

Understanding Caste Structure of the Gorkha Community: A study of the Darjeeling Hills.

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Darjeeling sometimes also referred to as “the Queen of Hills” is a beautiful hill station situated in the northern part of West Bengal. Darjeeling has a history dating back to the 18th century when it used to be a part of Sikkim. Eventually it became part of British India only in the year 1835 when the Raja of Sikkim handed over Darjeeling to the East India Company. Darjeeling is also famously known as the “paradise of tribes.” It provides home to a number of tribes such as the Lepchas, Sherpas and the Tamangs. However the area is dominated by the Nepali community at large. The present study focuses on the various Nepali castes residing in the Darjeeling hills.

The word Darjeeling comes from the corrupt form of the word “dorjee” which means “thunderbolt” and “ling” meaning “place”. It therefore means the place of “dorjee”. Darjeeling can be divided into two distinct tracts, the Tarai immediately beneath the hills and the duars region lying east of river Tista. The Tarai region is a low lying belt of the regions well conspicuous by a number of rivers and streams running down from the hills. In the early 19th century Darjeeling was an unhealthy marshy tract, formerly covered by dense malarious jungle, in which aboriginal tribes of Meches, Dhimals and Koches burnt clearings and raised their scanty crops of rice and cotton on a system.¹

Until the beginning of the 19th century Darjeeling formed a part of the princely state of Sikkim. The Raja of Sikkim was then engaged in an unsuccessful war against the warlike gorkhas of the Nepal.² At the end of the war the Gurkhas had wrested the Sikkimese territory as far as eastward as Tista and conquered the Tarai i.e the low-lying belt of the country which formed tea-garden of Darjeeling planters. The East India Company at that time was engaged in a war with Nepal which broke out in 1814. By the Treaty of Titaliya (1817) the conquered places of Sikkimese territory by the Gurkhas was restored and the East India Company received the territory of Darjeeling from Sikkimese Raja.

Accordingly in 1828 General Llyod (then Captain) along with Mr J.W Grant, the commercial resident at Malda were deputed to effect a settlement. It was during this journey both of them were attracted by the location of Darjeeling. These representatives also impressed the then Govenner-General Lord William Bentick to establish a sanatorium in Darjeeling and occupy it for its strategic militant position, as it was key to penetrate Nepalese territory. Eventually in the year 1835, 1st Feb the Raja of Sikkim by the deed of grant gifted the East India Company Darjeeling out of friendship.

NEPAL AND THE NEPALESE :

¹ Malley, L.S.O, *Bengal District Gazetteers*, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, Calcutta, 1907, p.no. 1

² Ibid, p.no.19

Nepal is an independent country situated in the east side of the Darjeeling. It roughly occupies an area of about 450 miles in length and 150 miles in breadth stretching from east to west. Darjeeling is located in the boundary territory of the Nepal. So it is not surprising to witness almost 80 percent of the population belonging to the Nepali community in the Darjeeling area. An agile, energetic people, they are capital agriculturists, as well as carpenters, tanners, blacksmiths, tailors.³

The term Nepalese is a generic term which includes many tribes and castes within the ambit of its wide name. However the term Nepalese is rather a linguistic one as it denotes the people sharing the same common language the Nepali. It includes many castes some belonging to the agriculturists, some practicing gold smithery, some living as Brahmins and some as cultivators. The term Gorkhas and the term Nepalese is used interchangeably. It is although difficult for someone outside the community to understand the difference between the two. They get easily confused by the two terms used interchangeably. However among the Nepalese the term Gurkha or the Gorkhas are most heard and most familiar which denotes a ruling race or a dynasty hailing originally from the Nepal region. The Nepalis also called the Gurkhas were a Martial race. They were not only a martial race but they were also good in road construction, clearing forests, agriculture and tea plantation works. The real strength and courage of the Gurkhas were exposed to the British only after the First Anglo Gurkha war in 1814. This eventually led to the deployment and recruitment of the Gurkhas in the Indian army.⁴

The Gurkhas were recruited not only in the Indian army but they were also recruited armed and police forces Bengal, Assam and Burma by the the Britishers. This is the reason we find large scale concentration of the Nepali speaking population in the hills of Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan and in the foothill areas of Arunachal Pradesh and Burma region.

The genesis of the Nepali community and its development may be traced back to the days of Prithvi Narayan Shah. By the middle of the 18th Century Prithwi Narayan Shah consolidated the entire Nepal which comprised mainly three principalities namely Kathmandu, Patan and Bhatgaon. Thus he gave birth to a new nation which came to be known as the Gorkhas. The name Gorkha is supposed to have been derieved from Sri Gorakh Nath, the patron saint of the Gorkhas. The ascendancy of the name Gorkha seems to have been inextricably linked with the saint.⁵ Among the Nepalese people inhabiting the region of Central Nepal the Kasandas, the Hains and the Chepangs are the most barbarous tribes. The Kasanda are the most primitive tribes among the three and live by hunting and preying the animals in the forests. The Hains belong to the lower ranges of east Himalayas and they keep themselves aloof

³ Newman,*Newmans Guide to Darjeeling*, W Newman and Co., Calcutta, 1900, p.no.99

⁴ Subba T.B., Sinha A.C., *Nepali Diaspora In a Globalised Era*, Routlege, New York, 2016, p.no.4

⁵ Bagchi, Romit, *Gorkhaland Crisis of Statehood*, Sage Publications India Pvt. Ltd, New Delhi, 2012, p.no.4

from other tribes. The Chepangs tribe in Nepal basically practice semi nomadic life style. They inhabit the areas in Nepal such as the Makwanpur, Chitwan and Gorkha districts.⁶

In India the term Nepali and Gorkha are used interchangeably by the people. K.K. Muktan in his book describes the word “Gorkha” indicates nation or country while the term “Nepali” defines nationality.⁷ A C Sinha in his book *The Indian Nepalis Issues and Perspectives* believes the two terms ‘Nepali’ and the ‘Gorkhas’ is a polarized one. According to him the term Nepali is a confusing one as it denotes the Nepali people of Bhutan, Nepal as well as India. Again the word ‘Gorkha’ seems to have been strongly advocated by the people of Darjeeling area. The name Gorkhas as well as the people Gorkhas residing in the Darjeeling region seems quite acceptable as the Indian government has a regiment under the name The Gorkha Regiment, the GNLF (Gorkha National Liberation Front) party working in the Darjeeling hills claims the name Gorkhas and the migration of the people from the region named Gorkha in Nepal to India particularly Darjeeling hills is quite confounded. Taking both the names into considerations A C Sinha prefers to call the Nepali people residing in India by the name the Indian Nepalese Origins or Nepamul Bharatiya.⁸ The Gorkhas are known worldwide for their valour and bravery.

Rank	Caste/Ethnic Group	Population	Percentage Composition
1.	Chettri	43,98,053	16.60%
2.	Bahun	32,26,903	12.18%
3.	Magar	18,87,733	7.12%
4.	Tharu	17,37,470	6.56%
5.	Tamang	15,39,830	5.81%
6.	Newar	13,21,933	4.99%
7.	Kami	12,58,554	4.75%
8.	Nepali Muslims	11,64,255	4.39%
9.	Yadav	10,54,458	3.98%
10.	Rai	6,90,989	2.34%
11.	Gurung	5,22,641	1.97%
12.	Sherpa	4,72,862	1.78%
13.	Thakuri	4,25,623	1.61%
14.	Limbu	3,87,300	1.46%
15.	Sarki	3,74,816	1.41%

Source : Census of Nepal,2011

⁶ Muktan, K.K. , *The Gorkhas in the Freedom Struggle of India*, Concept Publishing Company Pvt. Ltd., 2015,p.no.20

⁷ Khanduri, Chandra B, *A Re-Discovered History of The Gurkhas*, Gyan Sagar Publications, 1997

⁸ Sinha, A.C.,Subba,T.B., Nepal, G.S., Nepal,D.R., *Indian Nepalis Issues and Perspectives*, Concept Publishing Company, New Delhi, 2009, p.no.15

People caste and background

In the year 1835 when the British first acquired Darjeeling, the entire area was almost under forest .It has been estimated that the whole of this tract, comprising 138sq.miles contained only 100 people. The first census report of 1871-72 shows the total population of place at 94,712 persons. However, with the development of tea industry and with the influx of the settlers to exploit and use the waste land of the place the population increased significantly.

The term '*ethnicity*' was first used by David Reisman in 1953. The Ethnicity has been however generally understood in an objectives or subjective sense. Harold Isaacs defines it as primordial affinities and attachment. Although Van Den Berghe strongly argues in considering ethnicity as a combination of subjective and objective both. Most scholars do not agree with Van Den Berghe. The ethnicity of the Nepal for the Gorkha people can be traced back to Nepal. However the Lepchas are unanimously considered to be the 'aborigines' of Darjeeling.

T.B Subba in his book *Ethnicity, State And Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling* lays three different propositions on the ethnic history of the Nepali's and the 'people of Nepal origin' are not hundred percent same. In support of his proposition he states that Limbus and the Tamangs often asserts themselves as a group apart from the Nepali's.⁹

Secondly he lays down that the Nepali's as one ethnic group emerged in Darjeeling only in the 20th century. With regard to his second proposition he pointed out that Nepali's had separate identities till 1920's. They regarded themselves as Rai, Limbus, Mangars, Tamangs and it was only the Bahuns,Thakuris, Chhetris, Kamis, Sarkis and Damais who identified themselves as Nepalis.¹⁰

His third proposition lays that to study the history of Darjeeling isolated it from Bhutan and Sikkim would not be justiciable. Darjeeling once formed part of Sikkim and Bhutan so to call the people of those places as immigrants would be wrong.

Caste Background

The Nepali society is a homogenous in structure, however this is not true. The term 'Nepalese' denotes a generic term under which includes many tribes and castes. In the early times the Darjeeling region was inhabited by Lepchas who are believed to be the original inhabitants of the place. The foundation and evidence of caste structure prevalent among the Nepalese can be found in Nepal among the Newars. However it was only in the 14th century caste was organized on a uniform basis in Nepal. It was king

⁹ Subba, T.B., *Ethnicity, State And Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement in Darjeeling*,p.no.37

¹⁰ Ibid,p.no.39

Jayasthitha Malla who with the help of the five Brahmins from the Indian plains, organized the society of the valley into four Varnas and 64 castes on the basis of hereditary occupations genealogies.¹¹

In the year 1769 the Gurkhas wrested the valley of Nepal and they recognized their own Brahmin and Kshatriya orders. They accorded mongoloid tribes to two military castes the Gurungs and the Mangars. The caste structure that existed in Nepal was more or less similar to the Hindu society prevalent in India. The caste structure prevalent among the Nepali community in the Darjeeling areas are also as follows:

<u>Status</u>	<u>Caste</u>	<u>Traditional occupation</u>
High	Brahmin { Upadhyaya Jaisi	Priesthood, Agriculture
	Kshatriya { Chettri	
Middle	Vaisya { Newars Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Gurung, Jogi, Bhujel, Sunwar, Yolmo	Mainly agriculturists except Newars who are in business
	Sudra { Sunar Kami Sarki Damai	
Low		Goldsmith Ironsmith Cobbling Singing/Music

Source: Subba, T.B., Dynamics of Hill Society

Migration History Of Nepalis

The majority of the Nepali's people in Darjeeling hills claims their original ancestry from Nepal excluding Lepchas, Bhutias etc. The British government got the permission to recruit soldiers from Nepal by the Anglo-Nepalis Peace treaty of 1816. However, this was gradually disliked by the Nepalese government as a result of which the British government encouraged Nepali immigration in the Darjeeling hills. However this policy was relaxed during the time of Prime Minister, Bir Shumsher. In 1835 the population of

¹¹ Gopal singh, Nepali, The Newars-An Ethnosociological Study of the Himalayan community, United Asia Publications, Bombay, 1965

Darjeeling was only 100. In the year 1931 the population of Darjeeling reached 3,19,635.¹² This proves that the immigration from Nepal played a handy role in the increase in the population of the area. In the words of Kansakar ' Until 'the installation of Democracy in 1951, the main destination of the Nepalis migrants was India. In the absence of employment opportunities outside agriculture, Nepalis hill people migrated to India, and India became the safely valve for the country's growing population.'¹³ K.R.Sharma and T.C.Das in their book describes Gorkha immigration in Darjeeling area took place in the year 1652 when a few Newars were invited by the Chowgel king. Gradually the Bahuns, Chhettris, Gurungs, Rais, Limbus etc. were invited by the Chowgel Kings of Sikkim-Darjeeling.¹⁴

Darjeeling came to the attention of the British Government when Captain G.S.Llyod and J.W.Grant, Commercial resident at Malda visited the place in the year 1827 and recommended it for acquisition as a site for sanatorium. Lord William Bentick, the Governor General of India, was favorably disposed to the recommendation, noting in a minute "the great saving of the European life and the consequent saving of expense that will accrue both to individuals and to the state."¹⁵ However he was restrained by the objections of Sir Charles Metcalfe who feared that the Nepalese people would take it as an encroachment on their territories. Regardless of all these Sir William Bentick authorized Sir Captain Llyod to persuade the Raja of Sikkim to cede the territory of Darjeeling to the British Government. The letter was as "it is solely on the account of the climate that the possession of the place is desirable, [because] the cold.....it understood.....as peculiarly beneficial to the European constitution when debilitated by the Heat of the plains"¹⁶ The reason for choosing Darjeeling by the British government was manifold especially for its trade with Tibet and health considerations. It was only in the year 1839 with the appointment of Dr. Arthur Campbell the transformation of Darjeeling could be witnessed into a popular mountain sanatorium and hill station. The advent of the 20th Century saw the migration of the Nepali's in the Darjeeling hills. As the British government needed a large number of workers for tea gardens and various official related works as well as brave soldiers they promoted the Nepali's to settle in the Darjeeling hills. The advent of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways in 1881 further boosted the settlement process in the Darjeeling hills.

¹² Dash A.J., *Bengal District Gazetteers*, Government Printing Bengal Government Press, Alipore, Bengal, 1947,p.no.49

¹³ Kansakar, Vidya Bir S, *Research on Migration and Employment in Nepal*

¹⁴ Sharma, K.R. & Das,T.C., *Marginalization of Gorkhas in India A Community in Quest of Indian Identity*, Abhijeet Publications, Delhi, 2011,p.no.04

¹⁵ Kennedy Dane, *The Magic Mountains Hills Stations and The British Raj*, Oxford University Press, Delhi,1996, p.no. 22

¹⁶ Ibid, pp.no.23-24

Caste Structure among the Nepali Community

The Nepalese caste structure has undergone numerous changes and the major reshuffling of the caste structure among the Nepalis can be found during the time of king Prithvi Narayan Shah in Nepal in the year 1769. The caste system before that was not properly organized. However after 1769 the caste structure among the Nepalis can be found similar to the Hindu Society of India. Although considered to be homogenous, the caste among the Nepalis is a heterogenous one. A number of non-Hindu people like the Lepchas and the Bhutias along with the Tamangs and the Sherpas can be found among the nepali community. The high caste among the Nepalis are the Bahuns, the Thakuris and the Chhetris. The middle caste comprises that of Rai's, Newars, Limbus, Tamangs, Mangars, Makhas, Jogis, Sunuwars and the low caste constitutes Kamis, Damais and the Sarkis.¹⁷ Although the society seems to be homogenous one but it is quite complex to understand the inner intricacies of the Nepali community as whole starting from their origin to their present day residing in India.

The notion of pollution is also prevalent among the Nepali community. However the concept of pollution is not as rigid in India as it is in Nepal. The Nepali Community is also divided into two factions. One within which all social gatherings and social customs is acceptable called as *pani chalne jaat* or those from whom water is acceptable. The communities such as the Bahuns, Chhetris, Rai's, Newars, Limbus, Tamangs, Mangars, Makhas, Jogis, Sunuwars, Tamangs, Sherpas, the Lepchas etc. falls under this category. The Bahuns and the Chhetris are considered as equals and the ceremony of marriage is acceptable among the two communities. The marriage ritual is also possible of the Bahuns and the Chhetris with the Rai's, Newars, Limbus, Tamangs, Mangars, Makhas, Jogis, Sunuwars, Tamangs, Sherpas, the Lepchas etc. However it is generally considered that the social affiliation of the upper two castes i.e. the Bahuns and the Chhetris gets denigrated in case of their marriage with the other communities. However the custom is not as rigid as it is in case of the other communities in India. The next category is known as the *pani nachalne jaat* or among whom water is not acceptable. The Kamis, Biswakarma, Damais, Sarkis etc. belong to the category of *pani nachalne jaat*. The marriage and inter dining among them are considered not acceptable. They are considered as low castes and marriage custom is not acceptable of them with the upper caste. But the caste structure is very flexible among the Nepali community and one may find numerous evidences of marriage of low caste with the upper caste people.¹⁸

The Gorkhas or the Gorkhalis are so named after their former capital of the country. They formerly occupied the district around the town of Gorkha, which is around 40 miles from the west of Kathmandu.

¹⁷ Subba, T.B., Dynamics of the Hill Society The Nepalis in Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989

¹⁸ Bennett, Lynn, Dilli Ram Dahal and Pav Govindasamy, Caste, Ethnic and Regional Identity in Nepal: Further Analysis of the 2006 Nepal Demographic and Health Survey. Calverton, Maryland, USA: Macro International Inc, 2008, p.no.02

The Gorkhas are said to be of the Rajput descent and to have been driven out of the Rajputana area during the occasion of the invasion by the Musalmaans.¹⁹ They first settled near the Palpa region area, passed through the Kumaon hill area and extended their sway gradually to the Gorkha region of Nepal.

The Gorkhas are in general tall, slim, muscular and their features resembles similarity with the natives of Hindustan. They form a martial race and are essentially part of the Indian army. However owing to intermarriage they have become intermixed. They generally occupied the Kathmandu valley.

The Newars constituted the largest section of the inhabitants of the Nepal valley. They were the prior rulers of Nepal before the invasion of the Gorkhas. The Newars share certain feature in common however, they are short in stature compared to the Gorkhas and bear Mongolia traits. They perform all the activities related to agriculture, metal working etc. However, the Newars are known mostly as trading or merchant community among the Nepalis.

The Mangars and the Gurungs chiefly used to inhabit the west part of Nepal valley. Most of them are recruited in the Gorkha regiment of the Indian army. They are short in stature and share the characteristics of Mongolian people. The Kiratis and the Limbus people occupied the place east of Nepal valley. Both are famous as hunter class. They are short in stature with flat nose, powerfully built and display Mongolian features.²⁰ The Kiratis, the Limbus, the Mangars and the Gurungs almost all had their ancestry in Nepal while there were other Indian Nepali also who do not share their ancestry to Nepal. However the advent of the 20th Century and the expansionist policy of the British government promoted the Nepali people to further emigrate from their native places to India and settle as workers, soldiers in Indian army and plantation workers in various parts of Assam, Burma and Darjeeling hills.

The origin and the ancestry the Lepchas is not quite clear. The Lepchas or the Rong-Pas meaning ravine folks are considered to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the Sikkim. According to traditions it is believed that the Lepchas were the descendants of a couple who had escaped from a great flood and had established themselves on the top of the mountains of Tedong.²¹ It is believed that the Lepchas originally were the inhabitants of Tibets. They lived precariously in Tibet making their living by hunting, farming and subsisting on herbs. Even the language of the Lepchas is similar to the Tibetans.

¹⁹ Singh, Munshi Shew Shankar, Gunannand, Pandit Sri, *History of Nepal Translated from Parbatiya*, Abhijeet Publication, New Delhi, 1877, Reprint 2012, p.no. 17

²⁰ Ibid,p.no.18

²¹ Newman,*op.cit*,p.no.95

Conclusion

The structure of Caste is a complex one to understand for any layman. The proliferation of the caste into sub caste, jati, varna further made the process a difficult one for a laymen to understand. The structure of Caste among the Nepali community is also a complex one. However, it may appear a simplified one although it is not. It is not a homogeneous one. With a plethora of people living in the Darjeeling hills it is not easy to understand the division of a caste among the Nepali people in a simplified perspective. However it must be admitted that the Caste system among the Nepali community is not a rigid one. The customs prevalent in other parts of India such as the Khap Panchayat, Honour Killing is found missing among the Nepali people. In spite of all these the practice of pollution and difference between the upper caste and the lower caste can be visualized only in certain remote parts of the area. The community as a whole believes in the independence of the caste structure. However the Lepchas, Sherpas claim their existence out of the fold of the Nepali community. They believe they have customs and rituals different from the Nepali community and they share their own customs and rituals. Further research in the area can always provide space for discovering numerous aspects of the Nepali people in future.

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