

A Search for an Identity: A Study of the Sherpas of Sikkim

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Abstract:

Being a multi-ethnic state, Sikkim has witnessed ethnic politics, more so after the advent of the British. This created ethnic boundaries between the Bhutia, the Lepchas, and the Nepalis which furthered a quest towards asserting their individual political rights. The present paper specifically takes the case of the Sherpas of Sikkim and endeavours to bring to light the issues and challenges they have been facing in asserting their rights, the culmination of which has altogether led them to question their identity within the state. This paper historically analyses their migration pattern, their contested political identity, the role of ethnic associations in asserting their identity and the status of their language within the state. Therefore, it overall critically explores the identity formation of the Sherpas in Sikkim.

Keywords: *Sherpas, identity, ethnic politics, ethnic groups, associations, language, state and Sikkim.*

Introduction

We create inter-ethnic politics of “belongingness” and “othering”, and give birth to exclusive internal groups while intentionally separating ourselves from the rest. This factor paints the reality of most multi-ethnic states today. Sikkim, being one has witnessed politics of identity and predominance of ethnic politics, ever since the monarchy. The identity politics and conflict over resource entitlements established the contours of fault-lines in the Himalayan borderland (Arora, 2006: 4065). Today, a small state like Sikkim has recognized the importance of ethnicity as a political resource which can be used as a negotiating tool. It has witnessed the emergence of ethnic competition and rivalry over state resources, which are, however, subtle and fewer than in many other multi-ethnic states of India. Such ethnic competitions have also of late encountered the emergence of small ethnic groups and communities, whose voices and demands are more often unheard or even suppressed, vis-à-vis the interest of the dominant or the majority groups in the state. This paper specifically focuses on bringing forth the voice of one such small group, namely, the Sherpas of Sikkim.

According to Brass (1991), ethnic identity formation takes place in three sets of struggles. Firstly, it is within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources that create group boundaries and a rule for inclusion and exclusion. Secondly, it is between ethnic groups as competition for rights, privileges, and available resources. Thirdly, it occurs between the state and the dominant group (ibid:16). However, these three sets of struggles occur at different times and in different ways. Brass further argues that ethnicity and nationalism are largely the studies of politically-induced cultural change. A process through which elites and counter elites within an ethnic group select aspects of a group's culture, attach new values and thereby use them as symbols to mobilize the group to compete with other groups (ibid:75).

On the 16th of May 1975, Sikkim was integrated into the Indian Union as its 22nd state, ending the age-old monarchy which lasted for over 300 years from 1642 to 1975. It was accorded Article 371F that guaranteed “all existing laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority” (Vandenhelsken 2010: 179). The Parliament also made Provisions for seats in the legislative assembly, for protecting the rights and interests of different sections of people in the state. However, those at the political forefront continued to retain their position.

Today, Sikkim houses numerous communities and ethnic groups due to the influx of people from neighbouring countries of Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan and parts of India. Therefore, the ethnic composition of the state remains a very complex one. The three predominantly identified ethnic groups are, the Bhutias (Lhopos) the Lepchas (Mons) and the Nepalis¹. The Bhutias migrated to Sikkim in the thirteenth century from the eastern and central part of Tibet via the neighbouring valleys of Chumbi and Ha (Balicki 2008: 66). Their first descendent went on to become the Chogyals² of Sikkim who ruled over for more than 300 years. The Lepchas were in Sikkim before the monarchy, alongside the Limbus and the Magars, who comprised the first few inhabitants in the state. According to Mullard (1979), the Lepchas were the Western Tibeto-Burmese migrants, who came to the Brahmaputra basin and later extended to various parts of South-East Asia and Assam hills and thereby made their way to Sikkim (Mullard 1979: 3). The Bhutias and the Lepchas are today recognized as the indigenous ethnic groups. The Nepalis constitute a cluster of communities namely the Newar, Bahun, Chettri, Jogi, Sanyasi, Limbu, Rai, Magar and Thami, and the Scheduled Castes like Kami, Damai, Sarki and Maji (Chakraborty 2000: 3806). Many made their way from Nepal during the “Anglo-Gurkha War” of 1814-16, which was the direct result of stimulation by the British, who encouraged them to settle there, occupy wastelands and bring about economic growth and development in the then newly emerging state of Sikkim (Sinha 1975:15).

Today the Bhutias constitute 20 per cent, the Lepchas 13.16 per cent while the Nepalis constitute 66.84 per cent of the total population of the state which was 611 thousand as per the Census of 2011. We also find the presence of groups, like Marwaris, Bengalis and Biharis, who were in Sikkim since the 1917s, to profit from the expansions of the British cardamom trade (Balicki 2008: 6).

Given such a backdrop, this paper specifically focuses on positioning the Sherpas of Sikkim, by bringing to light their issues and challenges within the state. It critically throws reflects on the question of their contested indigeneity, their political identity, the role of the ethnic associations and the status of their language, all of which are essential tools for the identity formation of an ethnic group. As identity formation is backed by both psychological and political factors (Allahar, 2001: 197). Therefore, the paper overall looks at the broader question of what being a Sherpa mean in Sikkim.

Methodology

The study was carried out in three villages of West Sikkim, namely Upper Martam, Lower Sanku and Srinagey. These settings have been chosen, as they comprise the oldest Sherpa settlements holding a majority of their population in the state today.

Situated at an altitude of 5200 feet, Upper Martam is a remote village under Bermiok Martam Gram Panchayat Unit of Geyzing Bermiok constituency, located at a distance of 119kms from the capital Gangtok. There are around 50 Sherpa houses, belonging to Pankarma, Khamba Chen and Lama clans. The Government Primary School there is among the few schools where the Sherpa language is taught up till class five.

Situated at an altitude of 7200 feet and 6500 feet respectively, Lower Sanku falls under the Sanku Radhu Khandu Gram Panchayat Unit and Srinagey under the Baughten Sapung Gram Panchayat, both of which are a part of Manebony Dentam constituency of West Sikkim. Lower Sanku is 18kms from Upper Martam and 133 km from Gangtok. There are around 20 Sherpa houses where Lama, Chen and Lama Sherpa clans are found. While Srinagey is 11kms from Lower Sanku and 138kms from Gangtok. There are around 60 Sherpa houses where Pang, Kham and Lama Sherpa clans reside.

The study is based on qualitative research where both primary and secondary sources are used. Primary data was collected through purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used for selecting respondents belonging to various backgrounds like school teachers, religious preachers, members of ethnic associations, women and senior citizens, from the Sherpa community. An unstructured interview which included both personal interviews and focused group discussions was conducted. A total of 35 respondents from the three villages have been interviewed.

The data was collected for a period of one month from 22nd November to 25th December 2018, as a part of a pilot study for my doctoral research. The arguments, observations and cases put forth in the paper are a critical analysis of both the secondary sources and data gathered from the field.

Who are the Sherpas?

The origin of Sherpas can be traced back to the Kham region of Eastern Tibet where they were known as *sharpa* meaning the easterners, with the word *Shar* meaning east and *pa* denoting the people (Furer-Haimendorf 1964). They also called themselves *serwa*, a Tibetan term denoting people from the east. Kunwar (1989) argues that according to the Sherpas of Solu in Northeastern Nepal, the word *Sharpa* originated much later, before which they were called *Bhote*, a term given by the Nepalese³ to people who migrated from Tibet (Kunwar 1989:35). He postulated that the term

Sherpa came much later to differentiate them from *Bhote*. Nevertheless, over the years the descriptive term Sherpa has come to be accepted and identified for and by the ethnic group.

Locating and Identifying the Sherpas in Sikkim

The Sherpas today are found in all four districts of the East, West, North and South regions of the state. The majority of their population is confined to the villages in West Sikkim, namely Bharang, Begha, Buriakhop, Okhrey, Ribdi, Singling, Siribadam, Srinagey, Upper Bermiok, Upper Martam, Upper Thambong, and in higher regions of Tashiding constituency. They are also found in regions of South Sikkim such as Damthang., Nayabusty, Ranlang, and Wok. While in the East they are confined to Khamdong, Pathing and Regu. The least number of their population is in the North, specifically in Kabi and Tingda (Subba 2011: 281).

As the Sherpas are represented under the Bhutia census their appropriate share of the population cannot be determined. However, according to a report surveyed and compiled by the Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) in 2017, there are at present around 50,000 Sherpas in Sikkim. As per the report, the Sherpas comprise 8.18 per cent of the total population of the state, which is far from being an accurate one. So a need of having a distinct census of one's ethnic group becomes essential to ascertain their appropriate population. Therefore, a demand for the same is being carried out by the Sherpa. The Sherpas are *Nyingmapa*⁴ Buddhists who follow Lamaistic-Buddhism. They celebrate the Tibetan Losar⁵ as one of their important festivals. Their dialects and written scripts belong to the larger Sino-Tibetan language family.

After Sikkim's integration with the Indian Union in 1975, the Bhutias and Lepchas were given the "political minority" position, which was considered a discriminatory provision by a few Nepali politicians (Arora 2006: 4065). They were recognized as Scheduled Tribes in 1978, which further also extended to eight Bhutia subgroups like the Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo (Arora 2007: 199). The Nepalis conferred that the Scheduled Tribe (ST) status given to Bhutias was unjustifiable, given their background of monarchical rule for over 300 years. However, Bhutia-Lepchas contended that they were educationally, socially, politically and economically still backward.

As a virtue of this new ST identity, the Sherpas were entitled to the assembly seats, reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas. This platform gave them a new identity. However, this move was in no time met by a series of protests from the Bhutias who formed the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC), the Sikkim Bhutia Committees followed by other Tribal Organisations to safeguard their mutual interests and "redefine" their identity. They argued that the inclusion of the eight subgroups within their fold in the constitution under the Sikkim ST order had distorted the distinctive "Bhutia identity" and had threatened their "indigeneity". This prompted the DSA to write a letter to the then President of India Shri. Shankar Dayal Sharma on July 7, 1995, demanded: that "the Sikkim Scheduled Tribe Order 1978 and People's Representation (Amendment) Act 1980 be upheld and the attacks on the rights of Sherpa Community by some tribal organisations of Sikkim be stopped."

Despite several endeavours, the Sherpas today are recognised as one of the indigenous communities of Sikkim, under the Sikkim Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978 along with Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo.

Mapping the Origin and Migration Pattern of the Sherpas

The Sherpas have had a long history of trans-Himalayan migration, between Tibet, Nepal, and India. Therefore, to better understand their migratory pattern it becomes essential in mapping their migratory root between these adjoining borders. Their initial migration from their place of origin in Kham of Eastern Tibet was mostly driven by religious imperatives. Ortner (1989) and Oppitz (1973), who worked intensively on the Sherpas of Nepal, pointed out that the Sherpa ancestors migrated between 1480 and 1850s from Kham to specifically escape politico-religious and internal turmoil, then being carried out by the powerful Mongol neighbours in the north. Ortner (1992) in her other famous book *High Religion: A Culture and Political History of Sherpa Buddhism*, postulates that they first moved to Tinkey, in the southern central part of Tibet, but due to the rumours of an invasion from the West decided to move via the *Nangpa La* pass and reached Khumbu in Northeastern Nepal, and settled in parts of Pangbonche and Dingboche, in 1533, that were already sites of meditation for Tibetan lamas (Ortner 1992: 2). This group of Sherpas then constituted twenty-five to fifty persons (ibid). While Jestard (1969) argues that they migrated due to frequent conflicts between the *Gelukpa*⁶ and the *Nyingmapas* in the seventeenth century. The Sherpas belonging to the later sect escaped persecution by moving southward to Khumbu via the *Nagpa La* pass. Paul (1989), points out that there were no monasteries or *gompas*⁷, in Khumbu before the seventeenth century, that proves the Sherpa's arrival there only thereafter, as *gompas* constituted a significant feature of their society.

The famous anthropologists Furer-Haimendorf (1964), argued that the Sherpa ancestors migrated south of Rolwaling Himal, thereby turning towards the east and settling in Solu and later moving to Khumbu. On the contrary, Kunwar (1989), stated that after leaving Kham they went to Lhasa, Dingri, Khumbu and Solu, finally settling in Junbesi previously known as *gomba dzyung* (ibid:120). The Sherpas population eventually grew in parts of Northeastern Nepali namely in Solu, Khumbu and Pharak, emerging as the major Sherpa settlement regions. They were also found in Taplejung, an area originally inhabited by the Limbu population of Nepal (Furer-Haimendorf 1964:3).

Such early scholars and researchers who worked on the Sherpas mostly depended on oral narratives and folklores to construct their arguments, as there were no proper references found before the seventeenth century. However, one can draw an idea that the Sherpas specifically migrated to regions that were conducive to carrying out agriculture, herding or were of religious significance.

Trade formed an important economic activity of the Sherpas besides agriculture and animal husbandry. Therefore, frequent contact with Tibet continued through trade and also through visits made for religious purposes. Thus, they retained their uniqueness in terms of religion, dress, kinship, language, marriage and social life, which still resembled the people of Tibet (Fisher 1990: 32). In addition, "trade with Tibet formed the subject of several Government orders and decisions embodied in documents, copies of which are still in possession of individual Sherpas" (Furer-Haimendorf 1975: 61). Therefore it was significant for the Government of Nepal to not disappoint

the Sherpas to ensure smooth trans-Himalayan trade routes. Moreover, due to their geographical isolation in Northeastern Nepal from the Central Government in Kathmandu, the Sherpas were able to retain their authentic traditional practices for a very long time. They were also exempted from many Government imposed rules, most of which were “Hindu centric” in nature.

The Sherpa Migration to Sikkim

The Sherpas were first mentioned in the Gazetteer of Sikkim by Risley⁸ (1891), where he referred to them as *Shar-pa*. According to him, the Sherpas along with other Tibetan groups, who came from Tibet at various points in time, were admitted to Pemayangtse Monastery in West Sikkim, on heavy entrance fees (Risley 1891: 29). He further mentions a person known as Rabden Sher-pa, who came to Sikkim in the 1750s from Tibet as a regent, during the rule of Chogyal Gurmye Namgyal, the fourth Chogyal of Sikkim (ibid). This proved their presence dating back to the eighteenth century. Few scholars argue that the Sherpas mostly migrated to Sikkim during the Nepalese wave of migration starting from the end of the eighteenth till the early nineteenth century, encouraged by the British. A contrary view was postulated by Nepal (2009), who argued that the Sherpas were hunters who had descended from the Bhutia-Lepcha cross-group (Nepal: 2009). Such differences in interpretation among scholars occur as, besides their migration record from Kham to Northeastern parts of Nepal, there are hardly any documented writings or research mapping their migration to Sikkim.

Contrary to my knowledge from the secondary sources that mostly reflected on the Sherpas of Nepal, my respondents had a different narrative. They disagreed with having any migration history from parts of Northeastern Nepal and denied any association with the Sherpas there. Phurba Sherpa an 80-year-old respondent from Lower Sanku, stated “we are the Sherpas who migrated from Pang and Kham to Sikkim, we came here directly from Tibet, we have no connection with Khumbu Sherpas or Darjeeling Sherpas.” Most respondents shared a similar view. According to them even when they shared a similar origin, they were both different as after the persecution in Kham, few Sherpas migrated to Sikkim, while few made their way to Nepal and to Darjeeling. Yangki Sherpa from Srinagey argued, “they are Nepali Sherpas and we are Sikkimay Sherpa”. Their basic contestation is a difference in their nationality that differentiated them today as a “Nepali Sherpa” and a “Sikkimay Sherpa”. However, this persistent disassociation or disagreement on having any similarities with the “Nepali Sherpas” also points towards their resistance to being clubbed as a Nepali in Sikkim, who is still considered a “later comer” and is therefore not entitled to many state privileges. Their claim of direct migration from Tibet to Sikkim is their way of proving their “indigeneity”, which has been threatened and questioned on several occasions within the state.

Therefore, the question of their migratory history almost always intersected with their need to prove their indigeneity as a “Sikkimay Sherpa”. In addition, the respondents were quick in pointing out their migration from Tibet as early as the twelfth century when the state was ruled by local Lepcha Chiefs. Almost everyone interviewed, vehemently put forth that they migrated before the Bhutia wave of migration and so before the establishment of the Chogyal dynasty in 1642. They agreed to the presence of two other communities then namely the Limbus and the Magars. Sangay a Sherpa monk at Upper Martam, skilled in Vajrayana or the Tantric Buddhism, stated that they in fact came

four to five generations earlier than the Chogyals. Such early migration narrative was backed by their mention of a *lal paisa* or a red coin circular in shape with a hole in between. It was then used for allocating land among the people by randomly tossing it in the air to mark their land entitlements for livelihood. Only after the establishment of the monarchy did land come under the Chogyals preview and was distributed accordingly amongst his subjects. Such mention of the *lal paisa* was their way of justifying their presence in the state much before the arrival of other ethnic groups. However, such narratives contradict what is found in the existing studies that mention only the presence of the Lepchas, Limbus and the Magars before the establishment of the monarchy.

According to a few respondents especially the Sherpa religious monks, Sherpas came to Sikkim around the twelfth century from the Pang and Kham of Tibet, on hearing rumours of the great Guru Padmasambhava⁹ paying his visit to Sikkim before Tibet. Therefore, the Sherpas being a highly religious group ventured into the “holy land”, to seek his blessings.

The majority of the responders pointed out that they first made their way through a place known as Dentam Tar with Tar meaning the valley. Being an agriculturalist group, they were drawn by the fertile land, suitable weather, dense forests and the river there which provided a perennial source of water; where few of them went on to settle. Thus, Dentam Tar proved to be an apt region for the Sherpas for carrying out their livelihood through hunting and agriculture, specifically through shifting cultivation. However, the inevitable heat and humidity of this low lying region, to which the Sherpas were not accustomed, quickly made way for mosquito-borne diseases like malaria and dengue. Thereafter, they moved uphill to nearby high altitude regions of Begha, Lower Sanku, Okhrey, Srinagey Siribadam and Upper Martem where we today find them in majority.

One interesting factor to be taken note of is that their migration usually happened in clans. Due to this very reason, the Sherpas found in these villages are mostly a cluster of similar clans. As they practice exogamy, marriage between the Sherpas of Sanku, Sirinigri, Jaw Bari, Soshing, Panding, Begha, Matam and Okhrey was predominantly found. However, there were no restrictions found on marrying people from outside the Sherpa communities.

The Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) of 1984

The existence of grievances among ethnic groups leads to politicisation and eventually mobilization of its people. This in turn leads to the formation of ethnic associations (political or non-political), where the socioeconomic grievances of its people are accelerated. Therefore, associations have become an important instrument in mobilising their people to raise their voices and put forth their demands and grievances. The redress of ethnic interests and the fulfilment of demands also require an organisational form of interest groups and unions to perpetuate stability (Arora and Kipgen 2012: 431).

Sikkim has over the years witnessed the instrumental role played by such associations in the everyday lives of its people. The DSA, established in 1984, has today, emerged as the only relevant Sherpa association in the state and has gained immense popularity among its people. It claims to be “non-political”, however, the demand that it usually brings forth are political in nature, thereby blurring the boundary between the two. Over the years, it has also been instrumental in bringing

forth Sherpa unity and their voice of dissent, by together recognising various subjugations and injustices inflicted on them. The DSA has over the years specifically brought forth three major demands as discussed below.

1. The Demand over Protection of Land under the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917

According to the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917, “the Lepcha-Bhutia group were not allowed to sell, mortgage or sub-let any of their lands to any person other than a Lepcha or a Bhutia” (Sinha 2009:77). In other words, no Bhutia-Lepcha can sell, mortgage or sublet any of their lands to any person besides a Bhutia or Lepcha without permission from the Durbar, thereby also cancelling land transfers passed without the government approval during the previous twenty-five years.” (Moktan 2004:157).

Despite the Sherpas being a sub-group of the Bhutias, they are denied inclusion under the Order on claims of the violation of Article 371F, which safeguarded all the hitherto existing rights and privileges of its people. Therefore, the Sherpas were not entitled to the Order, on grounds that it dated back to 1917 which was now a protected right under Article 371F. However, the DSA backs their demands for the Sherpa’s inclusion within the Order No.1 as the Sherpas were a sub-group of Bhutias; a historical fact that dates back to 1891 when the first census operation was conducted by Risley. Even then the Sherpas were included as a Bhutia sub-group, alongside other “Tibetan” groups (Sikkim Express: 16th July 2017). Such a claim is further strengthened by Sarkar (2017) in her book *The Sherpas Across Eastern Himalayas* where she argues that the Sherpas, were found in a region called Dorji Ling, today known as Darjeeling in the 1800s when it was still under the territoriality of Sikkim before the British took it over in 1835. They were then clubbed under *Bhotia* meaning they were a sub-group of the Bhutias who had migrated from Tibet (Sarkar 2017: 122). Therefore their inclusion under the Bhutia fold dates back to the 1800s and much before the Order No.1, came into existence in 1917. This entitled them to all the privileges, including the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917. In an interview with Mr Pasang Sherpa, the spokesperson and an active member of the DSA, he stated:

There is a misconception and a misrepresentation of history regarding the Sherpas. We were a part of the Bhutias ever since the 1890s, or maybe even before that and certainly much before the Order No.1 of 1917. Either, the people do not read the history or they do not want to understand it. Either way, we are facing the brunt. We are being undermined time and again.

The association have been proactively taking the matter as far as to the Union Ministers of India, for their rightful inclusion under the Order No.1. However, even to date, the demand does not find its significance within the state.

2. Demand for Four Sherpa seats in the State Legislative Assembly

The “Representation of People (Amendment) Ordinance 1979, laid down the new formula for the distribution of seats on ethnic lines. Out of the 32 State Assembly seats, 12 were reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha, 1 for the Sangha (monastery monks) 2 for the Scheduled Castes, and the remaining 17 were for “general” in which any group could contest including the business community of Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis and Baniyas who were in Sikkim ever since 1917. In May 1999, the

DSA submitted a memorandum to the then President of India Shri. K. R. Narayanan, demanding 4 of the 12 seats of Bhutia-Lepcha in the State Assembly, to be reserved for the Sherpas. This was born out of direct discontent due to the persistent absence of their representation from the 12 seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas. Even this demand has been a long drawn one, with the DSA even in twenty years, still postulating for the same.

3. The Demand for Separate Census Representation of the Sherpas

The Sherpas, are till today represented under the Census representation of the Bhutias. A separate reliable data on a population ascertains the ethnic community's exact numerical strength and thereby legitimises their demand for a proportionate share of reserved seats for political representatives, jobs in government employment, and seats in educational institutions (Arora 2007: 215). Anthony D. Smith in his book *The Ethnic Revival*, argues that names are important, for not just self-identification but also as an expressive emblem of the collective personality. Until a collective cultural identity receives a proper recognition or name, it lacks in an important sense, a recognizable sense of community both among members and outsiders (Smith 1981).

Therefore, it becomes important for the Sherpas to have A separate Census, to further legitimise their demands. The DSA has so far requested the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation (DESMI) for a Census of the Sherpa population in Sikkim. Their delegation even approached the then Chairperson of the National Commission of Scheduled Tribe Sir. Nand Kumar Sai, demanding a separate Census for the indigenous Sherpa of Sikkim in 2016. However, the path towards achieving the same still seems long driven.

The Sherpa Language and the Question of their Identity

Language and culture are often referred to as ethnicity, which matters the most and is one of the pronounced markers of distinctiveness (Xaxa 2005:1365). It plays an important role in the ethnic politics of the state, amidst a scenario where having a distinct language and culture becomes essential in claiming the rights and entitlements of a group. Till the 1850s the Lepcha and the Bhutia language were used in the administrative affairs of Sikkim (Arora 2007: 206). In 1911, Charles Bell, the then political officer of Sikkim, declared that as 75 per cent of Sikkim's population were Nepalis, there were administrative requirements for Nepali speaking citizens. This was followed by an increase in Nepali nomenclatures for places in Sikkim, which were hitherto known by Bhutia-Lepcha names. Today Nepali has emerged as the lingua franca of the state, narrowing the boundaries between various ethnic groups and thereby building inter-ethnic relations (ibid: 206). The twentieth century witnessed increased usage of Nepali as the administrative language, which brought forth the Nepali identity into a broader platform. On August 31st 1992, it was officially included in the Eighth Schedule of the Indian Constitution.

The 1980s witnessed a cultural revival of the tribes in Sikkim, with the Lepchas, Bhutias and Limbus establishing their tribal associations, languages, rituals and practices. Their languages were however already recognized, established and taught as a part of the education curriculum from the very inception. In 1995, the Sikkim Official Languages (Amendment) Act, further recognised and included Newari, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Sherpa and Tamang languages to its list (Thapa 2000: 100).

Their presence and participation can today be found in politics, judiciary, administration, media and also in the educational spaces of the state. However, the basic problem with these later recognized languages is the disappearance they are facing amongst their people with very less conversing in the same on a daily basis. It has also failed to find a significant place in the education system, with their recognition only till the secondary level vis-à-vis Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbus and Nepali that are well established till the University levels. The Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University has already categorised languages such as Sherpa, Bhujel, Gurung, Magar and Rai-Rokdung as being endangered.

The Sherpa language belongs to the larger Sino-Tibetan language family and is marginally a tonal language written best and represented in Sambota (Tibetan script) script. It has evolved over thousands of years in its span and space resulting in a considerable size of vocabulary (4000+ content words), and unique phrasal or clausal structures (Sherpa: 2005). The language however only found its recognition in schools in 2002, nearly after half a decade of its recognition as a state language.

In Sikkim, there are only a few Sherpa settlements that have been capable of preserving their language for their younger generations. Upper Martam is one such village that is known for having preserved its old Sherpa customs, traditions and also their language. The Government Primary School there is among the few schools which teach the language. In interviewing Tshering Palden Sherpa, a Sherpa language teacher who was also my moderator in the field, on the relevance of learning one's language in today's scenario, he stated:

Today there are only 36 schools out of a total of the 766 Government schools that teach the Sherpa language with only 55 Sherpa teachers across the state. I think language is the only tool that can now keep the voice of our community alive, we should treasure it and spread awareness about learning it.

According to him, the children had stopped taking interest in learning the language for two reasons. Firstly, there were fewer qualified Sherpa teachers and secondly, the curriculum required an update to bring in new interesting ideas into the present teaching pattern. Upper Martam may be among the few places where the Sherpas have been successful in preserving the importance of their language to date. Few elderly respondents seemed highly critical of those who did not know the language, which today ironically comprised the majority of them. Sonam the old 91-year-old Sherpa pointed out "we only knew the Sherpa language before and that was enough, now my children hardly talk to me in Sherpa, my grandchildren, do not even speak the language."

The culture of embracing other languages cannot altogether be blamed upon the newer generation, as the education system itself gives more importance to Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbus and Nepali, which also promises more opportunities in return. Phurba Sherpa another Sherpa language teacher from Okhrey put forth "it is important that we learn our language before it disappears, it is also our duty to converse with our children in Sherpa. Look at us; even we are conducting this interview in Nepali, which is a problem." Ugen an independent Sherpa writer from Srinagey who has been working on compiling a Sherpa English dictionary stated:

What is the use of teaching the Sherpa language when the children forget about it later, we cannot force them. So I believe in preserving it through my writing, so later when they seriously want to learn the language, it will be made easier through my dictionary. That will be my contribution to my community.

While the respondents are aware of their disappearing language, only a few like Ugen Sherpa have been instrumentally active in taking steps towards preserving it through his writings, while the majority were not found to be taking any effective steps. The DSA has made its contribution by producing a Sherpa Multilingual Dictionary. However, one cannot ignore the indirect pressure from the state to learn Bhutia, Lepcha, Limbu and Nepali, after the secondary level that also promises one more job prospects. Amidst such a scenario, the Sherpa language has been struggling to find recognition, a significant place, and a future within the state.

In a multi-ethnic state, where language is significant, Nepali has become its lingua franca surpassing all other “indigenous” languages. The irony also lies in the fact that despite such ethnic-linguistic consciousness, very few converse or manage to read or write in their language. Many ethnic groups struggle to assert their identity amidst constant interactions with others. Thus, the younger generations cannot be altogether blamed, as the education system itself is structured around only a few languages. Such phenomenon directs toward various complex ethnic issues and crises, especially among groups whose language has already been categorized as endangered by the Centre for Endangered Languages, Sikkim University.

The Sherpas in Search of an Identity

The Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, protected the Bhutias-Lepchas as the indigenous groups while misrepresenting and “othering” its sub-groups. Dawa a young conscious Sherpa of Lower Sanku stated:

In all respect, we fall under the Bhutia-Lepcha indigenous group but the ball was never in our court. The groups at the political forefront have used us to serve their political gains and excluded us from them when we posed a threat to their hegemony. But the question is did we ever have a choice here?

The arguments put forth by the DSA were also simple, as they are politically a sub-group of the Bhutias, they are entitled to all the rights and privileges that came with being one. “As the identity of an individual speaks subjectively based on how they feel or how they interpret their position in the social context” (Allahar 2001: 197).

Therefore, till today the Sherpas are a group who is misrepresented in the political, economic and social realms, of the state, despite being among the earliest inhabitants. Due to a lack of proper representation, this ethnic minority also lacks a sense of belongingness to an ethnic group. In addition, their frustration over their land rights and their disappearing language within the state has led them to a feeling of what Narang (1995) termed “cultural deprivation”. According to the term, one of the significant inducements of ethnicity comes from the feeling of insecurity and a fear of disappearance amidst a sea of majority. This insecurity is back by discrimination, oppression and

the state also identifying with the majority which may lead to a homogenization process due to modernization leading to the creation of synthetic state culture (Narang 1995: 35). One such example can be drawn from my fieldwork, which interestingly coincided with the political parties campaigning for the May 2019 State Assembly Elections. Any meetings, talks and programmes organized by the DSA or any Sherpa organisations raised suspicion and were even tagged as “anti-Government” in nature by the then Government. Therefore, most respondents were initially even reluctant to participate in interviews and group discussions, to avoid drawing unwanted attention. It was after my constant assurance of their safety that they finally agreed to participate. This projects an attempt toward suppressing the emerging voice of dissent. “Unfortunately in the inter-and intra-ethnic rivalry or conflicts within the state, rather than acting as an impartial arbiter, the state assumes the role of sword arm of the prominent ethnic group” (Narang 1995: 35). Therefore, the dominant groups have been sharpening their identity, with state-makers, leading political parties and socio-cultural organisations in their favour. Ethnic identification has become a decisive variable among groups in their relationship and quest for political privileges (Kom 2011: 162).

Over the years, this has resulted in the Sherpas unitedly becoming more assertive as an ethnic minority. There has been a cultural resurgence among ethnic or linguistic groups that conveys a loss of identity due to increased social pressure from dominant modern society (Narang 1995: 36). Such long-term negligence, misrepresentation and “othering” ironically within their own state have led them on a journey towards a search for an identity, while leaving behind a task for us to understand on a deeper level what being a Sherpa means in Sikkim.

Conclusion

The introduction of political, economic and social forums in the state made ethnic identity a more attractive tool. This saw the emergence of many groups, coming to the forefront and instrumentally asserting their identity. We see how the “politically marginalised groups” namely the Sherpas, reconstruct their identity discourse by galvanising the Government and associations for resource-related struggles, land rights, seats in legislatures, and a proper census representation. Thus, identity politics stimulates an endless process of deconstruction. An identity can be internalised, re-shaped, re-constructed and transformed and therefore is very dynamic. The Sherpas in Sikkim, are in a process of instrumentally creating a unique identity and recognition for themselves in the state, even when the path towards achieving the same has not been easy. However, identity assertion requires more recognition; there is a need for an emergence of more Sherpa associations catering to their socio-economic and political demands individually, especially when we today find only the DSA overall working for their wellbeing. There is also a necessity for more research and discussions on the Sherpas, who still struggle to construct an answer around “who are they”. Thus, there remains a task to deeply reflect on them both historically and politically. Only then can they afford to promote and define a distinct Sherpa identity that can be used as a tool to put forth their rights and demands more vocally, eloquently and systematically within the state.

Notes

1. Nepalis are the Nepali speaking population of India
2. Chogyals means the king/Raja of the state.
3. Nepalese is a term used to refer to the citizens of Nepal.
4. *Nyingmapa* is the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, where celibacy for its monks and nuns is an option.
5. Losar is the first day, first month of the Tibetan Calendar, and so a Tibetan New Year, that falls in winters.
6. *Gelukpa* is a new school of Tibetan Buddhism that follows the Dalai Lama. Their monks and nuns practise celibacy.
7. *Gompas* are fortified Buddhist monasteries that are spaces for prayers, meditations and learning centres for Buddhist monks and nuns.
8. He was a British ethnographer and an administrator of Indian Civil Service who carried out extensive studies on the tribes and castes of the Bengal Presidency.
9. He was the 8th Century Buddhist Master from the Indian Subcontinent.

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