

CHAPTER – IV

4.1 Cultural Revivalism among the Khambu Rais: Contexts, Issues and Processes

In case of Darjeeling hills, as its history suggest, micro cultural identities existed in a submerged form and never became assertive until the 1990s. Again during the early nineties some length of time was spent on reformulating what was understood as ‘culture about to be lost’. So soon the effort on the part of cultural experts who built up some linkages with the organizational mobilization started for rewriting, rearranging and reviving what little was left to be preserved. As such the process of revivalism did involve a lot of borrowing from Eastern Nepal where, it is believed, most of their rites and rituals are still practiced in unadulterated forms. Thus the additions of festivities like *sakewa* and *sakela* as the core practices of the Khambus of Darjeeling hills were actually drawn from the original tradition of the Khambus in and around Eastern Nepal. But the Nepali society that was formed in Darjeeling had gradually shifted from many traditional cultural practices while some rituals are still practiced by a handful few. The Nepalese of Darjeeling, including the Khambus have to experience different issues like that of language (Nepali), nationality (whether an Indian or not?) etc. Thus their attendance towards their originality gained little attention where ‘being one and same’ in a new system was considered as more important. Hence the reality of festivities like *sakewa* and *sakela* no doubt found its place in the agenda of the Khambu organization, but the initiation of the same here in Darjeeling became purely for expressing a separate identity. Instances of wide celebration of *sakela* and *sakewa* thus became one of the tools to justify one’s cultural authenticity and exclusivity in the years following 1990s.

In fact, the way ‘tribe’ in India is understood and identified as a category, particularly in the sphere of administration, it is quite obvious that communities with some peculiarities in their social structure, rites and rituals would be tempted to raise the claim of tribal status. It is in this context claim of tribal status by communities like Khambu Rais, who have been harping on their micro identities since the 1990s, seems to be anything but obvious. Hence, the mobilization of the communities like Khambus

(under the banner of Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan) and others within the larger Nepali fold shared a common pattern of following ‘returning to a past’ like phenomena. Community associations considered tribe and Hinduism as two dichotomous percepts, and in their zeal to portray the communities (including the Khambus) as ‘authentic tribes’ they attempted to shed off their association with Hinduism. This anti-Hindu slur was a cardinal feature of *Janajati* movement that had begun during the same period at the other side of the border, Nepal. Interestingly, in most cases ground reality reflected the intermixture of Hinduism and tribal traits in the life processes of the common Khambus in Darjeeling. While the codification of Hindu law in the *Muluki Ain* or in the *Divya Upadesh* had entangled ethnic configurations in Nepal’s socio-political reality, the same was however, not true in case of Darjeeling hills.

Earlier the sense of marginalization in diasporic land (India) had provided them a necessary reason to fight for a single identity where being ‘Gorkha/Nepali’ was more significant. This identity is still relevant with which people identify themselves while interacting outside of Darjeeling but the emergence of sub-identity – like that of Khambu Rai – within the larger ‘Gorkha/Nepali’ identity has its reference to the changed socio-political environment of contemporary Darjeeling hills. The events of the national and international importance like the introduction of Mandal Commission Report by the government of India in the early nineties and the declaration of the international decade of the World's Indigenous People (1995-2004) by the United Nations in 1993 impacted the course of socio-political development, in general and the dynamics of community relations in the hills in particular. In addition to this the *Janajati Andalon* led by the ethnic communities in Nepal in 1990 also provided a necessary background and context for the politicization of community identities in the Darjeeling hills to come up with their issues using culture as their focal point. In addition, the proliferation of ethnic identities in Nepal and the recognition of ethnic languages such as Gurung, Mangar, Sunuwar, Tamang, Newari, Khambu Rai (Bantawa), and Sherpa as the official languages of Sikkim in 1997 also had its spillover effect in Darjeeling hills (Chhetri 2016: 2). The associative connections between the community organizations of Nepal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim have also contributed in the consolidation of micro-identity politics in such a manner that the larger issue of statehood politics and especially the demand of Gorkhaland seems to have faded away.

It should be noted that the tribal identity issue began to take shape in Darjeeling at that point in time when two major claims of Darjeeling politics got more or less settled. First was the demand of Gorkhaland that indeed unleashed a fierce battle against the state but was restored through the establishment of a sub-state level autonomous administrative arrangement known as Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988. And the second major success was reached in 1992 when the Nepali language was recognized as one of the scheduled languages (Eighth Schedule) of the Indian Constitution.

It is interesting to note that the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) led Gorkhaland movement of the 1980s in Darjeeling hills and SDF led Sikkimese politics that campaigned against high-caste Hindu political dominance from 1993 in Sikkim were the two models that inspired the Mongol National Organisation (MNO) to emerge as a major political force in Eastern Nepal (Hangen 2012: 11). The emergence of ethnic activism based on micro identities and mobilization in Darjeeling cannot be considered as an isolated phenomena. However, this should be noted that while political eventualities in contiguous areas like Darjeeling and eastern Nepal did share a coinciding temporality but at the ideological level they differed. In Nepal the *Janajati* aspiration grew up against the upper caste hegemony and with an anti Hindu urge besides there were other factors too but in Darjeeling tribal identity issue started gaining political clout not exactly with an anti-caste/ anti Hindu agenda. Hence it would be too naïve to maintain that Nepal's *Janajati* politics led towards the growth of tribal identity politics in Darjeeling hills, although it has been a complementary factor. Community organizations in Darjeeling did maintain relationship with their counterparts in Nepal. Scholars like Sara Shneiderman has talked about 'cross-border feedback loop' through which, she argued, community organizations of Darjeeling did maintain their transnational connections and also taken help and advices from the Nepal based community organizations in order to produce community consciousness regarding cultural affairs as potential mobilisational resources across the border. The agents of the feedback loop are the communities themselves (though Shneiderman did notice this amongst the Thangmis in particular) who moved back and forth and engage with others across the collectivity (Shneiderman 2015: 19).

4.2 Birth of the Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS)

Evolving through a series of events, the demand for Scheduled Tribe (ST) status in Darjeeling hills has restructured the cultural fabric of the hills. It has unleashed a new rigour to retrace the historical lineage of one's own identity, refurbish language, literature and other cultural practices (Chettri 2017: 86). Consciousness of community identity or what they realized through their cognition as survival of their self-rooted in-group is not a new phenomena but how this happened and more specifically how this complemented with popular imagination on the one hand and political mobilization on the other is what that merits attention. Tracing the background of the community like Khambu Rai of Darjeeling hills in Eastern part of Nepal have strengthen the cause of their mobilization in Darjeeling that historically represented a totally different socio-political context. The cultural revivalism among the Khambu Rais, which seemed to be a recent phenomenon, had fostered through the very establishment of their organization in the 1990s. Since inception Khambu Rai organization(s) worked extensively to restore cultural heritage by collecting myth of descent, history, language and literatures, social and religious customs and a distinctive culture of the Rai community. These movements were further augmented by the innate desire to be recognized as indigenous groups of Darjeeling. Driven by the quest to re-inscribe their belongingness in the national fabric ethnic associations selectively accumulated cultural practices and utilized them to project an objectified image of tribal past through meticulously designed performances (Chhetri 2016: 5). In an attempt to institutionalize the cultural specificities of the Khambu Rais in the form of an organization, *Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan* (KKRSS) was established almost three decades ago. The tribal phenomena in the hills although cannot be studied as an isolated individual case of the Khambus alone. The platform like Bharatiya Gorkha Janjati Manyata Samiti (BGJMS) acted as the united body of all the hill communities aspiring for tribal status. It did receive encouragement and support from the then supremo of DGHC Subhas Ghising, who did not want isolated tribal identities to emerge from within the Gorkha community and considered this as a possible threat to the Gorkha identity. Despite of Ghising's initiatives individual community organizations did flourish and endorsement of tribal status claim by respective communities did happen in the years ahead.

The role and part of the ethnic leaders or elites are notable as they helped sustain and expand the organizational activities in structured manner and gave

continuity to the existence of the respective organizations regardless of many ups and downs. Thus consolidation and maintenance of necessary connection between the leadership and common mass and keeping alive the expectation that recognition as ST is still a possibility, especially at times of extreme despair, were some such functions accomplished by the organizations. Hence the demand of tribal status made the respective communities feel, realize and act like distinctive communities with their cultural ‘givens’ rooted in the primitive practices, but this was emphasized as soon as aboriginality discourse increasingly being seen as a matter of exclusive treatment and privilege. This realization was based on the experiences of both the success of Limbus and Tamangs (who became successful in achieving the ST status) and the failures of Gurungs, Rais, Magars among others to attain the recognition as STs. Driven by a quest to revive their lost culture and tradition these ethnic associations started to analyze past records, published ethnic literature, and made frequent visits to Nepal to recover their authentic history and genealogy (Chhetri 2016: 2).

4.2.1 Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS): Organisational Set Up

Revivalism of the Khambu culture and tradition basically happened at the initiative of the organization known as Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS) that was established through the initiatives of few Khambu Rai intellectuals. The initial journey began with the three day Kirat Utsav that was organized in the town hall of Darjeeling during 27th - 29th of October, 1994. This program was a milestone in the way mobilization among the Khambu (Rai) community did spread. Khambus from different parts of Darjeeling district started taking membership of the organization which at that point of time was not even formally established. First and foremost, an intensive membership drive was conducted and organized by the zonal constituencies and it was finally decided that a central organization is needed to be established to dispense responsibilities among the stakeholders spread throughout the district. The founding members including the office bearers of the KKRSS, who emerged out of these eventualities, were from different places of Darjeeling hills like President Sri B.B Rai (Mirik), Vice President Sri Rudra Kumar Rai (Haridas Hatta, Darjeeling), Major B. K Rai (Rangbul), Prime Secretary Sri Ram Kumar Rai (Chandmari), Assistant Secretary Sri R.D Rai (Singmari), Cashier Sri Bharat Prakash Rai (Haridas Hatta), Sri Gajendra Rai (Haridas Hatta), Sri Tarakumar Rai, Sri C.K Rai, Sri Gopal Rai, Sri Bijay Kumar Rai, Srimati Sujati Rani Rai, Advisor Sri Hemu Rai, Sri C.R Rai, and Sri Tika Prasad

Rai. The body then was known as Kirati Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (Khambu was added later).

Within the six months of its formation a letter (dated 16th May 1995 vide appendix for the copy of the same) was sent to the Government (both to the Central Government and to the State Government) for the inclusion of Khambu (Rai) and Yakha (Dewan) in the list of Scheduled Tribes. At that point of time Khambus (Rai) as well as Yakkha (Dewan) and Limbu (Subba) were under the same organizational banner of Akhil Kirat Chumlung Association. Thus the appeal for the tribal status for Yakkha, Limbu and Khambu was made jointly through this organization and later when a Report (on criteria) was being asked from the governmental side it was not possible for the Limbus to give the same on behalf of the Khambus and Yakkhas. Some office bearers of the KKRSS (unwilling to be identified) did share that the Khambus were kept in a dark about the Government letter regarding their inclusion in the Tribal list. Later when the problem was realized the Khambus (Rai) were further given fifteen days to submit their report. In spite of the submission of the report nothing as such came out as an outcome and the process of submitting memorials continued.

The process of formation of the organization and the mobilization associated with it continued in Kalimpong after two years i.e. in 1996. Four years later on 26th July 2000, Kalimpong branch of the KKRSS was established formally in the Parasmanni haat bazaar. Within the jurisdiction of the district of Darjeeling the branches at various places like Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik, Siliguri, Bagdogra, and the adjoining areas of Dooars and Jalpaiguri were activated. Since then the process has been continuing. Organizational initiatives were undertaken by the Khambus of these regions to form branches of KKRSS at the level of villages one after another. Besides the organization kept close contact with the Khambu Rai organizations of other places like Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh and Kirat Rai Association of Shillong, Assam, Meghalaya, Dehradun, Uttarakhand as well as of Kathmandu, Nepal. Today the organization has a central committee/apex body at Darjeeling. Till date (till the last visit of the researcher in October 2019) all the zonal offices spread throughout the District of Darjeeling, like Kalimpong, Kurseong, Mirik, Siliguri and Bagdogra zones were functional. Even in the adjoining areas of Dooars and Jalpaiguri Zones they have been activated. Each of the zonal offices looked after their Branch Offices while the branch offices supervised the

activities of similar area offices (KKRSS Manifesto, as collected from the office of the KKRSS, undated document).

Under Kalimpong subdivision (Kalimpong has recently been declared as a district), there are three blocks with three different chairpersons: Kalimpong block I (Chairman Meghraj Rai), Kalimpong block II (Chairman Takendra Rai, Munsong) and Kalimpong block III (Chairman Nisan Das Rai). The leadership keeps on shuffling as per the organization's mutual understanding. Each of the blocks has their respective Chairpersons and Secretaries and under them there were village level branches (in each block). Darjeeling looked after Kurseong (there is Kurseong Mahakuma Samiti), Mirik has a separate regional Samiti, Rimbik [though a block but has a Chetriya (regional) Samiti] and next was the Terai branch like M.M. Terai and Bagdogra. Under Jalpaiguri (which has a separate Central Committee) comes under Salugara area (in the vicinity of Siliguri town). The apex body of the whole organization which is in Darjeeling has its Chairman Rtd. D.S.P. Tara Rai and General Secretary Binita Khambu Rai.

The various targets set by the Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan organisations include issues like teaching the Khambu language and literature, establishment of *mankhims*, establishment of Khambu bhavan, library, museum, etc. The Khambu organizations always aspired to unify all the Khambus for which continuous efforts were made to establish a network among the Khambus worldwide. Some of the objectives of the organizations as spelt out in their official manifesto are:

- i. The establishment of *Mangkhims* and propagation of religious life.
- ii. The establishment of Khambu Bhavan wherein there may be an office, library, museum, meeting hall and most importantly accommodation for out-of-station members (at a nominal fee) and guests.
- iii. In the educational field: a) Able and deserving students, from middle school (class v) level to post graduate (college level), to be awarded financial grants. b) Existing schools to be approached for the inclusion of teaching the Khambu language and literature with a view to opening a Khambu institution in the future. c) Talented children will also be given special incentives in the field of performing arts.
- iv. Towards the growth and development of the members: a) Private vocational coaching institutes are to be contacted to find their requirement for sponsoring

deserving candidates for the state and central services. b) Entrepreneurs in the fields of Horticulture, Agriculture, Floriculture, Animal Husbandry, etc. will be sponsored for training in their desired field. c) Khambus interested in research work in Khambu culture or publications of their works are to be invited to present their credentials in the furtherance of their pursuits. (KKRSS Manifesto, as collected from the office of the KKRSS, undated document)

It is interesting to note as per the narratives gathered from the field, the Rai organization initially emerged as a cultural defense. Late Samar Mani Rai (fictive name) an ex-school teacher expressed his view that “at the beginning the way Christianity was spreading with its missionary zeal in the hills, the Khambus found it as a possible threat to their indigenous culture and a few educated Khambus realized the grave consequences and thought of establishing their own cultural body to preserve/protect their own religion, culture and tradition from the onslaught of Christianity. If in the past Christianity was considered as a possible threat by the Khambus today Hinduism is considered by the KKRSS torchbearers as a similar threat, affiliation to which weakens their demand of tribal status”. But the reality seems to be different. It is rare to find out even a single case where a Khambu individual/ household is entirely following the pure animistic way of life. Moreover, Hindu way of life is not seen as an imposition upon the Khambus rather the adoption of Hindu elements was a spontaneous act on their part. The fixation and a rigid boundary between a caste-Hindu and a tribe may have heuristic value for academicians but in real life Khambu lifeworld is intermingled with the attributes of both animism and Hinduism. More often than not this happens to be the case with other Mongoloid communities of the Darjeeling hills. Thus on one hand the whole Gorkha community in general and Khambus in particular seems to have adopted a flexible approach where they shift their ‘priority-identity’ as per the situational requirements. So the claim of being a ‘tribal-Khambu’ is not a contradictory position to being a ‘Hindu-Gorkha/Nepali’.

4.2.2 KKRSS Activities and Mobilizations in Relation to the Demand of Scheduled Tribe Status

The fear of being left out at that point of time when others (like the Limbus and Tamangs) were recognized as Scheduled Tribes, has led the aspiring Khambu Rais of Darjeeling hills to submit their appeals to the state and central government besides lobbying with the high-ranking officials and other influential personalities of different

government departments. While there existed sharp departures in the way communities believed themselves as tribes and the way government considers and accords tribal status to the claimant communities, aspiring groups did make every attempt to convince the government apparatus about the genuinely of their claims. The role played by community organizations in this regard seems to be extremely significant as they enabled the common mass to live up to the expectations of the government machinery. The community organizations actually decide what is to be selected and performed and what is to be dejected and downplayed in the way they live their life. Tribalism, in the light of such processes, appears to be more a case of construction that has followed ‘fitting within a box’ kind of an approach in the Darjeeling hills.

Since 2003 when Limbus and Tamangs were declared as Scheduled Tribe and the Khambu Rais did fail to achieve the same, Khambu leaders have been consistently attempting to make Delhi, the national capital, as a center of their activities (instead of Kolkata, the state capital) in order to catch the attention of the major players of central government. Among the various other goals of the KKRSS working for the attainment of ST status has been the prime one. In 2009 Khambu leaders met with different officials of RGI, Tribal Welfare Ministry, Chairman of Tribal Welfare Commission, Chairman of Parliamentary Affairs Committee, MP’s and others and made submissions as well. There was a positive assurance from all these offices. In 2003 the documents of Khambu Rai mentioning the reasons for granting them a ‘Tribal status’ has been prepared and sent to the Union ministry. In 2011 their memorandum has again been sent to the General Secretary to Congress Party (vide appendix for some such memorandum submitted to the government).

Political developments took place during this time in Darjeeling hills was significant and it contributed towards the consolidation of tribal identity movement spearheaded by the different communities of the Darjeeling hills, including the Khambus. Particularly since 2007 Subhas Ghising’s supremacy in the hill politics has become an issue of public suspect. Ghising, the chief architect of Gorkhaland movement of the 1980s, started losing his control over hill politics due to his changed political position from separate statehood to Sixth Schedule status for the Darjeeling hills. There were rumors that Ghising was miles ahead from separate statehood and was merely a ploy at the hands of the government who has already sold out Gorkhaland cause for an autonomous council known as Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in

1988. Once the messiah of the Indian Gorkhas soon lost his political prominence when one of his (Ghising's) henchmen Bimal Gurung did form a new political platform Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) in 2007 and emerged as the new political boss of Darjeeling hills by ousting his one-time political chief Subhas Ghisng. It is interesting to note that Ghisng's failure to ignite the popular sentiment in favour of separate statehood movement was the key to Gurung's success, who revived the second phase of Gorkhaland movement and finally settled with another autonomous district council with some more administrative powers called as Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011. It should also be noted that during this time the long awaited political shift has taken place in the State assembly. With the change in batons of power (from Left Front to Trinamool Congress) in the state Assembly, political equation between Darjeeling and West Bengal shifted to the hands of Bimal Gurung as Chairman of GTA and GJM as the party in power on the one hand and Mamata Banerjee as the new Chief Minister and the Trinamool Congress (TMC) as the ruling party of the state on the other. There was no qualitative shift that has taken place in the overall political equation that ensued afterwards, except that the tribal identity question received a certain kind of institutionalization with the entry of some favourable clauses in the GTA Act. In the next chapter we will deal in detail with this political shift and its ramifications for the hill politics as a whole and for the movement of tribal identity in particular.

After the GTA took the administration they (GTA) with the formation of Gorkha *Janajati* Kalyan Samiti brought-fourth the issue of making ten hill communities as a 'tribal'. This Samiti (committee) submitted the memorandum on behalf of all the ten communities, including the Khambu Rais. Realizing the continuous meetings with the ministers in Delhi would not be of much help unless the issue is discussed with the State-Government, the Khambu representatives got the chance to meet the Minister-in-Charge of Tribal Development Department of West Bengal on 29th of Dec, 2011. The discussion ended with the minister accepting Khambus has a Tribal origin and he assured to take the issue forward. On 28 April, 2013 on the occasion of celebrating a Sakewa festival in Mirik a former tribal Minister of state (Rani Narah) was invited and the Khambus (Rai) discussed their issue again. Both the Khambu organization as well as the GTA led Gorkha *Janajati* Kalyan Samiti took the issue to the forefront. With the appeal of the GTA, the CRI Kolkata sent a team for a field survey of the 11 (Dhimal

added later) communities, after much delay the report was sent by the state to the Tribal Affairs Ministry and before the 16th Lok Sabha Election (2014) the chief minister, Mamata Banerjee had wrote to the President for the grant of ST Status. Along with this, President of GJMM, Bimal Gurung had also met Jual Oram (Union Tribal Affairs Minister) and had raised this issue in Delhi in 27th August, 2014 and again in 17th December, 2014. Representatives of all the communities along with the Darjeeling M.P. S.S Ahluwalia had also participated and backed/supported this demand.

Meanwhile since 16th January, 2014 Khambu youths under the banner of KKRSS and with the leadership of Binesh Khambu Rai (convener) and Sandip Kulung (spokesperson) on the occasion of Yeledong 5074 (Khambu Rai's New Year celebration) declared that Khambu Rai will start their relay hunger strike from 18th January 2014. The movement started as a Khambu Rai 'Rights Movement' where nine youths participated from the Mahakal Dara unit of the organization at the Trikon Park, Thanadara. This movement was basically for the 'Tribal status' for overall development and upliftment of the Khambu Rai community. On the fifth day following the assurance given by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee that their demand would be placed before the Central Ministry, the Khambu Rights Movement activists withdrew their strike (Himalaya Darpan, 25th January 2014). Chief Minister's positive stance towards Khambu struggle had pleased the community but the leaders of the movement were determined to continue it until some positive response was reached. Another phase of the Khambu Rights movement started with a meeting organized at Pudung Training center held on 7th March, 2015. The meeting was held under the President ship of Shri K.C Rai. In the meeting discussions were held on the issue of the rights of the Rai's who were spread all over India. Binesh Khambu Rai, the coordinator of the Khambu's Rights movement gave a clarion call to all the Khambu youths to be aware of this movement and he said this time movement should be led by the Khambu youths (Himalaya Darpan 8th March 2015). The spokesperson of the movement, Sandip Kulung narrated the progress of the movement as to how it shifted from Kalimpong to Calcutta to Delhi and how the efforts made till then were not sufficient for their present demand of Tribal status. For this he said that all the Khambu Rais should be united. The discussion in the meeting was rather a lengthy one where the Khambu youths from different parts placed their opinions. Giving an emphasis to the same issue they rose with a new vigor to shake both the State and the Central Government. It was realized

by them that simply celebrating Sakela here and there in the hills would not bear any fruit and the future action now onward should be oriented towards Calcutta and Delhi, to which everyone gave their consent. They thought their decision would be materialized, after the discussion with the Khambu committee at district and central level an appropriate time would be fixed for the Khambu Rights Movement (details shared in an interview with the researcher by coordinator Binesh Khambu). The new Movement they finalized would be initiated with the blessings of Khambu Rai predecessors and with the help of Khambu Rai youths and the Khambu Rais of all the branches of the Khambu Rai Organization were made aware of this. The meeting was represented by youths and members from Bhalukhop, Mahakaldara, Tumlabung, Yogda, Bhagey, Suntuk, Sangsey, Kafer, Lava, Gidiabling, Gitibiyong, Gairigaon-Dhaley-Jaldhaka, 33 no. Samisti, Burmek, Tandrabung, Peshok, Kharka, Tungsung, Mailibasey etc.

4.2.3 Split in the Leadership

The quest to structure their identities in accordance with the conception of tribe as defined through the annals of statist discourse has led to internal contestation and leading to formation of splinter organizations within ethnic associations (Chhetri 2016: 8). The instance can be specified by the eruption of the splinter organization within the Khambu organization. The establishment of a new body All India Kirati Khambu Rai Association (registered on 24th February 2014) under a president ship of late Bishal Khambu basically aimed at representing Khambu Rais at national level. This organization as claimed was founded for cultural, religious, charitable and educational purposes. As regarding their tribal demand every organization and Khambu unit is seen pressurizing the government from time to time. The Khambu organization (AIKKRA) also met central Tribal Affairs Minister Jual Oram. From 24th of February 2015 Khambu Rais under the leadership of AIKKRA had marched towards Delhi for their two days program (28th February and 1st of March 2015) where, as shared by the vice-president of AIKKRA Yogesh Makshu, “the program was for the issue of Tribal status and from hills nearly four hundred Khambu Rai have participated. This time the program was different as there was no *dharna* and the main attention was on Khambu’s culture, dress-attire, etc. besides various union ministers and national media for propagation were invited” (information shared in interview by Yogesh Makshu). Groups have also maintained a steady course of interaction with the Minister of

Backward Classes' Welfare Department and the CRI, seeking clues to restructure their identities as authentic tribal groups. Occasionally they have also appealed to local leaders such as MPs and MLAs, seeking their advice in their struggle to attain the much coveted ST status. As each group was in competition with the other, the chances of securing the ST status became contingent upon the potential of ethnic associations to reach out to state officials and lobby at the corridors of power (Chhetri 2016: 10).

The Khambu organization itself was divided into layers/ strata in terms of power of decision making (basically vested in the hands of the office bearers), the role of the mobilizers in different villages who too acted as the leaders at a local level and the members (whose participation did matter on every occasion). Functioning of the organization too operates with a similar kind of arrangement where the one at the upper strata basically engages in issues of paper-work concerning tribal affair as well as on production of literary works of Khambus. While those in the middle strata in the hierarchy of leadership mediated and initiated all the meetings, programs, celebration and discussion concerning tribal agenda at most of the village occasions. Another group comprised of a whole group of Khambus who had taken membership to the organization (what they referred to as a *Rai samaj*) basically considering its importance either at times of need or for its authority of granting OBC certificates, etc.

4.3 Hindu Tribe: Contesting the Past and Rectifying the Historical Blunder

The vagueness as well as the flexibility attached with the notion of tribe in India has prepared the ground where each and every agent as per their respective understanding comprehends the meaning of tribe, leading thereby the issue to further complexities. In fact, the meaning of Scheduled Tribe (ST) and the processes involved in the recognition of a ST is so complicated that it demands in-depth analysis, which this thesis endeavours to attend. The oscillating nature of identity in Darjeeling Hills from pan-Nepali or Gorkha identity to tribal identity, and from caste identity to tribal identity, is reflective of the flexibility of a community's boundaries and the capability of community elites or leaders to manipulate the whole process in their favour. Scholars have pointed out that ethnicity reflected in this way would allow us to argue that 'ethnic identity' in the modern political domain is little more than a strategic instrument for the state and political leaders to gain resources for power and authority (Tamang 2018: 37). The context specific development of community identities in Darjeeling hills, where communities like Khambus and others are constantly re-writing

their past with a possible hope of reshaping the future, also involves the entanglement between their Hindu identity vis-à-vis their tribal identity.

The socio-political history of the communities like Khambu Rais and many others in Darjeeling hills context is obscured with processes of fusion and fission where the strict separation of socio-cultural elements is hard to trace out. Moreover, the field experience suggests that the articulation of their culture or tradition always bear assimilative content where rigid boundaries between tribe and Hindu are not maintained. Although they were clear with this fact that *Bahuns* (Brahmins) are different from them in the sense that they are the carrier of the pure Hindu tradition, the *matwali* Khambu groups never identify themselves with the similar ‘purity’ nor even the upper caste *Bahuns* would accept them in similar vein. The *matwali* genre of Hinduism is something that lies at the core of Khambu self characterized by the blurred and diffused boundary between animistic and Hinduistic practices. It is difficult to delineate with any certainty the boundary lines between Hinduism and animism in the Khambu lifeworld. Much of the *matwali* Khambus lifeworld was found to be shrouded with rituals and traditions which they performed as they learnt it from their ancestors without bothering whether they were purely Hindu one or the animistic one. Hence, a *matwali* form of Hindu understanding was created that no doubt was different from what *tagadhari* Bahuns (Brahmins) or other upper castes used to believe or practice.

What most *matwalis* (including the Khambus) of the Darjeeling hills have been practicing was not by following the idea that there has to be strict differentiation to be maintained from the Hindus, as this separation required for establishing the claim of a tribe. This has created a situation of contention even between the leaders (who emphasized on this separation) and the general Khambus (who never realized this separation was actually necessary). It is impossible as they don't want to part with any of the so called Hindu practices which nevertheless they have translated in a matwali pattern. Many such instances were known from the field where Dasain (Dusherra) a Hindu festival celebrated by tagadharis in a Brahminical manner, matwalis like Khambu have made slight changes. Similarly, negating the Hindu version of Diwali (tihar) most Khambu Rais were seen narrating it as a victory of Balihang king (of Khambus) who had won the war with some Hindu kings. Thus this tihar (Diwali) festival is the celebration of that joy of victory, where they connect and try to re-narrate/prove the storylikewise. In Nepali culture on tihar a group of boys/men as well

as girls/women sings a chorus visiting home to home where there is one line mandatorily sung by almost all the groups which goes like... “*Hami afai ayeko hoina, balima (Balihang) raja ko hukuma huda ai pugiou hamī*” (we have not come as we wished, we are here with the command of the Balima king). This kind of assertion where the mention of the Khambu king named Balima, is claimed by Khambus as their own king, they try to shape that festival of *tihar* in the *matwali* (or Khambu) version or articulation in that sense. In this way it was found that most Khambus acknowledge and preferred to be identified as Khambu Rai with the feeling of pride in their traditions but simultaneously their regard for Hinduism which they consider as part of their lives and thus inseparable speaks volume about the ingrained nature of the Hindu and Khambu practices in their lifeworld. It was found that most of the time they were unaware about the differences between the two and at other they don't regard Hinduism as a domain that originates and rotates around Brahminical universe. So they being the product of assimilative processes/ exchanges which followed an unconscious way of representing them as Hinduised but an in-depth understanding reveals that such representations actually involved a process that may be termed as ‘*matwali* model of Hinduisation’.

The distinction between Hindu vs. tribal identity emerged as a hotly debated issue when the KKRSS made a public call of boycotting *Dasain* (Hindu festival popularly known as *Dushera* in the Hindi belt and *Durga Puja* in Bengal) by the Khambu Rais during 2013. Even newspaper articles appeared in the local Nepali daily in which opinions were shared castigating the *Dasain* boycott call. In fact, the call for boycotting *Dasain* was on air for a couple of years now. Initiated by Subhas Ghising and carried over by the Tamangs, in particular, such practices of boycotting *Dasain* in Darjeeling hills did make some headway during 2000-2001. Even the most enthusiasts among Ghising followers of the past and also the members of community organizations, were in most cases remained obfuscated and ambivalent as to how one can go for sacrificing the age old lived-in practice (of celebrating *Dasain*) for an authoritative versions of the past articulated by community organizations or by Ghising himself. Needless to mention that Ghising's emphasis on worshipping of stone pieces or any natural object as ‘totem’ (instead of idol worshipping involved in such practices like *Dasain*) was to prove hill communities as nature worshippers/ animists – a claim that could help substantiate the tribal character of the Gorkha. Almost in a similar vein KKRSS and the most firebrand Khambu leaders like late Bishal Khambu Rai claimed

that “Khambus are not Hindus and hence there is no point in celebrating *Dasain*, which is a Hindu festival” (views shared in Interview). What was interesting is to observe that the claims of boycotting *Dasain*, which was considered more as a strategy and ordinary Khambus did not respond to the clarion call raised by their leaders or by the community organization. Or, in other words the authoritative strictures of the organization did not completely displace the age old tradition of celebrating *Dasain* and the Khambus went for celebrating *Dasain* more as a matter of lived-in practice than a strategic choice. This again demands that we need to scrutinise carefully before taking a position on such crucial issues like the role of the organization vis-à-vis people’s response to the mobilizations spearheaded by community organizations.

4.4 Organisational Activities vis-à-vis People’s Perspective

The very formulation of the idea of Scheduled Tribe is assumed to be a static category, where any changes in it are understood as diminishing its purity/originality. This did generate confusion in Khambu mindset. The crux of the matter lies in the fact that within the given ‘definition of a tribe’ how could a group like Khambu would situate its claim as a tribe when they are found to be the practitioners of both Hinduism and indigenous beliefs and practices. It seems impossible to maintain strict separation between their primitive rituals and Hindu influences while it is also a fact that neither modernity nor Hinduism has thoroughly engulfed their animistic beliefs and practices. Those who have adopted Christianity, their story remained different, although their participation in selected functions and meetings at the organizational level is also reflective of their aspiration to become a ‘tribe’ (irrespective of their religious affiliation). Some others make it a point that their membership to the organization is for an obligation to procure OBC certificate (Khambu Rais are at present considered as OBC ‘B’ in the state list of West Bengal). Whether Hindu or Christian, Khambu organization does provide certain assurances of opportunity to its members and non-membership appeared to be unprofitable at times. Thus in some cases, Khambus of different religious background did become members but they did not get too much involved in the organizational activities related to tribal ritualistic performances. The appropriation of Hindu belief by the ordinary Khambus has been restricted within organizational affairs but this has not affected the Khambu commoners in the way they lived their life being a Hinduised Khambu. Even for Hinduised Khambu marriages *pachha* (lineage) and *samait* still needs to be different. While clan (*thar*) like feature of

the Khambus has not been totally replaced by caste like system but Brahminical supremacy and its acceptance can be observed when Khambus invite a Brahmin to perform a ritual (Hindu puja) in their households. However, for the observance of traditional rites and rituals concerning their birth, marriage, and death the Khambus (even the Hinduised ones too) never depended upon Hindu rituals or Hindu religious specialists.

It was also interesting to note that a certain kind of reciprocity did exist in the field situation. If the Khambus have received from the *Tagadharis* (those who wear sacred thread from among the caste Hindus viz. Bahuns and Chhetris in particular) then the *Matwalis* (those who are known by their habit of teetolaism viz. the communities belonging to Mongolid race including the Khambus) has something to offer to the caste Hindus. The services of *mangpas/ mangmas* (Khambu religious specialists) in villages like Paiyong, Newahang, and Dalep or any other village (in times of sickness, or if anything inauspicious happened in a family and during the time of death) were sought not only by the Khambus but by their caste Hindu neighbours as well. While Khambu tradition has survived the influences and admixture of Hinduism and caste system, the demand of a pure Khambu tradition devoid of any Hindu influence is more or less impossible. The Rai samaj in villages like Paiyong and the other two, was also serving as the branch of the main body of the KKRSS (Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan), and has inspired a ‘janajati’ aspiration among many, if not all. By taking a membership of local Rai samaj (or local KKRSS branch) most of the Khambu families have become passive participants of the organizational mobilizations. While the public display of their cultural authenticity as spearheaded by the KKRSS can be understood as a mobilisational stance for augmenting the movement for tribal status, it would be misleading to consider such an aspiration merely as an organizational output. We have discussed in the following that the movement of tribal identity led by the KKRSS is complementary to the ways through which Khambus in general maintained their layered identities in the Darjeeling hills. Perhaps due to this complementarity tribal identity movement among the Khambus did gain wide popularity in no time even beyond the three field sites.

It is important to note that the population whose belief system does not match with that of the Khambu tradition were either considered to be the out groups or in some cases they were found to have taken membership as an outcome of what they

termed as their societal obligation. From among the Christian Khambus, for example, some Catholics viewed the organization as a societal gathering and had taken a membership but their obligation ends when they were back home. This again reflected that there were members who did participate keeping only ‘tribal agenda’ in mind. Now after a decade being passed the demand for ST status has appeared to be a case of ‘*janajatiya maang*’ (demand by the whole community) but the way it is getting delayed and denied year after year, their hope now has completely shifted to parties like Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJMM) that have raised the demand for tribal status for eleven communities of the Darjeeling hills (including the Khambus).

4.5 Organisational Activities vis-à-vis the Domain of Performative and Layered Identities

One of the important requirements of developing ‘we-feeling’ among the groups is the ritual process through which identity is produced and reproduced (Shneiderman 2014: 284). The rituals and the symbiotic ideas that are being generated within the community professing the similar ritualistic affairs infuse a similar feeling related to ‘sacred’ objects as opposed to ‘profane’ elements of their own culture. It reminds them of sharing the same bond with the source/origin and erupts in them the mythical symbol of connectivity, belongingness and togetherness. The community’s imagination of the self as a Khambu can always correlate the other Khambus professing and imagining the same symbolic dogmas. The consciousness that is required to generate a self as distinct and different emerges thereby. The demarcation that Shneiderman made between ‘practice’ and ‘performance’ in case of Thangmi community suits the cultural assertion of most communities (Shneiderman 2014: 286). While what constitutes Khambus’ everyday life cycle including all their ritual throughout the year is their practical aspect, i.e. their reality as it is. On the other hand since from the time culture assumed some attention the communities charged with showing the authentic side of their cultural traits gave it a more constructed form, which in the words of Shneiderman got the shape of ‘performance’ or every particularities to be advertised were selected/chosen with precision and detailing as that will be under the constant gaze of the ‘others’. Shneiderman rightly said that one is incomplete without the other or both are interdependent i.e. performing something does require some basis which comes from the practice or its existential presence.

Thus people can only relate with the performance if they have experienced or have observed what is being practiced or played into action. For the one whose life is not wholly depended on farming or related activities it is very much possible that ritualistic practices has been reduced to traditional obligation with performance of few practices which are feasible to them. In villages like Paiyong, Newahang or Dalep, which were not completely isolated from the modern touch, tradition did exist in their ancestral hearth-stone which again needed to be compulsorily propitiated yearly (once or twice) either with blood sacrifices like earlier or purely in a revived way (with flowers and fruits). Besides their obligation towards their local deity being voluntary, some clans of the Khambus were found worshipping local deities like *Sikari*, *Burani*, *Aitabarey Devi* others did worship one or two among them. It is interesting to note that both *Sakela* and *Sakewa* festivals are testimonies to the fact that the Khambu Rais are basically agriculturalists but in contemporary Darjeeling the observance of these festivals have become a regular phenomenon and they are not simply dependent upon the imperatives of good harvest. More often than not these festivals came handy to the community leaders as the most potent resources for mobilizing the masses in favour of tribal identity. However, *Sakewa* and *Sakela* festivals are not to be treated as ‘invention of tradition’ but there is no doubt that these festivals like other festivities of the Khambu Rais have received renewed significance in the contemporary Darjeeling hills.

While it can in no way be generalized that each and every singular element of Khambu culture got reconstructed and recreated but many of the performances which seemed as new to some of the present generation Khambus did always persist there in Nepal. Basically household rituals (establishing a hearth stone/ *chula-dhunga*), services of mangpas, performance of chinta among others did form a part of Khambu’s lifecycle in the three villages under study. But when these festivities began to be celebrated, particularly from the new millennium, on the streets and highways coupled with the performances of mangpas with dhol and jhyamta (cymbals), these performances and festivities came to redefine their pathways for the achievement of a different goal that was delinked from the idea of sacred. The organizational effort always attempted to systematize the Khambu world within a certain well prescribed limit through its writings, where the Khambus themselves sometime get to learn many things from their organizations. But the one who had no access to reach out the textual sources circulated

by the Khambu organizations were found to have their own *chula-dhunga*, *udhauli*, *ubhauli*, *sikari*.

The point is that the many practices the Khambu organization tried to reintroduce much of which were already in practice. On many occasions Khambus in the field were found to be aware of the richness of their traditions but this awareness was not contingent upon the organizational mobilizations. Khambu organizations actually attempted to publicize, sharpen and in some cases concretize the existing traditions of the Khambu Rais. Paiyong village seemed to be the perfect example where the Khambus, already being the member of the organization, did not consider that something is being constructed by the organization as they still considered themselves as animists, believers in shamanism and supernatural power of the *mangpas/mangmas*, but they think that ‘being tribe’ (they meant the constitutional status of Scheduled Tribe) is something special that the Bhutias or the Lepchas did possess. There was a popular belief noticed in the field situation that the Rais are by default animists, ancestor worshippers, believers in shamanism and they do practice ‘exotic’ rites, rituals and traditions and in a certain sense they are tribes but it is rather hard to achieve ‘tribal status’ and is completely in the hands of those (they meant the Government/ State) who has the authority to confer such designations. They considered that they could only become a tribe when the government recognizes them as Scheduled Tribe. However, so far as rituals and traditions are concerned they considered themselves as tribes and therefore a natural claimant of the status of Scheduled Tribe.

In fact, multiple realities were in operation at the community level in field situation. Khambu Rais were found to be observing Hindu festivities like *Dasain* (Dushera) and *Tihar* (Dewali) alongside their own rituals and rites. Except the Sadhus and Christian all other Rais were found to be Hindusitic as also maintaining their own practices like *Chula dunga*, *udhauli*, *ubhauli* and *chinta*. While most in the villages were aware of their ‘Khambu ritualistic knowhow’(except some), they think Khambu *samaj* (organization) basically works at societal level and initiates programmes like *sakewa* and *sakela*, organizes rallies where their participation is expected. Khambu *samaj* also collects some membership fees as contributions which were used in occasions of death, building *mankhims* etc. Khambu organization is seen to perform dual function of ‘cultural protectorate’ as well as ‘community up lifter’. Thus when organizational role ends with meetings, programmes, celebrations even then Khambus

do not abstain from observing their usual practices and field situation depicted that it was not possible for the organization to influence the Khambus in all aspects/areas. At the end Khambus were seen to be continuing what they had always done, for instance, *dasain* is one such example where despite of organizational instructions many did celebrate it. Khambu Rais in the field situation during 2017 October revealed attachment towards this festival, in spite of the myth that depicts the slaughtering of a Khambu king by the Hindu king (on the pretext of which *dasain* was said to be boycotted). Their conscience did not permit them to refrain from its observance. While the organization always tried to revamp all the ritualistic practices of the Khambus, the commoner Khambus did follow what they had always done (i.e. to practice their rituals alongside the observance of Hindu festivities). Thus whatever construction and maneuverings occurred at the organizational level for promoting tribal identity and mobilization; the reality represented layered identities shared by the Khambu commoners.

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