administration either before the migration of the Nepalese there or at the same time they immigrated in the region. The numbers of the Bengali speaking people in the district as shown in various censuses are not unambiguous. In 1891, Bengali was stated to be the mother-tongue of 47435 people, in 1911, 45,985 and in 1931-37444. The consecutive census reports revealed the gradual decline in the number of Bengali speaking people in the hills. Among the Bengalis there were a number of castes in the hills.

Apart from the Bengalis, the Marwaris and Upite Hindustani mechanics also migrated in the hill areas. The Marwaris conducted trade and commerce after the establishment of the British rule there. A considerable number of Hindustanis of United province, Bihar etc. also migrated to serve as mechanics and other services in various activities initiated by the British Govt⁵⁹.

In the hill area, Muslims were very few and mainly found in the towns with a relatively small number in semi-urban areas. According to the census of 1901 the Mohammedans formed less than 4 percent of the total population

of the district⁶⁰. Most of them had been the residence of the Terai where many of the aboriginal Koches, Mechas Rajbansis etc. had embraced Islam. The census reports of 1941 showed that the number of Muslims in the district of Darjeeling was 8728.

Linguistic Distribution of Population⁶¹

Language	% to total Population
Nepalese (Khaskura)	21.00
Bengali	17.00
Jimdar	14.00
Murmi	10.00
Hindi	6.50
Limbu	5.00
Manger	4.00
Other Neplai language	5.00
Lepcha	4.00
Bhotia	4.00
English	1.50

Growth of Population in the hill areas of Darjeeling

1872	—
1881	92141
1891	150311
1901	173342
1911	189.763
1921	206961
1931	239377
1941	286355

1951	328785
1961	41,109
1971	479978

Source: Relevant censuses.

IV

So far as religious beliefs of the people in the hill region is concerned. Hinduism from India and Buddhism from Tibet and India had influenced the religious life of the inhabitants of the hills. Most of the people in the hills are believers of either Hinduism or Buddhism. It is mentioned in the writings of A. J. Dash in his district Gazetteer that generally the tribes (Lepcha, Bhotia, Tibetans etc.) were Buddhists and others (Nepali, Marwari, Hindustani, Bengali, Hindus etc.) were Hindus.

Among the tribes a few have been the believers of animism. It is evident that a good number of people who migrated into the district from Nepal were Buddhists as there was also migration from Tibet took place in Nepal long before the advent of British in this region. But Hinduism had become triumphant over them who migrated into the hills of Darjeeling and became permanent settlers and many of them embraced Hinduism. Overall the society of the Nepalese was and is Hindu by religion. It has to be noted that Hinduism gradually spread at the expense of Buddhism. Because the religion of the early settlers viz. Lepcha, Bhotia, Tibetan and even the lower caste group people of the Nepalese was Buddhism. Even among the Lepchas, Bhotias and Tibetans Hinduism had left its influence, though generally they are Buddhists by their religious beliefs and practices. It is evident that before

the advent of the British, the Buddhist monks and priests from Tibet had a regular contact with the people of the region and they conducted education to the inhabitants for preparing them able to chant Tibetan and Buddhist religious texts. But gradually with the migration of heterogeneous communities, races etc. particularly the Nepalese influence of the priests over common people perhaps reduced and thus Hinduism found its ground to develop and spread⁶². It has mentioned by O'Malley in his District Gazetteer that even after being embraced Hinduism, the Nepali Buddhists made their contributions to the Buddhist monasteries. Moreover, there was no deep cleavage between the two sects i.e. Hindus and Buddhists. Therefore popular religions in the hills were both Hinduism and Buddhism. The migrant Nepalese were Hindus and the aboriginal inhabitants' viz. Lepcha, Limbu, Tibetan, Bhotia etc. were Buddhists by their religious beliefs. In Kalimpong sub-division, Buddhist Monasteries were more numerous and it was here in the district that Buddhist culture had survived most strongly.

Buddhism however was gaining ground. The adherents of Buddhism had increased. The greatest numerical change in the Buddhist group of the hills of Darjeeling was caused by the influx of Bhutia migrants⁶³. It is mention worthy that the Limbus are Buddhists and in this respect they maintained their distinctiveness from other faiths.

The religion of the most plains men was Hindu. Although Hinduism and Buddhism were the main religions of the region, there were also a good number of Christians in the hill of Darjeeling. The Christianity was spread at first under the endeavour of missionaries. It is found from the 1941 census

that there was an Indian Christian Association which claims that there were at that time about 12000 Christians of local origin in the District, most of whom were of Nepali races. In this context one thing has to be taken into account that the converted Nepali, Lepcha etc. Christians from the very beginning availed the benefits and facilities provided by the British Govt. compared to the Nepali Buddhists or Hindus. In this respect the work of Mr. William Macfarlane is considered remarkable. He actually became succeeded in converting over 600 persons into Christianity before his death in 1887⁶⁴. It is already mentioned that a few people were found who retained their faith in animism.

V

If we study the courses of migration during British rule we will find that major portion of the migrants were Nepalese and in course of time there developed a strong overwhelming Nepali domination through the language over the society and culture of this adopted land. Here we will try to find out the reasons as to why such domination took place in the society and culture of the region. Though it was not caste domination, it was a cultural and linguistic domination over the hill people that established during this time. In this respect one point must be kept in mind that the British Govt. took an active role in bringing the Nepalese in the hills of Darjeeling⁶⁵. There were a number of factors directly or indirectly promoted the cause of the migration of the Nepalese and their gradual uplift in the region.

The Govt. preferred to recruit the loyal, obedient and laborious Nepalese in its military battalion. It was found in the subsequent period that the Gorkha

soldiers fought for the company and later on for the British Govt. in and outside the sub-continent. There was separate Gorkha Regiment in the British Govt.'s Army. There were about 11000 Gorkhas in the thirteenth battalion. There were Gorkhas in the Kashmir Imperial service infantry, Naga Hills Force, Surma Valley military police and Barma police etc⁶⁶. After retiring from the military services almost all the Gorkha ex-soldiers had been provided lands to settle in the hilly areas of Darjeeling, on the other hand, there was a minimum scope of job opportunities in the economic activities of Nepal. Agriculture was traditional and with the growing population pressure on land increased, therefore the people preferred to migrate to the hills of Darjeeling and joined the services offered by the British govt. to maintain their livelihood.

Another point is that at the beginning of the establishment of the British rule in Darjeeling, the owners of most of the lands were the Maharajas of Cooch Behar, Burdwan and other Zamindars of Bengal. The British Govt. took possession of the estates during the last quarter of the nineteenth century and gradually turned them into Khasmahal settlements. Not only that the Govt. enacted laws in favour of the retired Gorkha soldiers who served long in the British defense regiments one of such laws converted the district as non-regulated district i.e. the district will be governed directly by the Governor, therefore no laws, rules or regulations of the legislative council could be applicable in the district. More over there was imposed bar on land-selling during this time. The fact was that except the hill people no other (non-hill people) could buy lands in the district. They could acquire land only on lease basis. As most of the land in the district was under khasmahals, therefore the owner of the land was Govt. itself. The British Govt. gave those lands to the

retired Gorkha soldiers. The land laws which were introduced by the British Govt. in other parts of India were not applicable to the hill areas. It was almost impossible for the upper caste Hindu money lenders or others to buy the lands from Nepalese. The laws regarding the transfer of land from the Nepalese to other groups were made extremely stringent. Therefore, the Nepalese did not have fear of alienation to the rich upper caste money lenders of the plains. The Nepalese formed nearly 84 percent of the khasmahals' population in the hill. Thus in this way with the help of the British Govt. another colony was established by the Nepalese in the hills who became socio- culturally the most dominant caste group there⁶⁷.

The establishment of the plantation economy necessitated a large number of labourers to run it properly. The plainsmen, who also immigrated there, were more interested in trade and intellectual works rather than serving as labourers in the gardens. On the other hand the British and European planters saw that the Lepchas were reserved and slow and the Bhotias were unwilling to do manual works, they decided to bring the Nepalese to the hills to work as labourers who were thrifty and laborious than the aboriginal Lepchas. As the British started deforestation and plantation of tea simultaneously, the Nepalese also worked as landed labourers. The preponderance of the Nepalese in this population can be understood from the fact that 'Ninety percent of the labour employed on tea estates in the hills is Nepali and language used on them is Neplai'⁶⁸. In Kalimpong also there was no Nepali at the inception of the British rule, but the original settler's viz. the Lepchas, and Bhotias were not as good in manual labour as was required to effect an overall improvement of the area. Naturally the Nepalese served

the need and had began to settle in the region in a large number with the passage of time.

Another factor that helped the development of a consolidated Nepali culture was the introduction of English education and the advent of the printing press. We see that the development of Western education and growth of public opinion helped much to emerge a strong domination of the Nepalese in the socio-cultural life of the hills of North Bengal. In this field also the British Govt. and Christian Missionaries played an important role. The Christian missionaries were the pioneer to introduce modern education in the hill area. The Church of Scotland mission did much to the development of primary education in the district. The British Govt. and the Missionaries in course of introducing Western education among the Hillmen preferred to take Neplali as the language or medium of instruction as it was very close to the language Hindi. Moreover, they found that ‘even the Lepcha, Bhotia and Tibetans also picked up the language very quickly’⁶⁹.

In addition to that during the last quarter of the nineteenth century a lot of papers and periodicals were published in the hill area regularly, which espoused the cause of social awareness and socio-cultural development of the hill people. For instance the newspaper & journal ‘Khabar Kagat (1901) edited by Ganga Prasad Pradhan actively covered the social issues and activities of the common people along with publishing missionary activities. The main concern of the journals published between 1912-1939 was investigation to different aspects of Nepali society, culture and language etc. It also propagated the cause of education for women and advocated for a

radical change in social outlook. One association named *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* founded in 1924 had done much to spread the influence of Nepali literature and culture in the hills and with this object published books also. Another newspaper and journal was ‘*Chandrika*’. It published from 1918 under the editorship of Parashmani Pradhan, who was a renowned social worker. It played a significant role for the growth and development of modern Nepali literature. Parashmani Pradhan was an active campaigner for the growth and development of Nepali language and literature. He was first concerned with controversies surrounding the issue of standardization and later made great effort to obtain official recognition of Nepali as a major literary language from the Govt. of west Bengal in 1961 as well as Government of India. In this connection it will not be irrelevant to state that the language Nepali got the status of official language in the hill subdivisions of Darjeeling by The West Bengal Official Language Act 1961. A number of associations were cropped up during this time which promoted the cause of caste solidarity among the Nepalis. Thus it can be said that with the development of modern education, press and publications etc. a strong domination of the Nepalese in the hill society of Darjeeling was developed⁷⁰.

The Nepalese themselves were eager to improve their condition; they did not confine themselves working in the tea gardens and other manual working fields. Like the Bengalis they were equally anxious for the Govt. Services by obtaining education. By virtue of their knowledge in English language the Nepalese soon began to contend for various Govt. services in the hills which had been enjoyed by the Bengalis till then. So from tea gardens to railways, road communications, from education to Govt. services in every aspect they

stood in forefront in the hills, resulted in the emergence of a strong and overwhelming domination of the Nepalese as a distinct caste group in the hill region.

In the decade between 1891 and 1901, the total number of immigrants to India from Nepal was 243037. ‘It is mentioned in an article written by Manas Dasgupta and Abdus Samad that in between 1869 and 1901 the Nepali population increased by eight times and in between 1881 and 1941 the Nepalese increased by about three times’. The censuses of 1911, 1921 and 1931 reported Nepalese migrants into India as 280,217, 273,932 and 327,828 respectively⁷¹. The major portion of the migrants had settled in Darjeeling .W.W.Hunter in his ‘A statistical Account of Bengal’ vol. x, wrote that ‘the Nepalese who form 34 percent of the population of the District (Darjeeling) are all immigrants’

The socio-economic condition of Nepal also gave a fillip to the emigration of the Nepalese mostly of lower castes into the hills of North Bengal. After the establishment of the Shah Dynasty in Nepal, the legal and social forces encouraged by the upper caste Hindu migrants against the local population. The lower caste groups’ people were deprived of their ancestral land by the upper caste Hindus. With regard to the education and employment opportunities also as the high caste Brahmins were already learned and when sanskritized Nepali written in Devanagari script became the official language of the Kathmandu Govt. under the Shah Dynasty, the Brahmins picked up the Debanagari script and sanskritized Nepali quickly. The administrative, judicial and other official posts were occupied by them. Therefore the large illiterate people were forced by the poverty to search

land and occupation. At the same time the British Govt. offered to the migrants many advantages viz. The Govt. offered them jobs in the expanding tea gardens, land for cultivation in the areas ceded from Sikkim which was remained as waste land, opportunities in the British army etc. Thus we see that due to the poverty and lack of job opportunities a large number of Nepalese flocked in to the hill areas of North Bengal to earn for their livelihood⁷².

It is clear from the above discussion that with the migration of the Nepalese in the hills of Darjeeling district, a dominant Nepali culture arose there. Their numerical strength also helped them for the emergence of a strong Nepali language and culture which gradually became the communicating lingua-franca and dominant culture respectively in the hill society despite the fact that each and every caste groups in hills had their own dialects and cultures. It must be kept in mind in this context that this domination can not be called as caste domination by the Nepalese; it was only a cultural and linguistic superiority which helped the community to be placed in a dominant position in the society.

VI

Although Nepali language became dominant in the hills, there were a number of other languages. A large number of people used to speak the languages of the Tibeto Burman family of which no less than 19 different dialects were shown in the census returns of 1901⁷³. Tibetan was spoken by the Bhotias domiciled in the district, who according to their Nationality spoke the Tibetan or Bhotia of Tibet, Sikkim or Bhutan. The Lepchas had

their own native language and that is called by them Rong river, which is considered as one of the oldest languages in the world. Limbu was another dialect. Among the Nepalese of Darjeeling Khambu, Murmi and Manger were the commonest dialect though Newar, Gurung Sunhwar and Yakha were also spoken. Among the plains men the Bengali, Hindustani etc. were also in use. Khas i.e. Nepali, Hindi or as it was sometimes generally called Paharia also had been a fairly common dialect among a considerable number of people in the hills. This is a form of Hindi spoken by the Khas group of Nepal, who obtained it from the numerous Brahman and Rajput refugees that took refuge in the hills at the time when the ancient Hindu kingdoms were overthrown by the Muhammadan invaders⁷⁴. These people intermingled and intermarried with the original Mongoloid inhabitants and gradually became fused with them.

VII

Thus we find that the majority of the people in the hills are of Indo-Aryan and Mongolian origin belonging chiefly to various Nepalese castes also including a large number of Lepcha, Bhotia, Limbu, Tibetan etc⁷⁵. The society of the hill region was therefore presumably heterogeneous in its ethnic, religious and linguistic composition.

Except the Lepechas, Limbus, Bhotias and Tibetans the structure of the Nepali society was and is almost as same as the Hindu society of the plains of Bengal nay India. They had caste based hierarchy in which the Branhmans were regarded dominant and powerful as well as advanced section of the society. Consequently a number of changes in the social

relation took place. Caste structure and caste relations in the region have become much more egalitarian. Unlike the rigid caste system prevalent among the Hindus of plains the society of the Nepalese is comparatively lax. The Brahmans and other high caste Hindus among the Nepalese did not maintain rigidity so far as inter-marriage and ritual ceremonies were concerned. With regard to the profession or occupation also, they did not pursue for retaining their functional occupations though certain professions were confined to specified functional castes who continued to follow their trade, for instance the Sarkis who made the native shoes and sheaths of khukri, kumal Newar (Potter) Kamis and Bhama Newars who manufactured metal ware and performed the functions of a Blacksmith. There was, however an extraordinary laxity in ceremonial observances. They ate and drank food which had been prohibited to the orthodox Hindus. In this regard there was sharp contrast between the migrant Nepalese and the migrants of the plains who rigidly maintained the caste system and did not shake off their orthodox ways. This distinction was noticed by Hodgson who wrote “these high land soldiers, who dispatch their meal in half and hour and satisfy the ceremonial law by merely washing their hands and face and taking off their turbans before cooking laugh at the pharisaical rigour of the Sepoys, who must bathe from head to foot, and make puja (worship) before they can begin to dress their dinner, must eat nearly naked in the coldest weather, and can not be in marching trim again in less than three hours⁷⁶.

The social stratification based on caste, group etc. among the people of hill areas, however, became secondary as priority was given much to the economic activities and development. Moreover it is one of the characteristics of every migrant society to some extent. Therefore social

mobility received a larger scope. Despite social mobility each community retained its individuality in a way at preserving its own social customs and traditions which was evident from the different institutions, particularly religious ones which also served as platforms for social gathering on festive occasion and where they tried to rehearse and keep up their ties.⁷⁷

It is found that like the migrant Hindus of plains, the migrant Nepalese in the hilly areas were Hindus by their religious belief and practices. Interestingly enough there was hardly any socio-cultural intermixation between the plainsmen and hill men. The migrant plainsmen culturally were more tied up with the plains. For instance, during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century it was found that they were regular subscribers of news papers and magazine published from Calcutta like the Englishman, The statesman, the Hindu Patriot, Sanjeevani, Amrita Bazar Patrika, Bangabasi etc⁷⁸. They never felt any interest to be assimilated with the society and culture of the hill people and vice versa. Therefore there emerged in the hill a different kind of society based on distinctiveness of culture, language and ethnicity. It must be kept in mind that the migrant plainsmen were very few in numbers compared to the hill men in the hilly region of North Bengal.

Another important point is that since the beginning of the twentieth century a community consciousness were developed among the Gorkhas of the hill region. It has to be remembered that all the migrant Nepalese were not Gorkhas. It is evident from two memorandums (letters) sent to Mahatma Gandhi, one by D.B. Chhetri, the Congress leader of Kurseong sub-division in 1946 and the other by Maharaja of Nepal in 1947. Both mentioned in their letters that in Darjeeling, there were 73648 Gorkhas out of 277049 hill men

inhabiting in the hills of the district⁷⁹. In this context one thing must be noted that, press publications, several socio-cultural associations played a significant role in building a sense of group solidarity among the Gorkhas. Almost all the news papers, periodicals published from hills and associations of the time espoused the cause of the development of the hill society. For example we can mention the name of few newspapers, periodicals, Associations and their activities- One journal / newspaper *Gorkha Khabar Kagat* started its publication in 1901. It owed its origin from 'Gorkha Bharat jiban' published by Motiram Bhatta as its editor in 1886 from Varansi (The paper however was regarded with suspicion by most of the Nepali speaking Hindus as it published parochial and proselytizing articles). Another literary journal 'Chandrika' published from Darjeeling by Dr. Parashmani as its editor during this time. It also played a crucial role in developing a group consciousness among the Nepalese of the hill. Another Nepali weekly named '*Gorkhali*' was published in 1915; it was the first Nepali weekly in India. In addition to the press and publication a number of associations were formed during this period which also promoted the cause of group interest though such organizations were purely based on socio-cultural activities and a few of them in course of time turned to political associations and changed their outlook, it should be born in mind that, there emerged no political movement based on caste race, group etc. during my period of study. But it can be said that a community consciousness were developed during this time. Gorkha League (1925), Gorkha Dukkha Nibarak Sammelan. etc. are the few examples of such associations⁸⁰.

Another important point is that as the Indian National congress had started movement to uplift the socio-economic condition of the lower caste category people, like Harijan movement during the third decade of the twentieth century, the wave of such movement touched the hill society also. As a result Parvatya Ashprishy Samity' was established in Darjeeling.

VIII

After independence and partition in 1947 unlike the other parts of Bengal the hill region did not experience the refugee influx from East Pakistan, modern Bangladesh. On the contrary it faced the huge influx of migrants from Nepal which is still a continuing phenomenon. Due to the lack of job-opportunities, scarcity of land and poverty in Nepal the Nepalese had migrated into the district of Darjeeling. It must be kept in mind that during pre-independent period the Nepalese migrated from Nepal were settled mostly in the hills of Darjeeling, but after independence the influx of migrants not only settled in the hill areas of Darjeeling but also in the Terai and surrounding Duars areas of Jalpaiguri district including neighbouring districts of West Bengal. After the Indo-Nepal treaty of 1950, peaceful understanding had been established. As a result huge number of Nepalese from Nepal infiltrated and settled in the region. Actually the Treaty granted in reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the privileges in matters of residence, ownership of property 'participation in trade commerce etc. Therefore the migration again gained a new impetus changing the demographic pattern of the region in the post partition period, which in a long run helped in the emergence of the Nepalese as a single largest caste group in the hilly portion of North Bengal⁸¹.

Another incident, which played an important role in changing the demographic pattern after Independence was the Chinese invasion to Tibet in 1950. A large number of Tibetans left their parent land and took shelter in the hills of Darjeeling; many of them started settling there permanently⁸². Thus in this way since the sixties of the twentieth century the society of the hill region of northern Bengal makes a further difference from other parts of it.

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