

Chapter III

Internal Structure of the Plainsmen

Introduction

The objective of this chapter is to depict the patterns of inter-personal relationships within each plains community and among the various plains communities. For the local communities like the Lepcha, Bhutia, and the Nepali the plainsmen constitute a single homogeneous ethnic group. Even the scholars writing on Sikkim have often referred to them as a single ethnic group. In many situations, the state government has also been found to have treated them as one community. And, finally, the plainsmen themselves have sometimes acted as such.

But it will be too naive to take the plainsmen as a single community or ethnic group. It is at least desirable that we explore it and see to what extent they really are a single ethnic group. Preliminary knowledge about them compels us to look into not only the similarities and differences among the various plains communities

but also within each of them. There is in fact a lot of scope to question the subjective and objective bases of even the identities like the Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis, and the Oriyas.

It should be pointed out here that the Marwaris and the Biharis or the Hindi-speaking group of plainsmen constitute the core of the plainsmen as a group. Other plains communities like Bengali, Oriya, Assamese, Keralite, and Punjabi are small in number and none of them is reported to have any association of their own. Therefore, it is justifiable to devote on the Marwaris and the Biharis separately from what I have called 'other plainsmen' here.

Ethnic Structure

In this section, I intend to discuss the ethnic bases of the Marwaris, Biharis, and 'other plainsmen' separately. The last group of the plainsmen do not have a common ground for ethnic relationships to build upon because they represent a number of linguistic groups, different places of origin, and even religious differences. They are also much more scattered

than it is the case with the Marwaris and the Biharis. But occupationally there is a great deal of harmony within them because most of them are servicemen. It may also be added here that an insignificant few of them are holding Sikkim Subject Certificates too. They are by and large quite highly educated and sometimes with professional training also unlike their counterparts from the Marwari and the Bihari communities. Hence, the above classification of the plainsmen into three groups is more or less tenable. But it is necessary to go into the details of each of these three major groups of the plainsmen here.

(a) The Marwaris

The word 'Marwari' refers to the people of Marwar, in Rajasthan. The local synonym for this word is 'kanya'. Their migration to Sikkim first took place during the Indo-Tibetan trade. They were engaged in supplying various materials to Tibet and in importing goods like wool, incenses, and salt from Tibet. Some of them were also engaged in trading of the local products like cardamom and orange.

With the Chinese invasion on Tibet in 1950 the trans-Himalayan trade was severely affected. And the Indo-China War of 1962 virtually put an end to this prosperous trade. It was the Marwaris who were most badly affected by the border conflicts with China which now controls Tibet also. But being born traders and being highly adaptive the closing of the border with Tibet did not succeed in crippling them forever. They did face a temporary incapacitation but soon they overcame the shock by diversifying their trading activities. But without the sacrifices of the first generation Marwari migrants to Sikkim, the new generation members could not probably achieve the success they have achieved today.

The Marwaris living in Sikkim today are broadly divided into the following four groups:

1. The Agarwals,
2. The Oswals,
3. The Maheswaris, and
4. The Jains (Sarma 1990:27-33).

The Agarwals are believed to be the descendants of the king Agar Sen whose capital was at Agroha, in Punjab. They are divided into seven-

teen and half clans. According to a legend, the origin of their clans was explained thus. Agar Sen had seventeen sons and he wanted them to marry with the eighteen daughters of another king called Basuk or Vasuki. So the eighteenth son was formed out of the body of the eldest son. Hence, the seventeen and half clans. The half clan members cannot inter-marry with the members of the seventeen full clans.

The Oswals are believed to have originated from the Rajput clans who were converted into Jainism in the second century. But they have taken their names after the town of Osi or Osian, the ruins of which are still to be found about thirty miles north of Jodhpur. Some of the Oswal clans are Bhandari, Singhi, Lodha, Mohta, and Mohnot.

The Maheswaris are said to be the descendants of the Chauhan, Parihar, and Solanki clans of the Rajputs. The name Maheswari is derived from the name of their principal god called Mahadeo or Mahesh. They have seventytwo endogamous clans and are supposed to be strict vegetarian. The

orthodox among them do not even eat the garlicks and onion.

The Jains are the followers of Mahavira who had reformed the tenets of Hinduism in the sixth century before Christ. He had named Jainism after Jina or the Victor. Jainism is divided into two sub-sects called Swatambara and Digambara.

There is no restriction on the members of one group having commensal relations with the members of another. Both cooked and uncooked food can be freely exchanged among the members of the various groups. But normally, commensal exchanges take place only between the members of close relatives and friends from within the community.

Further, the Marwari dialect which is spoken by all members of the community irrespective of their shades of Hinduism is a strong harmonizing or homogenizing factor. Whenever they come across the members of their own community, whether Agarwal, Oswal, Maheswari, or Jain, they automatically start speaking in their own dialect. It is seldom violated by any member of the community, particularly the old ones.

It is this rather than their religion or traditional dress that makes them feel and behave as one single community. Needless to say that there are conflicts and quarrels within the community but such relationships do not get the opportunity to assume an upper hand. Due to various social and political pressures and insecurity faced by them conflicts do not normally get known to the non-Marwari communities living within the same town or even neighbourhood.

(b) The Biharis

The Biharis are called so after the name of their state of origin, namely Bihar. The word 'deshwali' is often used to refer to the migrants from Bihar. The common term used to refer to them is however 'Madhise', which means plainmen but which is not always used to refer to the Marwaris as well. Hence, the use of the hyphenated expression "Kainya-Madhise" for referring to the Marwaris and Biharis together.

The Biharis have the same traditional dress as that of the Marwaris. But there are some differences too. For instance, the Bihari society in Sikkim, unlike the Marwaris, is a hierarchical

society with the Brahmins occupying the top ritual position. There is also a sizeable number of the so-called Harijans among them. The Marwaris are, on the other hand, a highly stratified society with people whose income is a few hundreds to others whose income runs into lakhs per month. Secondly, there are dialectical differences between the Maithilis and the Bhojpuris within them. However, the Bhojpuri dialect is more or less widely understood and used by the Eiharis in Sikkim.

The Biharis are slightly late migrants to Sikkim. They were initially engaged in subsidiary, trading activities and other occupations like cobblery, barbering, and shop-keeping. The occupational diversification among the Biharis is therefore more significant than among the Marwaris. Many of them who went to Sikkim after 1975 are also engaged in masonry, carpentry, and construction works by the road side. Needless to point out that some of the post-1975 migrants are also highly educated and well placed in the educational and bureaucratic set up of Sikkim. The Marwaris are

conspicuously absent either in the menial occupations or in the educational institutions.

They are different from the Marwaris in yet another matter. While the Marwaris are professed vegetarian the Biharis are not so. Of course, being Hindus, they do not eat beef but some of them do eat buffalo and pork. Among the non-vegetarian food the most common are mutton, fish and egg. Further, unlike the Marwaris, alcoholism is known to be quite popular specially among the male migrants from Bihar. They not only drink it but also sell the factory-produced alcohol.

Because of the presence of considerable social distances within the Bihari community it has not been able to impose community endogamy within Sikkim. Apart from the social distances there is a considerable economic differentiation also though it is by no means as stark as it is so in the case of the Marwaris. As a result, despite being quite numerous the spouses are to be found from their own native places and not from their members living within Sikkim. This, however, applies also to the Marwaris to a large extent.

In terms of religion, the Biharis are clearly divided into two groups - Hindu and Muslim. Despite linguistic affinity and historical similarity the cleavage between these two religious groups seen at the national level is also reflected in Sikkim. The Muslim Bihari males can be easily identified by their head-gear and the typical beard they keep. They are also reported to be beef-eaters, which is perhaps a major point of cleavage between the Hindu and the Muslim Biharis. Being Muslims, they have other cultural and religious obligations too. The Islamic texts rather than the Vedic ones define their world view. Their places of worship are different and no matter what occupations they have the religious distinctions seem to predominate any other form of interaction. However, their population being much smaller compared to their Hindu members the religious divide does not pose any threat to the pan-Bihari solidarity formation.

(c) The Other Plainsmen

There are thirteen linguistic communities falling under the category of 'other plainsmen' here. (For details, see Table 6.). Of these thirteen communities, Bengalis, Keralites, Punjabis,

and Urdu speakers are quite numerous but it is difficult to treat them either individually or as a group the way the Marwaris and the Biharis could be treated above. Since they represent so many linguistic communities the only language through which they can communicate with each other is either Hindi, Nepali, or English. Dispersed as they are in different schools, offices, hospitals, etc. a close interaction is difficult to visualize. None of these linguistic group members live in compact geographical areas as the Biharis and Marwaris do. Thus, unlike these communities, the members of the communities included under 'other plainsmen' interact with each other more as individuals than as members of a particular social or cultural group.

There is of course a universal tendency to interact with people from the same linguistic group. This is in fact more strongly evident among the members of some of these linguistic communities. And, as pointed out earlier, being mostly bachelors there is very insignificant cultural interaction among the members of these communities. It is also to be noted that, unlike the Marwaris and the

Biharis, some of the members of 'other plainsmen' have settled down with local women. This is particularly noticed about the Tamil, Malayalam and Marathi speakers in Gangtok.

Most of these communities are in fact not fit to be qualified as 'communities' in traditional sense they often are simply conglomerates of individuals having different educational, professional, economic, and religious backgrounds. It is perhaps because of this that their interaction with the local communities is more frequent, if not more intimate also. They can be quite easily identified by their physical characteristics such as complexion and facial features. But in terms of food habits, alcoholism, dress, etc. there is no clear picture that can be discerned.

Occupationally also, it is often difficult to classify the 'other plainsmen' into any distinct categories except that the Bengalis are almost entirely a service category people. No other community is so heavily dependent on the service sector as the Bengalis are in Sikkim.

In terms of religion, they are by and large Hindus though the followers of Christianity, Islamism and other religious denominations cannot be ignored. It is observed, however, that it is basically the Christians and Muslims who seem to have a clear inclination to their religious strictures. The Hindus by and large appear carefree as if it is none of their concern.

By way of concluding this section it may be stated that the plainsmen are a heterogeneous lot representing various languages, religions, cultures and historical backgrounds. In addition to such primordial differences the class distinctions are gradually becoming sharper and sharper. Such distinctions are not only witnessed at the level of the plainsmen as a whole but also within each community subsumed under this identity. Geographical or spatial spread of their members, despite their concentration in the urban areas, has further brought about communication gaps between and amongst them. Hence, the ethnic solidarity formation cannot be very different from what we have observed. The heterogeneity of their social, cultural, religious, and class composition may be hypothesized to

be a major deterrent to a successful pan-plainsmen solidarity formation. This has been illustrated in the following sections.

Ethnic Solidarity Formation (I)

In this section the discussion is confined to the intra-plainsmen solidarity formation or at the level of the constituent communities from the plains of India. Among the fourteen odd constituent communities under the umbrella term 'plainsmen', only the Marwaris and the Biharis have exhibited some solidarity. Hence, the ethnic associations of these two communities may be separately discussed here.

(a) Sikkim Agarwal Sabha

Of the four major divisions of the Marwari community only the Agarwals have a council with the above name. Its aims and objectives are reported to be to promote the interests of the Agarwals living in Sikkim and to look after their welfare. Of its several social welfare functions, maintenance of the dharamsalas, charitable dispensaries, and temples are some of them.

This Association is considered to be non-political in nature but the leaders are often reported to be courting the political leaders of the state as well as the Centre for achieving some of its objectives.

It could not be ascertained about its origin or when it was established but from the very name of this Association it is clear that this does not include all the Marwaris. But this cannot perhaps be taken as a sign of political and cultural cleavage within the Marwari society. The Agarwals being the biggest group within the Marwari community, the name of this Association was naturally kept after them. However, the other divisions of the Marwari society there are also expected to contribute to the functioning of this Association.

(b) Sikkim Bihari Kalyan Samity

This Association was established in 1986 at Gangtok. Its aims and objectives are to promote and protect the interests of the Biharis in Sikkim. Apart from the existence of this Association not much is known about its activities.

Given the fact^{that} the Bihari community is stratified and faced with linguistic and religious cleavages, this Association is not expected to be very strong. Nor is the state government expected to give it as much attention and importance as it does to the Sikkim Agarwal Sabha. The Biharis by and large have a lower economic standing than that of the Marwaris and they do not command as much of respect as the Marwaris do.

From the above two examples of ethnic associations in Sikkim not much can be inferred. In the first place, vital informations on these associations are not known to people belonging to other communities or to the common members of the same. The leaders of these associations, on the other hand, try to give a pious picture of the aims and objectives of their associations. Under the circumstances, one can only conclude that the Marwaris and Biharis at least have laid the foundations on which they can build their ethnic castles if need be. However, the potentiality of the Agarwals to do something for their welfare is certainly more than that of the Biharis. Both

have strong contacts outside the state but the sheer economic superiority of the former compels a researcher or the state government to take it more seriously than the latter.

Ethnic Solidarity Formation (II)

In this section, I would like to discuss some of the ethnic associations working in Sikkim and having a 'pan-plainsmen' character. For various reasons, details on the Rotary Club and the Lions Club in Sikkim could not be collected. These clubs are, however, basically controlled and monopolised by the businessmen from the plains of India. The names of these associations do not necessarily evoke any ethnic connotation but everyone in Sikkim knows that these are essentially the associations of the plainsmen. Let me now describe some of these associations briefly.

(a) Sikkim Byapari Sangha

The plainsmen living in Sikkim are broadly categorized into two: servicemen and businessmen. The first category of plainsmen have no association of their own which could function as a pressure group but the second category of them have an

association with the above name.

The businessmen of Sikkim were first allowed to form an association by the Palace in early 70s. It was granted basically as the expediency of time and situation demanded. It was difficult for the Palace to deal with individual trader and timely inform each of them of the changes in the rates or merchandize or other necessary trade regulations. But if there was an association of traders this would be easily taken care of. Hence, when the demand was made for recognizing this association, the Palace did not express much reservation about it.

The plainsmen in Sikkim did not have any political rights during the rule of Chogyal, as pointed out in Chapter II. But Basnet (1974) has shown that it also applied to a great number of the ethnic Nepalis there. But while the ethnic Nepalis were more vocal politically after 1940s itself, the plainsmen mustered the courage only after 1970s. Since its inception, this Sangha began to function as a presurre group though it articulated its interests mainly through personal

contact with the leaders. Some of the leaders of this Association had considerable influence over the members of the State Council and still exert their influence over the leaders of the Legislative Assembly.

It is also reported that this Association sometimes sought the help of top bureaucrats serving in Sikkim on deputation from other places of India. But it is alleged that in most cases the office bearers of this Association were concerned with the promotion and protection of their own personal business and trade interests rather than the general interest of the traders there. It was this feeling which later led some of its members to form a parallel association of the traders. The dissatisfaction about the leaders of the Sangha, particularly about their ineffective efforts to solve their licence problems, was indeed widespread.

The decision of the government taken in 1973 to abolish the excise duty on cigarettes and betel nut benefitted a large number of small traders (Sengupta 1985:131). Cigarette was earlier a mono-

poly of one or two traders. It was based on contract payment of lumpsum amount which could be made only by a handful of the traders. But this respite from the government was not enough to keep some of the members away from attacking the office bearers of the Sangha. They indeed had many problems which needed to be attended to.

As the dissatisfaction with the leaders of the Sangha grew, some of the traders formed in June 1975 another association called Sikkim Merchants' Association. According to the leaders of this new association the previous leaders had failed to capitalize on the changed situation in Sikkim after 1975.

Until the formation of this new association the Sikkim Byapari Sangha was the only medium through which communication with the state government was possible. But it was basically the multi-millionaires among them whose interest was served by the Sangha. The rich businessmen who were credited to have helped a particular political party in the 1973 mini-revolution were later given a lot of favour but the poorer among them were

given no attention (Sengupta 1985:132).

But even the Sikkim Merchants' Association has not been able to achieve things which are of vital interest to them. Some of them believe that their failure is due to the general feeling of distress among the plainsmen and the lack of cooperation of the Sikkimese government in solving their problems.

(b) Nagarik Sangharsh Samity

It was in this backdrop that the plainsmen in Sikkim formed an association with wider implications and bearing the above name in May 1977. They had begun to realize that their approach to the solution of their problems should not be as traders or businessmen but as rightful citizens of India. Thus, the new issue was the preservation of their political rights. In the very beginning the leaders complained to the Governor and the Chief Minister of Sikkim about the spread of anti-plainsmen propaganda and the growing trend towards regionalism in Sikkim. The expressed aims and objectives of this Samity were, however, to maintain communal harmony, to pledge faith in the

Constitution of India, to participate in the development of the state, and to struggle peacefully and legally for achieving and protecting their fundamental rights as Indian citizens. With regard to its membership any Indian citizen living in Sikkim could be its member though actually it was only the plainsmen who took its membership.

Whatever may be the reasons, this Association does not seem to be functioning soundly or receiving full support of the plainsmen. For instance, an annual general meeting of the members of this Association was held in March 1978 but because of the lack of quorum elections to the 9 executive posts could not take place. Further, they could not hold any election even in 1979 though in that year ad hoc committees were established at Rangpo, Singtam, and Mangan towns of Sikkim.

All this was despite the fact that its call for a strike in July 1978 in protest against the police excesses against some members of the business community was reported to be a total success (The Nation 9/8/79). Soon after this, it raised

its voice against the "Parity System". On the other hand, the Sikkim Prajatantra Congress, in its memorandum to the Governor, was reported to have demanded the retention the "Parity System" (Nagarik Adhikar 1/8/78).

In 1978, there was a widespread propaganda against the rights of the plainmen to cast votes and contest elections (The Nation 9/8/79). Posters were reportedly displayed all over the town of Gangtok, which said that "Indians should not be given any voting rights". This was alleged to have instigated the Nagarik Sangharsh Samity leaders to mobilize their resources and send memoranda to the leaders in Delhi. They even took a delegation to Delhi in July 1978 and met the then Prime Minister, the Law Minister, and the Home Minister among others and apprised them of their demand for constitutional rights in Sikkim (Nagarik Adhikar 1/8/78). They also approached Jai Prakash Narayan who was reported to have assured the delegation to write a letter to the leaders in Delhi requesting them to fulfill the demands of this Association (The Nation 24/2/79).

Some of the leaders of the Sikkim Byapari Sangha were strongly opposed to the Nagarik Sangharsh Samity from the very beginning. The former believed that the ruling party was not sympathetic to the issues raised by the Sikkim Nagarik Sangharsh Samity due to its close association with the Sikkim Janata Parishad (The Nation 17/2/79). In the Assembly election of 1979, two important members of the Samity contested as independent candidates. Though some of the prominent members of the Samity supported Dorji Dadul, the Janata Party candidate from Gangtok constituency, other members supported the plains candidate, D. P. Bhawanipuri (Sikkim Express 27/9/79).

Conclusion

From the foregoing discussion, it appears that there is not only a heterogeneity of primordial values and norms but also a heterogeneity of interests even within a particular plains community. It is a combination of these two objective and subjective factors that seems to be responsible for precluding not only a strong 'pan-plainsmen' solidarity formation but even a solidarity among the members of their constituent communities. Otherwise,

there is no reason why the various ethnic associations described above should be beset with dissensions and conflicts.

It is quite probable that some of the weaknesses of such associations are due to political pressure but without the strong sense of insecurity they have in Sikkim, it is equally probable that such associations would prove to be even less effective. Apparently, the plainsmen are geographically scattered over different towns and interspersed by the local people even within the town. But with improved transport and telecommunication facilities they can very well be in touch not only with their members within the state but also others outside it.

It boils down finally to a situation in which no matter how essential it is for the plainsmen to unite and overcome many common politico-legal disabilities faced by them it is those few rich among them whose narrow economic interests have prevailed over the common interest of the plainsmen. The few rich businessmen are seldom interested in attaining the interest of their poorer members because most of them not only have their own

interest to be protected. But such rich plainsmen often also do not have any politico-legal handicap from which most of their brethren suffer. Being first and foremost traders the leaders of the various ethnic associations described above seem to have traded even with the future of their own community.

From the point of view of local Sikkimese the emergence of the various plains associations is nothing but an encouragement they have received after Sikkim became a part of India. According to them, this historical accident has not only emboldened the plainsmen living in Sikkim but has also made many of them adamant about the cause of their people.