

# The Process Of Enculturation: The Nepali Community In Darjeeling Hills And Terai In North Bengal.

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## **Abstract**

*The social environment of any human group plunges into culture. It is the culture, which guides the people- what to eat, what to be done and how to be done, how to talk and how to think. Human behaviours are grossly determined by culture as the individuals are born, raised and live in it. A person can never be free from cultural influences. Melville J. Herskovits in his book, *Man and His Works* (1947) tried to relate culture and individual in terms of enculturation. Enculturation is the process by which an individual learns the forms of conduct acceptable to his group. He points out that in diffusion, the transmission of culture is a gradual process of culture change of which acculturation is one expression which occurs when any two are in historic contact. According to Felix-Keesing, "Culture change may be defined broadly as a reformation in group behaviour, such reformation may be seen occurring from the level of individual experience, as being on innovator or accepting an innovation to that of the total functional and integral setting of a culture system." The Nepali Community is consisted of various castes viz., Brahmin, Chhetri, Newar, Mangar, Gurung, Rai, Limbu, Subba, Bhujel, Damai, Kami, Sarki, etc. With the growing consciousness and identity aspirations created resurgence of culture of respective caste in the latter half of 20<sup>th</sup> century. Since the 1990's, each community devoted themselves to prepare their respective qualifying paper as a 'tribe' based on the features laid down by the Government of India. The urge of preservation of culture transforms cultural aspects of various communities in the region and a change was evident. The paper, hence tries to reflect the basic cultural transformation of few Nepali castes and its effect on their cultural practices.*

**Key words:** Revivalism, Culture, tradition, Practices, Resurgence

## **INTRODUCTION**

Society refers to an encompassing network of social interaction and interrelationship and encloses innumerable individuals and phenomena. Social relationship and social behaviour form the essence of the society. The social environment of any human group plunges into culture. It is the culture, which guides the people- what to eat, what to be done and how to be done, how to talk and how to think. Human behaviours are grossly determined by culture as the individuals are born, raised and live in it. A person can never be free from cultural influences. These phenomena have been explained by Leslie White as 'cultural determinism.' Every human society literate or illiterate has a distinctive culture which governs the behaviour of its members.<sup>1</sup> Melville J. Herskovits in his book, *Man and His Works* (1947) tried to relate culture and individual in terms of enculturation. Enculturation is the process by which an individual learns the forms of conduct acceptable to his group. He (1955) points out that in diffusion, the transmission of culture is a gradual process of culture change of which acculturation is one expression which occurs when any two are in historic contact. According to Felix-Keesing, "Culture change may be defined broadly as a reformation in group behaviour, such reformation may be seen occurring from the level of individual experience, as being on innovator or accepting an innovation to that of the total functional and integral setting of a culture system."<sup>2</sup> According to White, culture is the matrix, which is governed by its own laws of growth and operation. Neither human biology, nor human psychology can analyse the principle of its reality.<sup>3</sup>

## **THE NEPALIS OR NEPALESE**

The Nepalis <sup>4</sup> are a group of people who share a common language and that is Nepali. Nepali is an individual and Nepal is a group of people who speak Nepali language. It is the Nepali language that unites all the tribal groups and other communities. They are both Aryans as well as Mongoloid with Austric and Dravidian substrata under the racial distribution.<sup>5</sup> A renowned linguist S.K. Chatterjee, observes that long before 1000 B.C. some of these early Tibeto-Burman's had come through the southern slopes of the Himalayas or by way of Tibet going to Tsangmo. They may have been preceded by earlier tribes who formed the nucleus or basis of the 'Himalayan' Mongoloids of Nepal, speaking languages like Newari, Lepcha, Magar and Gurung and the 'pronominalised' languages like Dhimal, Khambu, Kanawari and others. The speakers of the 'pronominalised' dialects probably represent the earliest waves: and the Newars, Lepchas, Magars, Gurungs, etc., represent late arrivals. The Himalayan groups of Indo- Mongoloids were thus probably the first to

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be established in India, and settled in Nepal, and pushed as far west as Garhwal and Kumaon, and further to the west; but they have remained largely in a very primitive state: except Newars.<sup>6</sup>

There are two types of Nepalis in India, first those who are born and settled and hold the citizenship in India or have property in India. Second, who are settled in India or have property in India but also holds the citizenship of Nepal. The Census of India, 1961, 1971, 1981 shows that Nepalis are present in almost every state and union territory of India. However, they are more concentrated in Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, West Bengal, Sikkim, Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, Mizoram, Nagaland, Tripura, and Arunachal Pradesh.<sup>7</sup> The total population of Darjeeling district consisted in 1872 of 94,712 souls, viz., 53,057 males and 41,655 females.<sup>8</sup> In 1881, The total population of Nepali in Darjeeling was 155,645 and in 1891 it was 223,314.<sup>9</sup> As per the 2011 Census, a total of 2,926,168 people in India spoke Nepali as mother tongue. The largest populations can be found in West Bengal - 1,155,375.<sup>10</sup> Apart from this, there are additional speakers of languages such as Limbu (40,835), Rai (15,644), Sherpa (16,012) and Tamang (20,154). So, the combined strength of Nepali and the other four Gorkha languages comes to 3,018,813.<sup>11</sup> Most of the Nepali population in West Bengal resides in the district of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Besides this, Nepalis have also settled in Jalpaiguri and Dooars area of West Bengal. The Nepalis of Darjeeling have always been socially, culturally, and politically much more conscious than their compatriots elsewhere in India.

### **EMERGENCE OF IDENTITY CONSCIOUSNESS AND ITS IMPACT ON THE NEPALIS COMMUNITY: -**

Most of the Nepalis in India, except in Sikkim, feel highly insecure. The most important aspect of the Nepali-speaking people is found in the census of 1961 and in the West Bengal Gazette.<sup>12</sup> In the Socio- Cultural table of the Census report of 1961, Nepali- speaking people have been presented based on different dialects. In 1961-62, in the parliament, T. Manen said that the Linguistic Minority Commission had produced misleading and wrong information that the Nepali-speaking people form only 0.66% of total population in West Bengal and only 25% of them were in the district of Darjeeling, He justified it with same source,<sup>13</sup> which was contradictory to the earlier one. The Handbook of the District of Darjeeling showed that the population of the Nepalis in the Darjeeling district was 290,000 and the Census of 1951 reported the total population of the district was 445,241. Thus obviously, in the district, there were 70% Nepalis.

The process of Gorkha identity formation was the outcome of the cultural renaissance in Darjeeling. By the middle of the second decade of the last century, there has emerged a sizable middle class in Darjeeling. They often engaged in pedagogical missions educating the masses for a need to form a strong community. Pratyoush Onta identifies general education and improvement of Nepali language and literature as the two especial areas of emphasis of the reform movements of this time.<sup>14</sup> A flurry of civil society organizations like the Nepali Sahitya Sammellan (1924), The Gorkha Dukkha Niwarak Sammellan (1932), Sri Hitkari Sammellan (1945), Himalaya Kala Mandir (1950) and the Gorkha League were the foremost organisations to carry out the cultural identity activities based on the idea of Kinship- Nepali *daju bhai*. The efforts of these organisation and many other factors led to a pluralist synthesis of the myriad groups that together constituted the Gorkha *Jati*, secured and sustained by a pluralist culture and imagination.<sup>15</sup> T. B. Subba says, there is an insurrection of "subjugated knowledges" and the various Nepali ethnic groups are in the process of rediscovering their lost identities. Various ethnic organizations of the Newars, Tamangs and other groups were there in Darjeeling even in the beginning of the 20th Century, but the environment was such that they could not become very active.<sup>16</sup>

Today, more and more communities in Darjeeling are becoming aware of the need for revival of their languages and culture and want to be designated as tribal or the indigenous people of a particular area. Failure of the Gorkhaland Agitation to give the people of Darjeeling of Nepali origin a definite status and other privileges, the only other alternative was to seek the status of a Scheduled Tribe, to get various benefits from New Delhi. Some of the various ethnic organizations in Darjeeling include the Newar Samaj, Thami Association, Lafa Mangar Samaj, Mangar Association, All India Kirat Yakha (Dewan) Chumma (organization), Limbu Tribal Association, Gurung (Tamu) Kalyan Sangathan, Gurung Association, Kirata Rai Association, Mukhia Samaj, Tamang Buddhist Gedong, All India Tamang Buddhist Association, Bharatiya Gorkha Khas Hitkari Samellan, All India Nepali Scheduled Caste Association (AINSCA).<sup>17</sup>

A new organization has been formed called the Bharatiya Gorkha Janajati Manyata Samiti, stressing this similar demand to make all Gorkhas 'tribals.' It consists of 22 ethnic organizations including Mukhia, Newar, Thami, Khambu, Rai, Lafa Mangar, Gurung and Dewan amongst others. It also includes the Kadasa (Kami, Damai, Sarki- the Nepali low castes) and the Bharatiya Tagadhari Hitkari Sammellan (Bahuns, Chettris, Thakuris and Sanyasis- the Nepali upper Castes) The organizations led by a Bahun (Brahmin), wants the same facilities and privileges, which are given to other tribals to the Nepali upper castes too. The Bharatiya Gorkha Khas Hitkari Sammellan has also been formed in same view to preserve their culture and tradition.<sup>18</sup>

### **THE DARJEELING GORKHA HILL COUNCIL AND ITS EFFECT ON THE NEPALIS**

In 1986, the GNLF demanded the protection of the hill people of Darjeeling district from "Outsiders' 'domination". The 'Sons of the Soil' has been the central concern as articulated by the movement leadership. Soon, this ethnos conflict became a very socio- economic force and influenced the balance of power in the Hills<sup>19</sup> as well as to the adjacent parts of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar district where Nepalis were settled. The agitation ultimately led to the establishment of a semi-autonomous body in 1988 called the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) to govern certain areas of Darjeeling district.

The United Nations declaration of 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples gave further impetus to the already changed political climate and brought a new lease of life to the marginalized and subjugated communities in the region. They began to organize themselves vigorously in search of lost identities.<sup>20</sup> Amidst all these political scenarios the urge for preservation of one's cultural identity geared up when Subhash Ghising circulated to the ethnic communities in Darjeeling for submitting ethnic bio data to secure tribal status under Sixth Schedule of Indian Constitution.

Since the 1990's, each community devoted themselves to prepare their respective qualifying paper as a 'tribe' based on the features laid down by the Government of India:<sup>21</sup>

- They possess an old dialect and language.
- They have their traditional language and scripts.
- They have a traditional dress code distinct from others
- The rituals and customs are unique which do not resemble with others.

## **THE DELIMMA OF CULTURE AFTERMATH THE FORMATION OF DEVELOPMENT BOARDS IN THE REGION**

The creation of Hill boards for the uplift of ethnic communities—Lepchas, Tamangs, Sherpas, Bhutias, Mangars and Rais—has added a new dimension to the effervescent politics in the Hills. In an effort to identify their distinctiveness various ethnic groups are discovering some of their lost cultural heritages, lost values, rituals, festivals and other cultural elements are being documented and, in some cases, revived (*Lochar*, for instance, by Tamangs). Such process is enriching the cultural diversity and plurality of the Nepali society and not weakening it. Awareness about one's culture and sense of history is a positive development so long it is accommodative and tolerant of other groups. Resurgence of group identities in the Nepali society has led to the establishment and reinvigoration of community associations. They have emerged to protect the interests of the respective groups evolved to undertake several community welfare activities, which ultimately serve the interest of the Nepali society. In many cases there is an attempt to do away with conservative and traditional practices of the groups in order to make it more contextual and relevant both in space and time. These are certainly positive developments and need to be nurtured through appropriate engineering processes.<sup>22</sup> However, the most positive outcome is the annual cultural assimilation by different boards which is enriching the cultural harmony among them. The development boards organize an annual base programme in different places and almost all from the respective community remain present on that day. The annual assimilation program is more prominent among Mangar, Gurung, Rai, who were not granted the schedule tribe status despite of fulfilling the different criteria set by the Government. At present the Mangars are under the banner of three major associations viz., Akhil Bharatiya Mangar Association (2002), Mangar Sangh Bharat (2006), Nav Mangar Association (2015). Similarly, Gurung and Rai under their own banner are in the process to obtain the Status on the same basis. Apart from this the formation of different development boards have equally contributed in the reorganization of caste like Khas, Bhujel, Kamis, Damai, Sarki and others. Therefore, after the formation of development boards, the integration process of respective community has progressed under their respective banner.

Hence, celebration of annual cultural festivals like Maghe Sankranti, Barahmijong of Mangar, Tamu Losar of Gurung, Sakela or Udhauli, Sakewa or Ubhauli of Rai, Phugal Parim of Bhujel. The most common scenario of these festivals is the traditional attire, food and the practices that were almost unknown to the younger generation till the last decade. The acceptance of one's cultural attire in the marriages as well as in all social gathering has become common scenario in the region. The food has become an obligatory part of all cultural event, which has certainly added a positive outcome to all the Nepali communities.

## **EVALUATION**

There is no denying the fact that the cultural unification movements have negative consequences as well. The most important consequence is accentuation of conflicts between groups threatening to destabilize the society, disintegration of space and loss of social solidarity. 'We' is replaced by a division of 'They vs Us' and often misused and manipulated by vested groups. All this may lead to a sense of 'cultural apathy' and ultimately lead to 'cultural failure.'<sup>23</sup> In this regard, here it can be mentioned that how the celebration of 'Dashain or Vijaya Dashami'<sup>24</sup> once symbolizes the festival of Nepali has turned into a festive of some of the Nepali communities. Hence, there is high possibility that some of the orthodox rituals and practices which were in oblivion may come into limelight in a process of exhibiting one distinctiveness as part of ethnic identity. In the words of Parasmani Pradhan, who was one of the most important literary figures in Darjeeling 'we are all Nepalis. By the term Nepali, we understand various communities within it, namely Newar, Gurung, Limbu, Tamang, Bhote, Lapche, Tharu, Sunuwar. All communities have their own language but it is the Nepali language, which can be spoken and understood by all. We must make efforts to bring about the progress and improvement of the Nepali language first, but I do not mean to say that only the Nepali language's progress must be brought about. We must not forget our respective community's language. We must not forget our respective community's language. We must try to find more about different languages and culture including Newar, Gurung Rai, Limbu, Tamang, Bhote, Lepcha and write books in these languages.'<sup>25</sup> In the race of finding distinctiveness of culture, the communities may turn into microscopic minority leading the whole community towards fragmentation. Thus, secluded concept of 'we the Tamang, the Limbus, the Newar, the Mangars; the Gurung; the Rai, the Bhujel any many more have substituted in the enculturation process with diverse cultures and traditions in the Indian Nepali society.

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30. Pahilo Pahar, 1982, Shyam Prakashan, Darjeeling, p38 (He delivered his ideas while laying down the foundation of Nepali Sahitya Sammellan)
- 31.