

## **Nepali as a *matribhasa*: Tracing the growth of Linguistic identity among the Nepali-speaking people in India**

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### **Abstract**

*This article traces the historical trajectory of language based identity formation among the Nepali speaking people in India. The paper focuses particularly on colonial Darjeeling Hill, where these people were concentrated. The article explores the geo-political and ethno-linguistic context of Nepali speakers in Nepal and India till the establishment of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (1924), to understand the emergence of Nepali linguistic identity. The paper argues that the political and cultural necessity induced by the colonial policy led to the emergence of language-based identity among the Nepalis in British India.*

**Keywords:** Nepali linguistic nationalism, identity formation, ethnicity, Nepali public sphere.

### **Introduction:**

Language is considered an essential symbol of cultural identity which can differentiate one community from another. India as a multi-lingual country has nurtured diverse linguistic communities since early times. In the pre-modern period, language was not the primary marker of human identity, the growth of language based community identity is considered a product of modernity. Scholars like Bernard Cohn, Sumathi Ramaswamy, Lisa Mitchell, Papia Sengupta, and Mitilesh Kumar Jha have traced the beginning of linguistic identity in India during the colonial period. In Europe, the differentiation of linguistic communities was an essential factor behind the rise of nationalism and the creation of nation state (Anderson, 2015, pp. 37-46) (Sengupta, 2018, p. 48). Therefore, the term linguistic nationalism has also been used by scholars to denote such a process. But the linguistic nationalism in India did not run parallel to its European counterparts because it did not lead to the formation of nation state in India (Mitchell, 2009, p. 21).

In colonial period, there was an emergence of various language based identity movements in different parts of India, one such movement was the Nepali linguistic movement in North India. The emergence of identity formation among the Nepali speakers in India centred on the concept of *matribhasa* (mother tongue) and its *unnati* (progress). The development of Nepali linguistic identity was undertaken by diverse ethnic people of the Himalayan region who ultimately adopted Nepali as their *matribhasa*. Why did they accept Nepali as their *matribhasa*? Why did these people worked for the *unnati* of Nepali while neglecting their ethnic language in India? This article essentially tries to explore the answer to such questions.

### What did Nepali mean?

Kumar Pradhan has given three different connotations of the term Nepali – first, it denotes language; second, it has a political connotation as it denotes nationality of Nepal, and third, it is used in a cultural sense to denote various Nepali speaking people living beyond the political frontiers of Nepal (Pradhan K. , 2010, pp. 1-2). The Nepali speaking people in India come in the third category. The use of the nomenclature of Nepali or Nepalese was of recent times. It was first used by J.A. Ayton in his *Grammar of the Nepalese Language* (1820), gradually the term Nepalese changed into Nepali. The Europeans used it to denote the language and nationality of Nepal. Partha Chatterjee calls such usage as a ‘derivative discourse’. Language based identity was derived from European nationalism where language delimited the nationality of the people. Europeans basically used the same notion of language and nationality in Asia. But unlike Europe, the Indian sub-continent was composed of ethnically diverse people.

In Nepal the term Nepali was not used to denote the language. There were various names for the language, like *Gorkha bhasa*, *Parbatia* and *Khas Kura*. The term *Khas Kura* denoted the language of the Khasa (place), *Parbate* was the term given by the Newars, the inhabitants of Kathmandu valley, to denote the language of the mountain and *Gorkhali* meant the language of the Gorkha, which was the nucleus of Shah Dynasty who later conquered the Kathmandu valley. Before the advent of the British, the language was known after the place where it was used. Lisa Mitchell in her study of Telegu has rightly argued that in the pre-modern times, “language was regarded as a feature of the local environment rather than a feature of the common people.” *Nepal bhasa* (language of Nepal) was the only term which was nearly similar to the European notion of Nepali. But *Nepal bhasa* was used for language of the Newari people and the term *Nepal* denoted only the Kathmandu valley. The government of Nepal officially approved the nomenclature of ‘Nepali’ only in 1930s (Hutt M. J., 1988, p. 34). It was the Nepali speakers in India who first accepted the term Nepali to denote both the people and language.

Nepali as a language belongs to the Indo-Aryan group of language family. Nepali descended from Sanskrit.<sup>1</sup> Similar to other Indo-Aryan languages, Nepali also evolved from *Apabhramsa*.<sup>2</sup> The earliest known Nepali is found in a series of epigraphs, dating as early as thirteenth century C.E, belonging to Khasa ruler Asokachalla. Khasa at the height of power had carved out an extensive empire in western Nepal and included even Gharwal, Kumaon and some parts of southern Tibet during the twelfth century C.E. This speech came into contact with the speeches of the Brahmins and Rajputs of India after their migration to western Nepal in the wake of the Muslim invasion. It was from this cultural interaction that

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<sup>1</sup> Turner, R. L. (1931). *A Comparative and Etymological Dictionary of the Nepali Language*. London: Kegan Paul, Trench, Teubner & Co Ltd., p. i

<sup>2</sup> Chatterjee, S. K. (1942). *Indo Aryan and Hindi*. Calcutta: Sri Bharati Press., p. 3

Nepali evolved. (Pradhan K. , 1984, pp. 5-10) Unlike most of the other Indo-Aryan languages Nepali literature developed lately. The earliest known prose is the biography of the Gorkha King Ram Shah, written in seventeenth century C.E, while the earliest known Nepali poem belongs to eighteenth century C.E.

The advent of the high-caste Indians into Nepal coincided with the decline of Khasa kingdom. The disintegration of Khasa resulted in the emergence of several small principalities called *Baisi* (twenty two) and *Chaubisi* (twenty four). Drabya Shah, the descendant of the Rajput, carved out a principality of Gorkha in 1559. It was his descendant Prithivinarayan Shah, who through his conquest merged the entire fragmented nation into one. By 1769, the Gorkhas overtook the Kathmandu valley from the Newar ruler. Prior to this unification, the term Nepal was used only for the Kathmandu valley, but after its conquest, the name was eventually applied to all the territories within the ambit of the Shah Dynasty, which corresponds to the modern nation state of Nepal.

The establishment of the Shah Dynasty in Kathmandu Valley and its subsequent expansion in other areas of present day Nepal gave a new fillip to their language – Nepali. It became the official language used throughout the kingdom. But Nepali was used in Kathmandu valley even before its conquest, as inscription using Nepali has been found. In this context, T.W. Clark remarks that Nepali was in use in Kathmandu at least 130 years before the Gorkha invasion (Clark, 1957, pp. 167-187). But the political consolidation achieved by the Shah Dynasty helped in the dispersion of the Nepali language, geographically and ethnically, among the diverse populations settled in different parts of Nepal.

When the term Nepali is used to denote the people, it is generally used as a blanket term to include people of various ethnicities. Its social composition consisted of two broad divisions – *thagadari* and *matawali*. *Thagadari* were the upper caste Hindu - Brahmins, Thakuris and Chettri. They shared a common Indo-Aryan racial and linguist affinity and were entitled to wear the sacred thread. Their language was Nepali. The *Matawali* were the ethnic people of the Himalayan region who shared the tradition of drinking alcohol. In this category comes - Gurung, Magar, Sunwar, Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Newar, and more. Racially, they belonged to the Tibeto-Burman race. Geographically, they were settled in different parts of Nepal. Linguistically, all the ethnic community had their own language. Religiously, these peoples were not originally Hindus, they were either the worshipper of Buddhism or Shamanism or nature worshipper.

The Gurungs originally belonged to the place between the Bheri and Marsyandi rivers in Nepal. Their language *Tamu-mai* was closely related to Tibetan. The Murmis, popularly known as Tamang, were said to be one of the earliest settlers of Kathmandu valley. Their language was closely related to Tibetan<sup>3</sup>. Generally, it is

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<sup>3</sup> Dalton, E. T. (1872). *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal*. Office of the Supriintendent of Government Printing., Calcutta, p. 105.

believed that they originally came from Tibet. The Sunwars were from the place called Simungarh in Western Nepal. The Magars, belonged to the central and lower parts of Nepal, between the Bheri and Marsyandi rivers. The Newars were the people who ruled Kathmandu valley, before its conquest by the Gorkhas. Their language was the official language of Nepal before 1769, and was used for literary purposes at early times. Yolmo belonged to the place called Helembu, their language Yolmali, shared certain linguistic traits with Tamang and Sherpa. The Limbus, Khambu and Yakkha were the principal tribes of Eastern Nepal and together they were known as Kirata or Kirati. They share a common linguistic, racial and cultural origin. They are regarded as the original inhabitants of eastern Nepal. The British resident at Kathmandu, Brian Hodgson had divided the country inhabited by the Kirats into three parts-*Wallo Kirat* or Hither Kirat, from the Sunkosi to the Likhu; *Majh Kirat* or Middle Kirat, from Likhu to Arun and *Pallo Kirat* or Further Kirat, from the Arun to the Mechi river and the Singhalela ridge. Owing to the geographical settlements of *matawali* in different parts of Nepal, culturally these ethnic people were able to seclude themselves and maintain their language in Nepal. Although, they were located in different places in Nepal, but due to the political consolidation achieved under the Shah Dynasty, these ethnic people had slowly started to accept Nepali as their second language.

### **Home away from home:**

The Nepali speaking people were settled in different parts of India, but it was in Darjeeling hills, that they formed the demographic majority. Darjeeling hills had a chequered history shared by Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and India. Although a small place, Darjeeling being strategically located, shared boundaries with Bhutan, Nepal, Sikkim and Tibet. Darjeeling originally belonged to the kingdom of Sikkim, ruled by the Chogyal Dynasty since 1642. It was transferred to British India in 1835, in lieu of allowances, by the Deeds of Grant. In 1861, Darjeeling was annexed by British India by the terms of Treaty of Sinchula. In 1865, Kalimpong was annexed by British India from Bhutan after the conclusion of treaty of Tumloong. In 1866 Kalimpong was merged with Darjeeling district and Darjeeling hills took its final shape. In geographical and academic discourse Darjeeling hills represents Darjeeling sub division, Kurseong sub division and Kalimpong sub division (at present Kalimpong is a separate district since 2017).

Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalayan region before its contact with British India was inhabited by Bhutias (*Lho*), Lepchas (*Mon*) and the Limbus (*Tsong*) (McKay, 2021, pp. 17-18). After the transfer of Darjeeling to British India, the immigration of economic migrants from Nepal led to a demographic change. The migration of people between India and Nepal had been a common practice since pre-modern period, due to same religious belief and geographical proximity. During the British rule, there was a dramatic increase in migration from Nepal and an organised form of migration took place under the colonial patronage.

Scholars have worked on understanding the factors behind the immigration. They have theorised the factors in a binary form - 'push' and 'pull' factor. Various causes found in Nepal became a push factor like the rigid Hindu laws, hierarchical social norms, caste system, slavery, *jhara* (forced labour), high land tax and the decline of *Kipat* (communal land holding). Pull factor behind the immigration are found in favourable condition and opportunities prevailing in colonial India, like the establishment of tea plantation in Darjeeling, the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers in the Indian army, favourable land policy, works in railway and road construction, cinchona plantation and more. The colonial officials like Archibald Campbell and J.C. White were instrumental in encouraging Nepalis immigration to India.

In 1835, when the British took over Darjeeling, the Darjeeling district gazetteers recorded a population of not more than 100 souls. In 1850, the population rose to 10,000. In 1869 the population numbered 22,000. The first systematic census of 1872 records 94,712 people and in 1901, the census recorded 249,117 persons. In Kalimpong, when this part of hill was acquired by British India in 1865, the population was estimated to be 3,536 people and in 1901, the population rose to 41,511.

Owing to the migration of people from Nepal, there was a drastic increase in the population of Darjeeling Hills. The demography of Darjeeling became heterogeneous, consisting of three different communities - Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis. They were known in the official records as the Hill tribes. Lepchas were the autochthonous of the Sikkim-Darjeeling Himalaya. Bhutias in Darjeeling were generally composed of four different groups – Sikkimese Bhutias regarded as a product of intermarriage between Tibetans and Lepchas, Sherpa who came from East Nepal, Drukpa who were Bhutanese and Tibetans who were from Tibet.<sup>4</sup> Darjeeling became a hotspot of ethnic diversity as such colonial writing has described its people as a 'bale of tribes and nations.'

Out of three major hills community, it was the Nepali who became the most dominant community in the demography of the hill. By the beginning of twentieth century C.E, most of them had settled permanently in India. The colonial official reports reflected the birth of Nepali people in Darjeeling.<sup>5</sup> They had created a new home outside Nepal in India. Unlike Nepal, geo-culturally, Darjeeling was small place, which became concentrated with a diverse linguistic culture. There was a need for a common tongue for communicative purpose among the hill people. Out of all the ethnic language it was Nepali which was adopted as the lingua-franca.

Nepali was already the language of power in Nepal, where owing to the authority enjoyed by the language, Nepali was used as a second language in Nepal by diverse people whose primary language was not Nepali. The colonial official records of the

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<sup>4</sup> Hunter, W. (1876). *A Statistical Account of Bengal: Darjiling*. Trubner & Co., London, pp. 45-46.

<sup>5</sup> O'Malley, L. S. (1907). *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*. The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot., Calcutta, p. 39.

mid-nineteenth century mentions the use of Nepali in Darjeeling, like the Report of W.B Jackson, but the Report mistook Nepali as 'Hindee'.<sup>6</sup> Nepali, which was used as secondary language in Nepal by the ethnic people ultimately changed into primary language in India. Various areas around Darjeeling were named in Nepali. Towards the end of nineteenth century, L.A Waddell had prepared an etymological list of regional names of places around Darjeeling hills. From the evaluation of his list, published by the Journal of the Asiatic Society, it can be deduced that much of the places around Darjeeling hills were named in Nepali, Tibetan and Lepchas languages.<sup>7</sup> Therefore, a sense of belonging and identity with the language and the region was already developed by the Nepali speakers by the end of the nineteenth century C.E.

### **Darjeeling as an epicentre of identity formation:**

The life of the people who migrated from Nepal underwent a far reaching change in India. The agents of colonial modernity, like western education and the print media instigated a new socio-cultural outlook among the people. There was a growing awareness regarding their backwardness and need for *unnati* (progress). Nepali language was considered lagging behind other Indo-Aryan languages. The progress of the language was considered necessary for the progress of their *jati* (community).

The Nepali speaking people started to give importance to the cultivation of modern education in India. The Christian Missionaries, made the pioneering work of providing education, to the natives of the Darjeeling, during nineteenth century. The most success in this field was achieved by the illustrious Rev Macfarlane, who opened up many schools in the second half of nineteenth century. With the growth of Missionary schools, the colonial authorities also started to take its initiative to educate the natives of Darjeeling hill. The missionary had taken lead in the establishment of primary education and at the higher educational level the government established Darjeeling Government High School in 1892. This was the only high school in Darjeeling hill until 1922. Unlike Nepal, the people in Darjeeling hills got the opportunity to avail the privileges of modern education.

Although the Nepali speaking people in Darjeeling were among the first generation to receive modern education, but there was no provision for learning Nepali as a vernacular subject and as a medium of instruction in the schools. Hindi was used instead of Nepali for the purpose of education. It is in this context that the new emerging Nepali intelligentsia considered it as an obstruction in the *unnati* of their *jati*. The Nepali intelligentsia believed that such condition prevailed because Nepali was not advance as the other major regional languages of India.

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<sup>6</sup> Jackson, W. B. (1854). *Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government: Report on Darjeeling*. Calcutta: Calcutta Gazette Office. p. 7.

<sup>7</sup> Waddell, L. (1891). *Place and river names in the Darjiling district and Sikkim*. Journal of Asiatic Society of Bengal, 60, part 1, pp. 53-79.

Since the time when the Christian Missionaries established schools in Darjeeling, Hindi was used for imparting education. There were reasons for the Christian Missionary's pioneer educationist Macfarlane in disregarding Nepali in favour of Hindi: first, as Macfarlane he had some knowledge of Hindi unlike Nepali which was not known to him; second, there was a dearth of text-books in Nepali (Dewan, 1991, p. 109) and lastly, Nepali had linguistic affinities with Hindi and most importantly both the language used the same *Devanagari* script for writing. In the nineteenth century, various colonial administrators and missionaries tried to learn and develop some knowledge about Nepali. Although grammars of Nepali were also written by the Europeans but most of them had classified Nepali as a 'dialect' of Hindi. Even one of the grammarians S.H. Kellogg, claimed Nepali to be a dialect of Hindi.<sup>8</sup> As a result Nepali was considered to be a variant of Hindi by most of the colonial scholars in nineteenth century. But by the time of the publication of the Linguistic Survey of India by G.A. Grierson, Nepali was clearly recognised as a distinct language.<sup>9</sup>

Before Darjeeling became the centre of Nepali literary activities, Banaras the religious centre of the Hindus, had been the traditional centre of learning and literary activity for the Nepalis in India. The autocratic Rana's rule established in Nepal since 1846 was not favourable for the development of literary activities in Nepal. The printing press in Nepal was under the monopoly of the government. There was censorship against expression of liberal ideas, which could endanger the autocratic regime in Nepal. Colonial India although was not free of imposing restriction on the freedom of expression, but in comparison to Nepal the cultural aura was better. Nepali people mostly from upper caste used to come to Banaras to learn and to express their literary freedom in the form of writings. Earliest Nepali periodicals in India were published from Banaras, their work in Banaras paved the way for linguistic consolidation among the Nepali speakers of Darjeeling hills. The Nepali periodicals published from Banaras were subscribed and read by the Nepali intelligentsia of Darjeeling hills.

### ***Unnati* of the Nepali language:**

Print media played an important role in creating awareness and *unnati* of the Nepali language. Various Nepali periodicals were launched from Banaras and Darjeeling for promoting the language. In 1914, a Nepali periodical *Chandra* was launched in Banaras by Madhav Prasad. Although short lived, *Chandra* was quite influential. In the very first issue, the editorial held that:

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<sup>8</sup> Kellogg, S.H. (1876). *A Grammar of the Hindi Language*. Kegan Paul Trench, Trubner and Co. Limited., London, Reprint (1938), p. 120.

<sup>9</sup> Grierson, G. (1916). *Linguistic Survey of India : Indo Aryan Family, Central Group, Vol. 9 Part 4*. Motilal Banarsidass Publishers Pvt Ltd, Delhi, Reprint (1967), p. 17.

The reason behind the progress of the English, French and German peoples lay in the development of their respective languages. (Pradhan, 1984, p. 75)

Another influential Nepali periodical *Gorkhali* was published in 1915 from Banaras under the editorship of Suryabikram Gyawali. It actively campaigned for the progress of Nepali language. The editor believed that one way of making progress of the language was through the publication of periodicals. In the first issue of this Nepali weekly the editor wrote:

It is most regrettable to note that while people of all *jati* are engaged in the development of their language, our Gorkha brothers have allowed their language to lag behind all others. Calcutta University considers our language to be weak and does not recognise it in its curricula. (Onta, 1996, p. 44)

Before the publication of *Chandra* and *Gorkhali* in 1901, the first Nepali periodical in Darjeeling called *Gorkha Khabar Kagat* was launched by Rev Ganga Prasad Pradhan. He had bought the press from the Christian Missionaries and gave the name Gorkha Press. The primary objective was to spread the Christian missionary ideals among the hill people through the medium of regional language. But the publication of this periodical was monumental, as it reflected the rise of Nepali language consciousness. It was not only the first Nepali newspaper to be published from Darjeeling hills, but was also the second Nepali periodical published in India, after *Gorkha Bharat Jivan* published from Banaras. The application of the term 'Gorkha' in the name of the periodical and his press displayed the rising affection toward the *jati* and the language (Rai R. , 2012, pp. 1-3).

A poem entitled *Ghazal* was published on 1<sup>st</sup> Oct 1916 in *Gorkha Khabar Kagat*:

Oh! Gorkhali you are in slumber,  
You are behind other *jati*...  
Nepalis are more than fifty lakhs,  
Alas! Language is yet to advance,  
There is no language here there is no language there,  
Even in school there is no language. (cited in, M N Pradhan, 1991, p.24)

The above poem written by Parasmani Pradhan, who was a student at that time, showcases the concern about the dismal state of Nepali *jati* and language. It also showcases the census awareness and the disaffection against the schools for not providing Nepali in the curricula. Another poem entitled *matribhasa* by the same writer was published in *Gorkhali*. The writing noted that the language of the Gorkhali (people) was in great danger and implored the people to "start preaching your mother tongue." (Pradhan N. M., 1991, p. 22). The ethnic people in Darjeeling had accepted Nepali as their *matribhasa*. In the academic discourse, scholars generally believed that the concept of language based identity and the concept of

mother tongue was absent in India before the advent of colonialism. It was in the colonial period that we see the germination of such phenomenon, owing to the colonial practice of maintaining census and various other official reports, where the diverse people were differentiated based on various features, one among which included language. In the earlier period, in nineteenth century, Nepali poet Bhanubhakta simply used the word *bhasa* (language) to denote the language. By the early twentieth century the concept of *matribhasa* started to gain currency among its speakers. Nepali language became an intrinsic part of cultural identity. Nepali as a *matribhasa* was further disseminated with the inauguration of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924, where its founder like Parasmani Pradhan and Suryabikram Gyaweli frequently used and propagated the idea of *matribhasa unnati*.

The Nepali language which became the lingua-franca of the migrated people in colonial India was given the status of *matribhasa*. This not only raised the prestige of the language, but it also helped in connecting and binding the Nepali speaking people emotionally. By considering language in danger, a notion of fear was used by the Nepali intelligentsia, to mobilise the people on a linguistic basis. The first quarter of twentieth century, witnessed the growth of emotion towards the mother tongue in India. Unlike the Tamil or Telegu language movement in South India, during the early twentieth century, where language was personified in the form of Mother Goddess, (Mitchell, 2009, pp. 12-13) (Ramaswamy, 1997, p. 79) the emotional attachment towards the Nepali language did not precipitate into such language personification. The important feature of the growth of the concept of mother tongue among the people of Darjeeling hills was that it was able to unify diverse ethnic people based on a common language - Nepali. This does not mean that ethnic language and dialect had completely disappeared in the hills, but the people accepted Nepali as their primary language instead of the ethnic language.

The linguistic consolidation among the people of Darjeeling was further encouraged by the growth of political consciousness. Since 1907, the people of the hills – Nepali, Bhutia and the Lepchas collectively demanded for a separate administrative unit for Darjeeling hill based on various distinct reasons. One among such reasons was the language, which was different from mainland Bengal. By 1917, the first political party from Darjeeling, known as the Hill's Men Association, was established. The growth of political awareness and their demands reflects that the people from the hill regarded themselves as distinct linguistic community.

### **Nepali Public Sphere and linguistic consolidation:**

In 1914, Gorkha Sahitya Samaj was established by the Nepali speaking students of Darjeeling government school. It was one of the earliest societies established to work for the promotion of Nepali language. The creation of this society was one of the first events in the Darjeeling hills to showcase the dissent of Nepali students against the dominance of Hindi in the school. The Darjeeling Government High

School had a library named Hindi Sahitya Samaj, which had collections of different books and periodicals only in Hindi. The Hindi Sahitya Samaj was not interested in collecting Nepali books and periodicals. Therefore, the students of this school protested and founded Gorkha Sahitya Samaj to collect Nepali books and periodicals. (Pradhan, 1985, pp. 1-2). However, Gorkha Sahitya Samaj was not the first society to be formed by the hill people for the promotion of Nepali. Perhaps the first concerted effort can be seen in the formation of Gorkha Library.

Gorkha Library was established in Kurseong in 1913. (Chalmers, 2009, pp. 109-147) It is regarded as first Nepali public library established in India. Among the objectives of the Gorkha Library included the promotion of Nepali language, education and creation of an amiable relationship among the hill communities. Gorkha Library was one of the first public institutions established not only to work for the progress of language and education but also for the unity among the hill people through Nepali language. On January 1919, during the inauguration of a new permanent building for library, Dharnidhar Sharma read his influential poem *Udbodhan*. This poem was also published in the local periodical *Chandrika*. Sharma implored the people to awake and work towards the path of progress.

Before 1918, Hindi, Bengali, Urdu and Tibetans were taught in the schools of Darjeeling as a vernacular with the exception of Nepali. During the visit of the Vice Chancellor of Calcutta University in Darjeeling Government School, the Nepali students presented a petition requesting permission for the use of Nepali in the schools. But the lawyer accompanying the Vice Chancellor remarked Nepali as a “coolie’s language”. (Onta, 1996, p. 42) This event caused much indignation among the hill people. The incident was published in *Gorkhali*, and a campaign was launched for the recognition of Nepali in the schools. The students also made a request to the headmaster, Sarada Prasad Mukherjee of Durbar High School of Kathmandu to contact the Calcutta University. Durbar High School was opened by the Ranas of Nepal in the second half of nineteenth century, for educating the ruling aristocratic family of Nepal. *Chandrika*, published from Kurseong in its 5<sup>th</sup> May 1918 issue, implored that bringing uniformity in the language was the way to get approval for Nepali by the Calcutta University. In July 1918, Calcutta University recognized Nepali as a vernacular which could be used at Matriculation, Intermediate and B.A level.

In 1924 Nepali Sahitya Sammelan was established at Darjeeling. It was the first Nepali literary society in India. The creation of this institution led to the acceptance of a broader meaning of the term Nepali. The first Chairman of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan, Hariprasad Pradhan in his inaugural speech defined the meaning of the term Nepali. He said:

We should call this organisation Nepali Sahitya Sammelan because the word has a broad meaning. It refers to all races of Nepal – Magar, Gurung, Kirati, Newar, Limbu, etc...Different people might use

different tongues but there is no person who cannot understand Nepali language... No particular race can claim that this language to belongs to them alone. (Hutt, 1997, p.117)

Similarly, another founding member Parsamani Pradhan said in his speech:

We are Nepalis. Within the fold of Nepali there are many *jatis*. Newar, Gurung, Rai, Tamang, Bhutia, Lepcha, Tharu, Sunwar are all Nepalis. All the *jatis* have their own independent language, but owing to the fact that all can speak and understand Nepali, we should first work for the progress of Nepali language. (Pradhan, 2010, p. 35)

Therefore, the establishment of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan marked the official beginning of a new identity based on the Nepali language. In Nepal, the authorities and the common people did not accept the European nomenclature of Nepali for people as well as the language. The foundation of this literary society was important as the Nepali was accepted instead of terms like *Gorkha bhasa* or *Khas-Kura* or *Parbatiya*. In Nepal, *Gorkha bhasa* was preferred until the word 'Nepali' got its official recognition in the decade of 1930s. Given this context, the establishment of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan was a historical event in forging the linguistic identity of the Nepali speaking people in India. The Nepali speaking people in Darjeeling officially regarded themselves as well as their language as Nepali.

### **Conclusion:**

The adoption of Nepali as a common tongue and as a *matribhasa* by the diverse ethnic people in India was not a drastic event. It took over a period of time, and the initial groundwork was prepared in Nepal where Nepali had been used as the official language since its political unification. In Nepal, cultural unification of diverse people was not achieved due to its geo-political factor owing to which ethnic people used Nepali as a secondary language. It was in India that various ethnic people, emigrated from Nepal, adopted Nepali as their primary language as *matribhasa* and started to work for its *unnati*. The concept of *matribhasa*, although influenced by the British colonial policy, helped in binding the people with the language emotionally. The concept of *matribhasa* was further consolidated by the political developments and educational needs in Darjeeling hills, which necessitated unity among the people. This unity among the people of Darjeeling hills was achieved through the means of Nepali linguistic identity exemplified by the establishment of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan.

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