

Khas-kura Nepali and Cultural Consolidation in Darjeeling Hills: A Genesis

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Abstract: *With the opening of Tea Industries by British tea planters gradually altered the racial composition of Darjeeling hills. Immigration of plantation labor hailing from Nepal had been a major factor of the changing of racial composition of Darjeeling hills. Multi-ethnic Nepali community became the majority people in Darjeeling hills. The preponderance of Nepali in Darjeeling hills, the Nepali or Khas-kura speaking people gradually conscious to unify and consolidate on linguistic basis. An attempt has been made to search the emergence of culture, literature and the process of cultural Consolidation of the Nepali or Khas-kura speaking people in Darjeeling hills.*

Keywords: Culture, Darjeeling hills, Immigrants, Khas-kura

The hills of Darjeeling district is well known today for its sensitive movement. The political identity of this area was raised by the great majority of the inhabitants who rely more and more upon Nepali dialects and languages. An attempt has been made to show the emergence of the Nepali people as a separate cultural group. During the rule of East India Company and subsequently during the regime of British Indian Government the economic and political cases radically altered the racial composition of the population of the hills. In 1835 when this forest tract was given as a token of friendship to the East India Company by the ruler of Sikkim it was populated by aboriginal Lepchas.¹ In later years the Tibetan dominated over the Lepchas. At the outset of the Company's rule there was no Nepali population in Darjeeling. In the seventies of the nineteenth century Nepalese formed only 34 percent of the population of the district.² In 1839, Dr. Campbell, a British Resident in Nepal was transferred to Darjeeling as superintendent. He converted this forest tract into a sanatorium. In 1866 Kalimpong was annexed to Darjeeling from Western Duars. With this change Darjeeling district reached its present shape. However, real development of Darjeeling hills systematically started from the second half of the 19th century when commercial Tea plantation was started in this region. Tea industries brought in large number of immigrants from Nepal to work as labourers. In the regiments of the British East India Company Gorkha or Nepali soldiers were enlisted from 1815 and in the tea gardens Gorkha or Nepali labourers worked from 1865.³ About the middle of the 19th century particularly after the Anglo-Nepal War (1814-16) Darjeeling became a

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great recruiting ground for the British army. The brave, loyal and hardworking Chhetris, Mangars, Gurungs and Thakuries (broadly called Gorkhas) were found very suitable for military careers. By the close of the first decade of the 20th century as employment opportunities opened up in the tertiary sector led to further Nepali immigration. In between 1866 and 1881 Nepali population increased by eight times and in between 1881 and 1941 Nepali population increased by three times. In 1901 it was found that 61 percent of the population of Darjeeling was of Nepali origin. According to the census of 1941 and 1991 Nepali formed respectively 86.8 percent and 94 percent population of Darjeeling.

Due to immigration Darjeeling hills became a polyglot or mixed population of Lepchas, Tibetans, Bhutias and Nepalese. Darjeeling hills became a polyglot due to different people speaking various dialects. As Darjeeling hills gradually were developing immigration also considerably increased. No less than 19 different dialects were spoken in Darjeeling hills.⁴ The original inhabitants, probably Lepchas were rapidly outnumbered by settlers from Nepal and Sikkim. The Lepchas who were the aboriginal inhabitants were not eager to get the opportunities in tea industries or to join in the British army. However, Lepchas have a language of their own called Rong –ring. Tibetan is spoken by the Bhutias. The immigrated various Nepal tribes like Gurung, Limbu, Khambu, Sunawar, Mangari and Murmi used their own languages in the hills. Though there were multi-ethnic Nepali community majority of the inhabitants used khas-kura Nepali as mother tongue different tribes hailing from Nepal like Newars, Mangars, Limbus, Khambus usually use Khas-kura Nepali for communication outside their immediate kin-groups.⁵ Bhutias and Lepchas who have their own mother tongues are generally found to be bilinguals and they freely use khas-kura Nepali in their linguistic communication with the people not belonging to their own ethnic groups. It is to be noted that nearly one fifth of the whole population speak khas i.e Nepali Hindi.⁶ Khas was a natural form of Hindi spoken by the Khas tribe of Nepal who obtained it from the numerous Brahman and Rajput refugees in Nepal. The Gurkhas of Nepal used to speak the language that had been brought from India between 1200 A.D to 1500 A.D.⁷ The Khas had a large admixture of Aryan blood belonging to the proud military order of Nepal, which had adopted the title chettri as a caste name. The khas or chettri, the Mangars and the Gurungs were three dominant tribes of Nepal, which overthrew the Newar dynasty of Nepal in 1769. Since the overthrow of the Newar dynasty in Nepal, Khas or khas-kura as it also called (kura merely being an affix meaning speech) had gradually spread throughout Nepal and beyond its borders. Khas-kura gradually ousted the various tribal dialects, and became current as a lingua franca both in the principality of Nepal and the polyglot district of Darjeeling.⁸ Due to the increasing ascendancy of Nepali or khas-kura over the other languages in the hills there emerged Nepali linguistic and cultural hegemony. Prithinarayan Shah, the tenth ruler of Nepal in his regime issued an order to use uniform language i.e. khas-kura as state language of Nepal. As Darjeeling hills became populated mostly by Eastern Nepal, Nepali speakers form the largest single group in the Darjeeling

hills. The Tibeto-Burman group of the Sino-Tibetan speakers like Lepcha, Tibetan, Bhutia, Sherpa has decreased progressively from the beginning of the 20th century because of the adoption of Nepali dialects.⁹ The phenomenal spread of the Nepali language is attributable mainly to its adoption by several Tibeto-Burman linguistic groups forsaking their own tongues. By this way the Nepalese became a large, organized and vigorous ethnic and linguistic group as numerous small groups of other ethnic stock began to be known as Nepali.¹⁰ As Nepali or khas-kura speakers form the largest single group in the Darjeeling hills they realized the importance of the khas-as the best possible choice under the circumstances. Thus among the hill people of the district, especially among the Nepalese extraction, there was a persistent demand for declaring Nepali as a language for official use and for medium of education.¹¹

The preponderance of Nepalese in Darjeeling hills, Nepali or khas-kura speaking population gradually conscious of unifying and of consolidating on linguistic basis the khas-kura speaking people. The first outcome of the Nepalese consciousness was through the language, culture and literature. It is to be noted that in Darjeeling hills Ganga Prasad Pradhan was the great Nepali pioneer in the late 19th century for the cause of Nepali language. He had started a Nepali press and was bringing out periodicals, news, letters etc. In 1901 he published a newspaper "Gorkhe" from Darjeeling which vigorously inspired the khas-kura Nepali people to ventilate their views in their own language. Macfarlane, the British official, encouraged the Nepali or Khas-kura language as the same was similar to Hindi and having the same alphabets and could easily be available from other parts of British India without too much of effort. Later Mrs. Graham of the Scottish Mission introduced Khas-kura Nepali as the medium of instruction in her primary school. Between 1917 to 1927 most of the Indian primary schools in the hill areas of Darjeeling adopted khas-kura Nepali as the medium of instruction. In 1883 a branch of All India Arya Samaj was opened at Chowk Bazar. By this organization the Nepalese people not merely spread Vedantic Hinduism, but tried to promote Nepalese history, culture, language and literature since its members were mostly Nepalese.¹² In this context it is to be mentioned that in Colonial India when as a whole the people of India were unable to form a nation wise organization, the Nepali speaking people tried to unify them on linguistic basis. The earnest efforts of the Nepali speaking people could be found very soon and for the cultivation of Nepali language and literature a good number of literary organizations were grown up in Darjeeling hills. In this connection it is quite pertinent to mention the attitude of the Colonial Government towards the people of Darjeeling hills. As Tea industries gradually developed in Darjeeling hills it flourished the British economy which was mostly dependent upon the Nepali labourers. So the Colonial Government paid attention to Nepalese social and economy and showed negligence towards the natives of the Darjeeling hills. It is quite evident from the Annual Administrative Report of the Bengal presidency (1871-72), which stated that the Government had done little or nothing for the instruction of the Lepchas and the

Bhutias.¹³ However, in 1918 a notification of Calcutta Gazette was published on July 24th which recognized Nepali as a vernacular language in education. Before this notification till 1911 Lepcha language was official Language in Darjeeling hills which is severally claimed by the Lepchas.¹⁴ In the 20th century the British Government passed some acts in favor of the retired military Nepali personnel. Of the laws one of the laws was that Darjeeling district was declared a non-regulating district i.e. Acts and Regulation did not come into force unless they were specially extended to it. The administration of the district was vested in the Governor in Council under Deputy Commissioner and Assistant Commissioner. In that time restriction was imposed upon purchasing of land in Darjeeling. Because land of the district was occupied by the departments of Government or had been granted by Government of private persons or public bodies or a variety of conditions and the tenants had no rights to transfer or sublet lands held by them without the permission of the Deputy Commissioner. Act was passed that except hill people land could not be purchased by other people.¹⁵ However, the non-hill people could get land only through lease and Bengal Tenancy Act did not apply to any part of the District. Most of the lands of Darjeeling district were under Khasmahal or the owner of the lands was Government. The British Indian Government distributed these lands to the Gurkha solders of the British Army.¹⁶ This was one of the facts of the increasing population of Darjeeling hills. Besides this in the late 20th century due to the political disturbances in Assam and Meghalaya, the Nepalese of those areas migrated in Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri district.

Thus, in Darjeeling hills the promotion and cultivation of Nepali language and literature started. Educated Nepalese took the initiative to make conscious of the language. On that line the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan of Judge Bazaar Darjeeling was established in 1924.¹⁷ The aim of this organization was to promote and cultivate of Nepali language, culture and literature in Darjeeling hills. Similarly very soon The Nepali Sahitya Parishod was also established with the same aim and functions. In 1925 the Government of Bengal declared that khas-kura was recognized as the medium of education in Darjeeling hills.¹⁸ Prior to this event, Mahatma Gandhi, the popular mass-leader belonging to Indian National Congress, in Nagpur session of Indian National Congress had given his proposal in 1920 for the adoption of khas-kura Nepali language for Darjeeling hills.¹⁹ The declaration of Bengal Government was however, vehemently protested by the Lepchas and Bhutias.²⁰ In 1927 the Bengal Government recognized khas-kura. This official recognition created an aspiration among highly- educated Nepali speaking population in the Darjeeling hills.

The gradual recognition of Nepali/ Gurkhali/ Khas-kura language became an established language in Darjeeling hills. On the other hand native languages were gradually vanishing from the arena of Darjeeling hills. The Gorkha Dukh Nivarak Sammelan was founded in 1932 at Darjeeling for rendering all kinds of social service to

the poor Nepalese of Darjeeling. One of the avowed objectives of that Organization was to eradicate illiteracy and promote education and cultural consciousness amongst the educationally backward Nepalese.²¹ In 1934 on 23rd December the khas-kura Nepali speaking people of Nepali, Lepcha and Bhutia communities formed an organization Hill people's Social Union through a conference to consolidate the people in Darjeeling hills.²² The organization became a symbol of the hills integrity. After the formation of Hill people's Social Union Nepalese nationalism took birth in the hills and gradually disappearing the other languages spoken in the hills. The integrity of the hills revealed through the monthly periodical of the organization named NEBULA. By this way the khas-kura speaking Nepali people in Darjeeling hills recognized them as Gurkha and khas-kura Nepali language came to be known as Gurkhali language. Following the khas-kura/ Gorkhali language there emerged 'All India Nepali Language Organization'. The organization by and by persistently demanded for Nepali as official language. This demand gradually deepened to be more after independence. Due to the demand an enquiry committee was formed that had stated that as the overwhelming majority of the people in the hill areas speak Nepali, the District should be recognized as a bilingual one and both Nepali and Bengali should be recognized as the District's regional languages.²³ In 1956 the 'All India Nepali Language Organization' had started movement for the recognition of Nepali language in the hills. In the meantime in 1964 the Nepali Sahitya Adhyayana Samiti was established in Kalimpong. The Samiti published a quarterly periodical called Hamro Sanket.

The gradual demand for the recognition of Nepali as the medium in the hills resulted in educational field. In 1962 North Bengal University gave permission to the undergraduate level to start khas-kura Nepali. In 1976 Post Graduate degree course started in Nepali language in North Bengal University. However, the most remarkable event was that in 1976 during the tenure of Suniti kumar Chatterjee's president-ship of Sahitya Academy Nepali language was recognized by the Sahitya Academy. A committee was formed of ten members constituted Nepali language Advisory Committee in 1976 led by Parashmani Pradhan. This was the history of the development of Nepali language in Darjeeling hills by consolidating different languages speaking people. However, by the late twenties of the 20th century social workers of Nepali Association, Bhutia Association, Lepcha Association and Gorkha dukh Nivarak Sammelan went round organizing libraries and literacy centers in Darjeeling hills. The gradual demand raised by the khas-kura speaking people in Darjeeling hills achieved in 1992 when constitution of India gave recognition to the Nepali language by the 71st amendment in the 8th schedule. On 20th August was a historic day in 1992 celebrated by the Nepalese as 'Nepali Bhasha Manyata Diwas'. The consolidation of Nepali language and literature in Darjeeling hills in the long time laid the foundation of separate political consciousness.

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