

Globalisation and Identity: The Case of the Lepchas in Sikkim

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The process of social change in India under the influence of external forces like Westernization, modernization and the globalization has produced vast sociological literatures covering the philosophical understanding of Indian society encountering with the political economy of modernization and globalization. The process has provoked a wide-range debate among the academic community on the issues of national character, the idea of nationalism and romanticisation of fragmented identities. The journey of democracy, development and the celebration of plural identities in postcolonial India has paradoxical in character in which both the resistance and co-operation between the local and national is the reality. This paper is an attempt to conceptualize the nature of identity formation, the value of cultural symbol and the local subsistence as found in case of Lepcha Movement in the state of Sikkim, particularly when the country is passing through a process called globalization.

Keywords: global ethics, mythology, market, development project, globalization, subsistence ethics, naturalism.

Introduction

In Nehruvian India there was a conscious effort to base Indian national identity as a unified identity which was to be composed not only of the cultural institutions but of symbols and representations. Up to this period the cultural construction of national identity was based on the construction of meaning which influences and organizes both the actions and the formation of national subjectivity which Benedict Anderson termed 'an imagined community'. The end of Nehru regime has been the starting point of India becoming a fragmented nation due to the development of certain micro-level identity movement following the line of caste, religion language and region. The coming of

globalization has further strengthened these socio-political identity based movements. Globalisation has forced intellectuals to have a relook at the established definition of the term 'Indian national identity'; they are now trying to examine the factors that have left a dislocating impact to the vision of Indian national unity. What is happening to cultural identity in late- modernity?

One can define globalization as a complex process, operating on a global scale, which cuts across national boundaries, integrating and connecting communities and organization in new space- time combination, making the world in reality (Appadurai, 1997: 291, 299). Fragmentation of Indian society had started especially after the emergency period in mid-1970s and it received a boost with the adoption of the Mandal Commission report. Since then a new politics began on the basis of caste, language, region, religion etc. People started questioning the founding secular principles of Indian democracy. Lately globalization is playing a significant part in strengthening these fragmented identities in the sphere of economy, polity and society. Now market has become the focal point to conceptualize individual identity. Due to the influence of global market, micro level movements have begun to fuel new discourses on democracy and development. With the influence of the globalization the subaltern groups of people have become conscious in raising their voice for securing political power and new self-identity; they have started movement against the negative fallouts of globalization. The new movements take the shape of ethnic and tribal movements, movements by the environmentalists and so on to protect their identity. Globalisation as a process of social change refers to multiple cultures interacting with each other within a single territory. The boundaries of society have expanded from local community, through states to global order.

According to Arjun Appadurai (1997), globalization can be defined by looking at the relationship between five dimensions of global cultural flow which can be termed as, (a) *ethno- scape* (b) *media- scape* (c) *finance- scape* (d) *idea- scape* and (e) *techno-space*.

Ethno scape: With globalization, there has been a constant flow of people throughout the world. They can travel across countries and continents. A large-scale special movement of people is taking place, which leads to the continuous contact with different groups of people at the global scale.

Finance scape: There is a free flow of finance and capital beyond the national territory. Although it was not new for India, (in the colonial period British had established the East India Company in Kolkata) it established an order based on one-sided exploitation.

Idea scape: The idea scape is composed of elements of the enlightenment worldview which consists of concatenation of ideas, terms and images including freedom, welfare, rights, sovereignty, representation and the master term democracy. Due to globalization the integration between peoples of different civilizations is increasing and these increasing interactions intensify civilization consciousness.

Techno scape: The global flow of finance leads to the free flow of technology and scientific equipment all over the world in a disjunctive manner.

Appadurai argues that due to the removal of barriers and boundaries, peoples now encounter cultural homogenization. This global cultural flow leads to the process of intensification of interaction among peoples across territories. The 3rd world countries, which celebrate multi-culturalism, look at the process of homogenization as a serious threat to their identities and cultures. Due to the declining authority of the state a process, what David Harvey calls *detritorialisation*, has come into force. In the Indian context, the state earlier had the power to give license for the establishment of any industry or business enterprise but after globalization the global powers can exert enough pressure for a free entry of global capital.

Many sociologists and scholars have tried to understand the impact of globalization in their respective ways. Roland Robertson (1992) has talked about convergence vs. divergence. He argues that every society has to face the phase of convergence at different speeds but moving towards the same point mainly due to the result of the overriding emergence of industrial man. On divergence, he stated that the idea determines people's perception towards modernity, which varies from one person to another. On this issue Baum (1974) argues that societies are converging in some respects like in terms of technological and economic sense and on the other hand diverging in terms of social relation. Actually he has brought in the issues of societal continuity into the debate. Basically the term

globalization encourages or involves homogenization vs. heterogenization and universalization vs. particularization, and the whole process is very complex.

Marshall McLuhan in his book *Exploration in Communication* (1960) introduces the idea of 'global village' keeping in view the compression of globe. He emphasizes on the media and television which help consolidate the idea of the global community. Another sociologist Wallerstein (1974) argues that the term globalization is related to the time-space reality. Giddens (1990) says it's a trend to think of 'time-space distanciation' the condition under which time and space are organized so as to connect presence and absence. Giddens talks about the idea of the disembedding of action from 'local' contexts, as an aspect of the move into 'modernity' and then 'high modernity', under the process of 'globalization' (Robertson, 1992: 14). Manuel Castells (1997) argues that, globalization and strengthening of various cultural identities (religious, national, ethnic, geographical and gender among others) have occurred over the last 15 years side by side. Some scholars view that globalization requires a global, cosmopolitan cultural homogenization of the world while others criticize the process. Yet another group of scholars feels that globalization will overcome local and historical identities (ibid: 56). Hall (1996) observes that globalization has forced the social scientists to reconstruct their knowledge about culture, identity and practices across the globe.

Identity discourse in global era

According to Asish Nandy (2004), the national identity in pre-globalization period was defined as *Homo Psychology* where the individual defined their identity in relation to the culture of the nation. In the opinion of Margaret Mead (1953) it creates a *National character*. This *homo psychology* was produced through a Durkheimian understanding of *Social fact* where the individual's action is taken to be guided by a strong set of rules and regulation of the society.

This kind of Identity is on the decline now with the declining power of state or territory. For example, world war of 1914, there was the violence or war with one homo- psychologicus to other which prompted movement of people from one territory to another, which

shows the strong homogeneous feeling about their own territory. Even the people on the move tried to preserve collective identities. This is because they feel alienated from a state that no longer represents them or helps them building meaning in their lives. They therefore tend to build these identities on historical foundation. Now the feeling of homogeneous identity is on the wane. In this respect, people crave much more than just market economics. For a Marxist, even the state can be said to be an agent of globalization rather than of the people. The reaction to this is an alternative construction of meaning based on identity (ibid: 62).

Hybridity of culture has been one of the outcomes of globalization. Arjun Appadurai observes that in global world people have recognized themselves as a 'global citizens'. The process of globalization also creates an instrumental identity in and between the existing nations. Alongside the rise of global citizenship and hybridization of culture one can also notice the growing assertion of ethnic identities. With 'global cultural flows' and homogenization there is also a growing tendency towards micro-narratives and local cultural movements opposing the dominant order (Appadurai, 1998:43; D'Souza, 2006: 70-71).

In other words, globalization is not simply about the rise of global culture that all people of the world supposedly share, but it is also about how people are responding to this possibility of a global cultural flow and how they are increasingly forming local cultural traditions and identities as a response to general global trend (Berger, 1998: 305). The main difference between pre-globalisation period and globalisation is that, in first one there was power relation between state and other people but in globalisation period, all sections of the people like subaltern people, women, Dalit, ethnic groups have got an alternative to explore and got power to resistance and started questioning their given status by the hegemonic social order. The 'culture of silence' got the new voice to rise for protection of their culture. Globalisation has a different effect on upper class, upper middle class and middle class on the one hand and poor and other subaltern on the other. At the time of new landscapes of globalisation, Benedict Anderson's 'imagined community' can be extended to 'imagined world'.

Under the process of globalization state and the national culture is gradually losing its power and in the language of Eric Erikson,

most of the societies are facing the newly emerging challenge called 'identity crises. This trend of identity formation in the era of globalization has produced the postmodern subject conceptualized as having no fixed, essential or permanent identity. Identity has become a movable feast, formed and transformed continuously in relation to the ways 'we' are represented or addressed in the cultural systems surround us (Hall, 1987: 277). Now we have 'pluralisation of identities'.

In the context of globalization, Fredric Jameson (1984) has recently used the term 'nostalgia for the present', which is one of the central ironies of the politics of global cultural flows. Using global media and sophisticated communication technology people across the world collect news about the important events in their country of origin, like Independence Day, Republic Day, and *holi*, Diwali, Id etc. they feel very happy and also feel that they are in touch with their culture. The people away from their homeland are always nostalgic about their past and take care in reproduction of their culture. Turner points out that nostalgia in its literal meaning as homesickness- a feeling of melancholy, weeping, anorexia and despair. Turner has emphasized that the notion of homelessness as a basic form of estrangement or alienation. It is something like what Erich Fromm says that the cultural root and relatedness of individual or a group of people have a certain kind of attachment with their home called nation having the feeling of oneness to feel about our cultural value system. Turner and Straut argue that there are four main presuppositions of the nostalgic paradigm: the idea of history as decline, the sense of a loss of wholeness, the feeling of the loss of expressivity and spontaneity, and the sense of loss of individual autonomy. Media images that are enshrined and heavily coded with local cultural meanings beam out to new places to find their home in the television sets across continents. These are some forms of expression of the feeling of localization (Robertson, 1992: 156-157).

In the present scenario, we can understand the situation of the third world countries, especially India, through Huntington's *The Clash of Civilizations* (1996) and Appadurai's *Dead Certainty: Ethnic Violence in the Era of Globalisation* (1998). Both the works point to how and why different kinds of fundamental movements are taking place and what have been their modes of resistances.

Basically, globalization has created great divisions among human groups and contributed to the spread of cultural conflicts. Huntington argues that Nation- states will remain the most powerful actors in the world affairs but the principal conflicts of global politics will occur between nations and group of different civilizations. The people of any region or country deeply care for their culture and civilization. A civilization is cultural entity and it gives identity to the groups on the basis of language, history, religion, customs, and institutions. Huntington states that due to globalization the world is becoming a smaller. The interactions between peoples of different civilizations are increasing and the increasing interactions intensify civilizational consciousness and awareness about difference and commonalities between civilizations. These awareness and consciousness in turn find expression in different movements related to culture, language and identity. Some close home examples are movement by the Lepcha community in North Sikkim, Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling hills, and various kinds of environmental movements.

The process of globalization has created a debate among the academicians around the world on the question which kind of identity that different societies and peoples are having in this contemporary time? The continuous interaction between global and local culture has produced three types of identity based on the processes like cooperation, resistance and assimilation. It seems many things are happening simultaneously which can be summed up as (a) deterritorialisation of identity, (b) localization of identity and (c) hybridization of identity.

a. Deterritorialisation of identity

The 'deterritorializing' character of the globalization process refers to the creation of a global identity going beyond the socio-geographical location of the cultural experience of people. One way of understanding this is to think about the places we live in as being increasingly 'penetrated' by the connectivity of globalization. The idea of deterritorialization, then, grasps the way in which events outside of our immediate localities, or 'action(s) at a distance' become increasingly consequential for our experience. It is argued that the modern culture is less determined by location because location is increasingly penetrated by 'distance'. The more

obvious examples of this sort of penetration of localities are in such areas of mundane cultural experience as our interaction with globalizing media and communications technologies, television, mobile phones, email, the Internet, or in the transformation of local into increasingly 'international' food cultures (Tomlinson, 1991).

What is at stake in such examples is a transformation in our routine pattern of cultural existence which brings global influences and outlooks into the core of our locally situated life world. Television news brings distant conflicts into the intimate spaces of our living-rooms, 'exotic' tastes become routinely mixed with domestic ones, assumptions we make about the health and security of our families now routinely factor in an awareness, however vague, of global contingencies such as environmental risk or stock-market stability. But we can add to these a more subtle example of deterritorialization, precisely, the reach of the institutional-modern form of identity into a global cultural life. It is basically related with cultural power, which is the reflection of homogenous identity (such as McDonaldization)

b. Localisation of identity

As a counter trend of the global cultural identity is the dramatic rise of social movements based on identity (such as gender, sexuality, religion, ethnicity, nationality) across the world. These cultural sources of resistance to the power of globalization in contemporary times go a long way towards getting this power in perspective. The localization of identity in the present time is absolutely a political one which is based on the polarization of people on their primordial identities to transform them into vote banks. Other major cause of the growth of local identity is the fear of losing ethnic culture because of the onslaught of global culture and the forces of homogenization. Thus various grass roots movements are emerging now to preserve their own culture, language and environment. This trend can be seen also a resistance towards the cultural hegemony of the western world in the name of globalization. The drive towards 'globality' combines logic of capitalist expansion with the rapid development of deterritorializing media and communications technologies. But this drive is opposed by various processes and practices expressing different orders of 'locality'. Amongst these we can count the

cultural identity movements that Castells focuses on.

c. Hybridisation of identity

The term hybridization is now a buzz word in social sciences in discussing the cultural identity of different societies under the era of globalization. Whereas the concept of deterritorialisation and localization refers to the two extreme point of macro and micro identity formation, the term hybridization refers to the mixing of the macro culture *i.e.*, global culture and the micro culture *i.e.*, the local culture. Intellectuals like Baudrillard emphasizes on the hybridisation of identity where people both accepts the global cultural flow while preserving their emotional attachment with local cultural experiences. The identity thus formed can be termed as hybrid identity. Hybridization as a process of culture change is not new in India. From the period of Mughals to the present time, Indian society has been through a process of acceptance and rejection of different cultural patterns introduced by the Muslims, British and the others. D. P. Mukerji, in this context has observed that Indian social change is not a complete transformation of one culture to another culture; rather it's a synthesis of Indian traditional Hindu culture (thesis) and the British culture (anti-thesis). In the same tune Yogendra Singh has termed Indian social change as modernization of Indian tradition, where the Indian tradition is smoothly adjusted with the modern culture. This nature of Indian social transformation has been conceptualized by Dipankar Gupta as 'mistaken modernity'.

One can say that globalization has also not completely transformed the Indian cultural identity into a new one rather it has created more space for the coexistence of different cultural identities. The modernization process appears to be one dimensional approach to the study of change in Indian society through the Western imagination. The main agent to reorder the Indian traditional socio-cultural identity into the western individualistic attitude is the Indian state. But globalization is not a one dimensional approach nor does it say that the Western culture is more rational than Indian culture; rather it renders equal value to all cultures. This ethics of globalization do not authorize any culture to leave a homogenizing effect.

The rationale of this study is to examine how the Lepcha community of Sikkim responds to the forces of globalization and regroups itself for survival as a community while preserving the essences of their culture. Data have been collected through an intensive fieldwork by using interview schedule, unstructured questionnaire. Ethnographic method has been applied in the study. The case study of Lepcha movement as a field has been taken to examine how the process of localization works. For some years the Lepchas, the indigenous tribe of Sikkim, are organizing themselves to preserve their sacred lands and holy mountain where, they believe, their ancestral spirits reside. They have launched an organized protest against the construction of dams over the Teesta River.

Unequal citizen in global era: the Lepcha movement in Sikkim

Human conduct is always established in a particular space or place. The interaction between man and environment and the associated practices form the basis of social organization of space and place. Such practices range from human beings' struggle for livelihood to its involvement in cultural practices. These interactional competencies and embodied practices find expression in the form of what in common parlance is understood as 'surrounding', 'environment', 'landscape', 'territory', and so on. The landscape and the territory provide a social relationship between man and nature which evokes a sense of belongingness in the land and nature.

The space and surrounding environment are perceived by local people as sacred. We can explore the relationship of man and environment from various perspectives. In this context, some relatively unexplored spaces are (1) Sacred Forest/Grooves, (2) Traditional Pastureland, (3) Sacred Mountains and Hills, and (4) Sacred Water bodies.

The Lepchas in Sikkim are now categorized as minority group although they were the original inhabitants of the state. Over the years they have progressively lost their control over the resources and power as they have been the victims of political and economic developments. They have accepted their marginalization generally without much protest and movements. However, in the recent

past they have reacted in an organized manner against the mainstream development paradigm sponsored by the state especially in Dzongu area, which is reserved for the Lepchas. The Lepcha community has raised the question over their identity and rights over the nature and environment. The movement has taken a 'value' turn as they consider the area as their sacred land, which cannot be polluted by the outside agencies. The idea of 'subsistence ethics' shapes their social action in everyday life. This ethnic identity based on the beliefs of 'naturism' has prompted a collective consciousness in the form social movement when a number of NHPC Hydropower Project were introduced over the Teesta and Rangeet River in the name of 'development'. The anti-project movement took shape since the Lepchas perceived that if constructed they would destroy their nature and livelihood. Their harmonious relationship with Teesta and Rangeet Rivers, which for them were sacred and had religious value, would be destroyed. This movement is unique in a sense that it combined environmental, ethical, mythological, and religious rights issues while opposing the setting up of the hydro projects.

One can illustrate the point as to how they attach value to their land and nature and the mountains and assert their exclusive rights over the sacred Dzongu area. They call themselves as 'Mutanchi Rong Cup' - beloved children of Mother Nature and mount Kanchenjunga, observe traditional nature worshipping festival of *tendonglho-rum-faat* where the Lepchas pray to this hill which save tribes from flood etc., they perform *Mutrumfaat*, or *shikari puja* at the time of harvesting period, perform *sakyourum-faat*, giving thanks to the god after harvesting, perform *amyarum-faat* at the time of making roof, perform *kumrum-faat*, handloom *pooja* and so on.

The movement illustrates how modernization and development process help arouse ethnic and environmental consciousness and movement. The mega-hydroelectric projects in Dzongu area are largely perceived by the Lepchas as threat to their culture. While labeling the projects as 'a violation of a sacred Landscape' the Lepchas of Sikkim started the anti-dam movement after a convention in Gangtok in 2006. The convention in Gangtok was a turning point in the battle for their land, their culture and narratives (Little, 2008: 16).

The movement for protection of Dzongu represents a case where

the traditional values related to ecology and environment is in conflict with the mainstream perspectives of the development. Here the dominant discourse on 'development' does not match the perceptions and interests of the ethnic people. The development in the form of setting up hydro power plants is primarily aimed at serving the interest of the rich and powerful who need a favourable infrastructure for new areas of capitalist explorations and adventure. According to Habermas, this mode of development, which does not care for the environment or the downtrodden, is prompted by the 'system world' and the instrumental action of the people, which may be linked with state politics or the technologically advanced global order. The environment where the Lepcha people maintain their livelihood constitutes their life world, which, they think will be threatened if the hydropower projects come up in their sacred land.

In the field I could locate myself with the people and their locality and engaged myself with them. Through the ethnography method, we conceptualize the things sociologically and perceive peoples' perceptions of their life through the eyes of the people or the respondents. In the field I interacted with teachers, old people, members of young generation, shaman or *boongthing* and some social activists who work with NGOs. They clearly expressed their concerns about the probable fall-out of the up-stream hydroprojects. They apprehended a mass-scale chaos and unwelcome interference into their religious sentiments. My guide, Mr. Kachu, a lecturer of college in Sikkim, introduced me with the local people. Two men, Rengzone, 38 years and Sonam Lepcha 48 years, gave an introduction about their landscape, their local beliefs (which mentioned above), ecology and environment and how the Lepchas in the area perceive the recent intervention in the name of development. They talked about Dzongu or Lingtham and what value or sentiments are attached to the area by the Lepchas. They told that earlier there were around 20 villages, people were engaged in cultivation of paddy crops and large cardamom and the production was only for the consumption but now their livelihood is threatened.

One of the *panchayat* heads of the village, Kenjaang, said that he was in favour of Hydro power project because it would provide employment to the unemployed. As a preparation 30 people were

sent to the area of NHPC for training. In middle Lingtham, we met a man who was working in monastery and some teachers of middle and primary schools. Here they were all against the NHPC project. They showed courage and awareness to protect their culture and Dzongu land. One school teacher said that they took efforts in sensitizing students about the adverse effects of so-called modern development projects and the need for initiatives to protect their indigenous culture, their code of conduct and indigenous knowledge.

The informants were largely against the project; they showed me that in Dikhchu region the houses, the river, the mountain and the plants faced destruction due to the construction of the project. One of the farmers, Nemkoth Lepcha, favoured the construction of road but not the dam. One government school teacher, Oungchuk Lepcha, 35 years, said that in the year 1989 and 1992 government of Sikkim sanctioned funds for the construction of roads but they opposed the construction that time. But now they realize how badly they need new road for better communication. Another teacher said: 'the children are the future stars and our indigenous knowledge system, culture, mythological beliefs, Lepcha language and local folk dances will be in the hand of these children. They will preserve the homeland. We want to educate our students for this task'. From 2001 they have made arrangements for training for the children in handloom work, which is a part of folk culture of the Lepchas. This field study shows that a large majority of the Lepchas wanted to preserve their land and culture against the onslaught of the post-colonial development projects initiated by the state. In the part of the upper Lingtham, I met Miss J.J Lepcha, a 42 year old lady school teacher as well as social activist, who had elaborated how she worked for the empowerment of women and the protection of Dzongu. She was working for protection of Lepcha language, and training the youth in Lepcha crafts like making of Lepcha caps, weaving of traditional cloths etc. Thus she emphasized on the need to preserve the traditional knowledge system linked with the livelihood and culture.

Conclusion

The paper shows how the modern development discourse is

perceived as a threat by the ethnic communities like the Lepchas of Sikkim, and perceived as a threat to their shared belief system, habitat and livelihood. The intrusion of the exogenous forces makes them aware of preserving their livelihood, ecosystem, beliefs and sentiments. This perception of threat of development prepare them for a movement on ethnic line against the state supported development project like setting up of hydro power projects in the upper streams of the Rivers Rangit and Teesta. The Lepcha resistance to the state sponsored development model highlights the character of a new social movement in contemporary time based on the conflict between indigenous knowledge vs. scientific knowledge. The resistance movement in Lepcha dominated areas speaks for a narrative of life, nature and culture opposed to the modern development discourse. From social science perspectives, the cultural ethics of indigenous people like Lepcha has logic of practice which finds expression in their everyday life, the idea of happiness and subjective meaning of nature and culture. In sum, the minorities in the mainstream development discourse do not have a say in defining what would be their course of development; they are only the recipients of the state and market sponsored development discourse. What is important is to create an ambience of an enlightened dialogue between the stakeholders, which at the moment is not in sight.

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