

## Reflections on the Demand for ST Status by Some Ethnic Groups in Darjeeling Hills

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*In the process of social formation a gradual assimilation/integration of the so called autochthons and non Aryans into the Hindu society continued until recently. But in the recent past one can notice a reverse trend where the ethno-political forces are keen in preserving their identities at the cultural level and get them recognized by the state for certain privileges or rights. The demand for recognition as Tribes (STs) by some ethnic communities in the Darjeeling hills is a case in point. The present paper offers some insights into this growing clamour of the hill people for ST status and the politics behind it.*

**Keywords:** Scheduled Tribes, ethnic groups in Darjeeling Hills, concept of tribe, demand for ST status, retribalization.

### I

Anthropological discourses on tribes and castes in India are rooted in colonial rule, particularly in late nineteenth century. H. H. Risely, a British administrator cum anthropologist propounded the thesis that a gradual Brahmanisation of the aboriginals, non-Aryan or casteless tribes continued to occur persistently in Indian Society (Risley, 1981). Talking about the Nepali speaking castes and sub-castes and communities the history is somewhat obscure and imaginary. Now with the demand of self-rule and creation of a separate Gorkhaland for the Nepalese / Gorkhas there is a need to understand their social history.

It is assumed (Subba, 2001:1) that particularly since 1866 when the region came under Bengal, several hill communities came under the umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali nation for their survival in a multi-ethnic situation confronting with diverse forces and interests. All these ethnically distinct communities thus became a part of Nepali social structure and Nepali language became their

language as well. Following the model of Nepal, in the Nepali caste (*jat*) structure of Darjeeling Hills, those different ethnic groups found places in the middle rank of the social hierarchy. They were placed below the Bahuns and Chhetris, but above the low/untouchable castes like the Kami, Damai and Sarki.

On the question of degree and nature of absorption of various ethnic groups into Nepali caste system, the 1941 Census offers the following categories in order of rank.

- a. The Nepali 'high castes' Hindus - the Bahuns, Chhetris (Khasas), and Thakuris.
- b. Those who were accorded a high caste status like the Newars and Sannyasis.
- c. The former tribes namely Gurungs, Mangars, Sunnwars and Bhujel, who were Hinduised and absorbed into the Nepali caste system.
- d. The Kirata tribes who were in the process of being absorbed into the Nepali caste society like the Rai/ Jimdar, Khambu, Yakka and Garthi.
- e. The so called low artisan and servicing communities like the Kamis, Sarkis and Damais. They were in the process of being absorbed into caste hierarchy.
- f. At the extreme end there were Tamangs and who were yet to be absorbed into the Nepali caste fold.

The different ethnic groups in terms of their degree of assimilation to Nepali caste system were ranked as follows: (i) Hinduised and totally assimilated/integrated groups as included in the above category 3, (ii) groups which were in the process of being absorbed/assimilated as observed in the case of category 4, and (iii) the groups included in the category 5 were on the way or yet to be absorbed to the caste system.

The Newars, who were ranked second in social hierarchy, originally had their own complicated caste system and social ranking in Nepal with about twenty odd discrete castes. Some of the Nepali castes like Limbus and Mangars were considered to be autochthones, although they had their origin in Nepal.

The Nepali society of Darjeeling Hills is stratified largely on the basis of caste. A large majority of the Nepalis (77%) in the 2001 Census are returned as Hindus. However, according to Subba (1992) besides the Lepchas and the Bhutias there are over nineteen endogamous groups professing different religions, speaking different languages, and holding of different positions in the social hierarchy among the people corporately identified as 'Nepalis'. Because of their numerical strength, the significance of each Nepali caste group in building a composited Nepali society is crucial. Historically, in the Nepali caste society, the different castes followed different occupations for their livelihood. In course of time, they became parts of the Nepali social structure where all the ethnic/racial groups were equally called *jat* (caste).

## II

The leaders of ethno-political organizations in Darjeeling Hills are now demanding Scheduled Tribes (STs) status since this would bring them some special privileges. These leaders prefer to call them as spokesman of *janajati*, a term officially coined for the tribes. Thus in 2005, a new demand articulated by the GNLF supremo Mr. Subhas Ghising was that the territory of Hill Council must be recognized as a Tribal State under the provision of Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. He made this demand in order to facilitate all the Nepali communities in the hills to avail of the benefits meant for the STs. So he publicly gave certain directives about 'how to be a tribal' by reviving their archaic cultural practices (Mukhopadhyay, 2007).

In recent years certain ethnic groups of Nepali ancestry are seeking to re-establish their old cultural identities and traditions (Shneiderman and Turin, 2006). They are, however, not sure how much it would be practically possible for them to revert back to their missing ancestral culture and dialect/ language! The apprehension has some substance since the communities have gone through a long process of modernization and internalization of many of the pan-Indian cultural traits.

The ST status demand has captured the collective imagination of the people in Darjeeling hills which starve of employment

opportunities and the now dominant Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM), which is controlling the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration is likely to mount pressure on the centre to expedite the process of granting ten Gorkha communities – Rai, Yaksha, Gurung, Bhujel, Newar, Jogi, Sunwar-Mukhia, Mangar, Khas and Thami the coveted constitutional status. Keeping in line of the demand of the hill people the Government of West Bengal, in a cabinet meeting on February 26, 2014, has resolved to request the Union government to recognize these ten hill communities as Scheduled Tribes (*The Statesman*, Feb. 28, 2014). One may wonder whether the state government has consulted the competent organizations like Anthropological Survey of India and Tribal Research Institute in this matter, and has done any groundwork before sending its recommendation to the Centre. Other pertinent questions are whether this recommendation was aimed at development of the communities or just a political strategy or a result of pressure politics. Who are going to be benefitted if the status is granted?

One may be curious to know – why the Gorkhas in the Darjeeling Hills are now so eager to rediscover their lost tribal identity. History reveals that since the unification of Nepal in the late 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Nepal's various indigenous 'tribes' (in colonial perception) have been incorporated within the caste hierarchy. These ethnic groups however did not belong to any tier of the classical *Varna* order of the Hindus. According to some scholars the Gorkhas made Hinduism the state religion of Nepal. They are a collective group of people, all belonging to Kshatriya (warrior) Varna and they derive their name from the Hindu warrior-saint guru Gorakhnath.

There is a view that the emigrants from India brought the local tribes of Nepal into the caste-fold converting them into Hinduism. The Gurungs and Mangars were the first to be converted. They accepted Hinduism in Toto while others are found to have accepted it only partially (Northy and Morris, 1974: 4). It is also felt that the Hinduism, which the Mongoloid Nepalese follow, does not have castes and it is closer to Shamanism. On Varna question of the Nepalese, there is a view that the three tier social ranking of the Nepalese society based on status groups i.e. *tagadhari* (wearer of sacred thread/ high caste), *matwali* (liquor consumers/ low caste), and *sanujat* (untouchables) seems more meaningful in the context

of Darjeeling Hills (for more detail see Caplan, 1970).

Based on the ethnic categorization of the Nepalis in 1941 Census, A. J. Dash in his *Darjeeling District Gazetteer* (1947) recorded the Nepali communities such as Mangar, Newar, Gurung, Limbu, Kami, Sunawar, Yakka, Sarki, Garhi, and Tamang (Murmi) as 'tribes'. The ethnic groups like Rai, Sherpa, Chettri, Sanyasi, Brahman, Bhujel, Yogi, on the other hand, were designated as 'Other Nepali Castes'. The Bhutias, Tibetans and Lepchas, mostly Buddhists or Christians by religion, were classified as 'tribes' under the broader category of 'Other Hillman'.

In the succeeding 1951 and 1961 Censuses, the castes and tribes, other than the officially listed SCs and STs were not enumerated separately. Naturally the leaders of both GNLFF and GJMM have based their demands on the 1941 Census classification. To them it is the only source to justify their claim as genuine 'tribes'. That also helps legitimize their claim in getting recognized as STs. Based on this classification they play out the 'tribal identity card' forgetting other considerations. For them, recognition as STs is the panacea to all their problems. The ethnic categorization of the people of Darjeeling Hills as offered by the 1941 Census later led to considerable confusions and controversies on the question of the actual identity of the various tribes and castes living in the area. One can hardly deny that in 1871-1941 Censuses, the authorities were not always successful in identifying caste and tribe boundaries properly/ scientifically.

All the facts noted above made the Nepalese caste system much more complex and the social position accorded to different ethnic groups was controversial. But it is true that Nepal's different indigenous communities were not in any way placed in the core of the Hindu societies of the Khas, Newar and Madhesi. Their social position was somewhat peripheral and they were designated as lowly *matwali* (alcoholic) castes.

Nepali, according to Vimal Khawas (2006: 22), is a generic term which subsumes more than fifteen ethnic groups. These ethnic groups had migrated to the area (Darjeeling Hills) during 18 - 20<sup>th</sup> centuries from Nepal and later became a part of Nepali social structure. According to Roy Burman, in addition to Bhotias and the Lepchas who were recognized as indigenous Scheduled Tribes,

there are good numbers of 'tribe like constellation' in the Darjeeling Hills who have distinct cultural traditions and organizations of their own (1961: 33). T.B. Subba has identified the hegemonic role of the Bengali population and their cultural domination over the hill communities of Mongoloid origin. He writes:

The political and cultural pressures of a numerically dominant and educationally far 'superior' Bengali 'race' forced the various communities like Gurung, Tamang, Mangar, Rai and Limbu to come under the umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali nation. Their respective identity had to be submerged in order to constitute a force strong enough to resist Bengali domination and ensure their common survival. Thus, they became a part of Gorkhali or Nepali people and Nepali language became their language as well (2001: 1).

He continued saying:

In Nepal, the Gorkha rulers were actually aware of the cultural, linguistic and other differences across communities but they were not officially recognized as separate nationalities. They were essentially treated as subjugated or conquered people who needed to be brought under the Nepali nation (*ibid*: 2).

On the question of cultural approximation of the hill communities we come across an opposite view given by Sarkar. He argues: 'Sanskritisation had been at work in the hills ever since the mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. Available historical data are capable of establishing the fact that the Mongoloid communities felt content with the Nepali caste system and quite often despised the cause of tribes' (2014: 25).

### III

Many of the ethnic groups in the Darjeeling Hills have recently acquired an interest in being listed and labelled as Scheduled Tribe. Leaders of political movements in the area at different times have favoured the term 'Gorkha' over 'Nepali' to differentiate between the Nepali citizens of India and Nepal. In the last three decades, the political forces operating in the hills have not only halted the

absorption of the different ethnic communities of Mongoloid origin into the wider society but have to some extent reversed the process. Thus the list of ethnic communities granted ST status has become longer. Originally there were only four Scheduled Tribes, namely, the Bhutia, Lepcha, Sherpa and Yolmo in the Darjeeling Hills, but in 2002 the Tamangs and the Limbus were added to the list. Recently the leaders of the newly formed *Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha* (GJMM) are pressing the demand for ST status to ten more ethnic groups.

Earlier Subhas Ghisingh, the GNLFF supremo had demanded autonomy under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution for Darjeeling Hills and at the same time demanded ST status for all communities living in Darjeeling hills, irrespective of their individual ethnic/ caste identity. Following Ghisingh's line, recently another newly created political platform called *Bharatiya Gorkha Janajati Manyata Samiti* (BGJMS) has demanded that all the people of Nepali origin (including Bahuns and Chhetris) should be recognized as Scheduled Tribes.

On the whole, several hill communities are now aspiring for ST status in order to avail of the benefits of reservation. The power and status elements are also involved in the issue. But the selective granting of ST status is clearly a part of governance strategy of 'divide and rule' which might create discord among the communities and unsettle the Gorkha unity (identity movement). This may also eventually lead to social dissonance far more violent than the Gorkhaland agitation. Following Beteille one can doubt if this assertion of tribal identity in the political domain can be described as retribalization in any meaningful sense (Beteille, 1997: 78).

Darjeeling experience leaves with us several questions on the very highly cryptic concept of 'tribe'. Article 342 of the Indian Constitution empowers the President to draw up a list of STs in consultation with the government of each State. But it nowhere defines the word 'Tribe'. Although the Constitution is quite clear on the question of eligibility for entry in the tribal fold it is quite surprising that why the definition of tribe was left vague. This lack of clarity on the definition allows power-politics in the process raising demands for and granting of ST status to more and more communities, and which ultimate defeats the very philosophy of

protective discrimination.

Absence of a clear definition of 'tribe' has made the identification has left room for manipulation in identifying new communities as ST. Beteille has pointed out the inadequacies in the conventional concept of tribes in the Indian context. For him, in contemporary India the 'tribe' of an Anthropologist's 'ideal type' can be rarely found. Now the 'tribe' is more of an administrative category. Moreover, there is a lack of fit between what Anthropology as a discipline defines as 'tribe' and what the Anthropologists are obliged to describe as 'tribes' (1991: 59). The other reality is in conceptualizing tribes in India, the scientific or theoretical considerations were never allowed to displace administrative or political ones.

The tribe in India is both a legal and political category since only with the approval of the government a community can attain ST status. On this issue Xaxa has observed that the question of tribes in India is closely linked with political and administrative considerations. This partly explains the reason behind the steady increase in the number of STs in India (1999: 3589). It is paradoxical yet true that the number of communities deemed to tribes has increased along with the modernization and development in India. Thus while in 1950 there were only 212 officially recognized STs in India, the number is now estimated around 700, of which 73 belong to the category of Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs).

Now if the Indian State endorses the demands of the hill leaders for granting ST status to another ten ethnic groups (a demand that has already been endorsed by the West Bengal Government) their total number would increase to 16 in the hills. The share of the hill tribes to total ST communities of the State would then go up to 28 per cent. The political angle of the issue is rooted in the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) agreement where both the state government and the GJMM have endorsed the demand of all the ethnic communities (excepting the communities which have been recognized as SCs or OBCs) for ST status. One fundamental question is who are going to benefit from this inclusion of new communities in the list of STs? Should the State surrender to this pressure politics without assessing the condition of the aspirant communities objectively? It is true that the State has an obligation to periodically identify and recognize some deserving

groups as tribes. But it is expected that it has to be done scientifically. Otherwise it may develop certain vested interest in many ethnic communities who do not deserve the ST status. And it would be difficult to arrest the trend because from the beginning the list of Indian tribes while preserving the vagueness in the definition. This is not to say that those engaged in drawing up lists of Indian tribes did not have their own conceptions of tribe, but these conceptions were neither clearly formulated nor systematically applied (Beteille, *op.cit.*: 59).

#### IV

In the Darjeeling situation, the demand of recognizing several ethnic groups as STs has less to do with primitivism, indigeneity or autochthonous status than it does with ethnic discreetness and cultural distinctiveness for gaining material or political advantages. This certainly epitomizes a kind of 'neo-tribalism'. As we see, recently the three distinctive Nepali SC communities have already asked for inclusion in the category of STs. Nepali upper castes like Bahuns and Chhetris are also in the fray.

In 2004, the GNLFF leadership demanded of Sixth Schedule status for Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). For adding strength to the demand there was a move to ethicize community identities and to turn to animism and follow several other archaic practices. So there is an apprehension that any attempt to include the people of Nepali origin in the category of ST en-masse may turn to be counterproductive. Eventually it may lead to fierce rifts and violent ethnic conflicts in hills in near future. Moreover, as Atal asserts, any attempt on the part of ethnic leadership to insist on retention of the primitive traits is nothing more than aspiring to keep certain groups backward for all times (2008: 449). They should therefore refrain from playing the card of what may be called 'politics of backwardness'.

The Constitution has given to the tribal identity a kind of definiteness it lacked in the past. It has also sealed the boundaries between tribes and non-tribes which were 'fuzzy' in pre-British India (Chakraborty, 1995: 3376). Census enumerations, however, give us information on discrete identities which are used by the

state for distributive justice. As fallout, tribal identity not only enjoys legal (or Constitutional) sanction but political and material interests prompt the ST groups to maintain and strengthen that identity. That has certainly halted the process of 'tribal absorption', which had once happened.

We often come across conflicting information about the size of the hill communities, their economic and their social conditions in media. At a time when more or less every community is aspiring for ST status any current survey data about their population, education, occupation, income, nutrition and overall condition are bound to be dubious. There is every possibility of getting some kind of concocted data if the entrusted agencies/organizations work as willing tools in the hands of government in power. The academicians/scholars often shy off handling such issues which are politically sensitive. They are often denied the responsibility of preparing objective reports on the condition of the communities aspiring for ST status.

## V

Politics of culture in Darjeeling hills of today is showing divergent trends. On the one hand, there is a call for Gorkha (Nepali) unity, while, on the other, the ethnic communities, the major political players and the State government are demanding ST status with the hope that they can draw political dividends out of their actions. The ethnic communities look for new opportunities for the younger generation as ST status, if granted, would bring them some special benefits, especially in the field of education and employment. The call for revival of primitive cultural practices is a ploy to justify the claim for tribal status.

One may wonder whether the communities asking for ST status are really qualified for the same! Or, what objective yardsticks one should follow before granting them tribal status? As a matter of fact, many of these communities hardly possess any 'primitive traits' and are very much in the process of modernization. They neither lack competitive spirit nor are they egalitarian in their social formation. We do not have sufficient empirical data to categorize these ethnic communities in Darjeeling Hills as 'backward' or

'forward'. Granting of ST status to new groups could create new space of competition and conflict not only among these groups but also among the new ST groups and the already existing ST groups. The consolidation of tribal identity might impact upon the Gorkha identity negatively.

The latest National Tribal Policy (2006) has directed the State to take necessary steps in arresting the increasing demands from new communities for inclusion in the list of STs by rationalizing the 'process of scheduling'. If the State really cares for the backward communities it should invest more on human resources development and creation of opportunities. Alongside capacity building the strategy of development should be on enhancing the control of these communities on the material resources so that they can take advantages of the market-induced opportunities. The politics of culture in the hills which all the major players resort is a step in self-deception. The State and the major political players should play their part in saving the hill society from the process called 're-tribalisation'.

### **Note**

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