

**IN SEARCH FOR BELONGING: POSITIONING THE LAYERED IDENTITY OF
KHAMBU RAI COMMUNITY OF DARJEELING DISTRICT (KALIMPONG DISTRICT)
IN CONTEXT**

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Abstract

The multiple or layered identities of Khambu Rais community where they switch from one to the other can be understood under the lens of belonging and recognition. The move away from the singularities of 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha' as primary conceptual and political category for the Indian Nepalis, has resulted in an awareness of the subject positions – in case of the Khambu Rais such subject positions imply the notions like belonging to a Mongoloid race, being a Kirata or a matwali, having a rich heritage of ancestor worshipping, a Tibeto-Burman language etc. – that inhabit the claim of Scheduled Tribe status raised by different communities including Khambu Rais in the Darjeeling hills. This issue of shifting identities among the hill communities of Darjeeling thus determines the urge of the people to get rights, recognition and autonomy with the different categories like 'Gorkha' or 'tribal'.

Keywords: reservation; aspiration; recognition; tribalism; Hinduism; ethnicity

Introduction

The state plays a dominant role in the lives of its citizens. Besides securing rights and entitlements for individuals the state plays a crucial role in establishing political norms and expectations. The political assertion of community identities is needed to be understood in the light of rights and entitlements questions on the one hand and political expectations on the other. Community identities are therefore intrinsically related to the ways through which communities engage with or become a part of larger political processes, which is often based on the politics of redistribution (Chettri:2015: 13). The kind of meaning a state attached to the redistributive justice mechanism has transformed the recognition process as a device to deliver socioeconomic and political protection thereby shaping the subjectivities of the tribal actors (Chhetri 2016: 2). While 'exclusivity' guarantees some rewards and protection from the state, the uniqueness that is being portrayed by the community through its organizational set up and mostly in the form of cultural revival serves the dual interest of give and take for both (the state as well as the community). Thus, by encouraging the ethnic assertion of the communities for 'reservation-benefits', the ruling parties of the state create a political base in areas where they had no political grip earlier and the communities while galvanizing cultural revivalism see hope in reservation politics and also become politically viable in the local acrobatics of political power. The demand of tribal identity of the Khambu Rais or other communities in contemporary Darjeeling hills therefore forms a part of the larger political process in which politics of redistribution is being viewed as the surest way to acquire more political or economic benefits and privileges (Chhetri 2013: 206). This has become a common practice in the state politics of Sikkim where the state encourages and promotes the active participation of some of the ethnic communities in matters of cultural preservation and identity assertion. Situation in Darjeeling hills gradually taking a similar shape like that of Sikkim where the communities and their identities are getting fashioned as per the norms set by the state. Thus, the indirect control that the state exerts upon the communities, as Mona Chhetri puts it, constantly refurbishes the community (as is the case of the Khambus too) to search for new strategies and mechanisms to invite the attention of the state (Chettri 2013: 21). This interaction between the communities and the state is crucial because it has resulted in shaping almost everything, from the goals and agenda to the strategies of action to be followed by the members of different cultural groups and organizations.

The case of Patidars in Gujarat who held public demonstrations across the state seeking Other Backward Class (OBC) status is a case in point that needs to be considered. The Patidars, due to their sheer number and influence in the economy and politics of the state were confident in raising the demand for reservation despite the fact they are one of the economically and politically prosperous communities of Gujarat. The question that arises: who should therefore be the beneficiaries of reservation policies? In every community some degree of polarization is evident. In other words, every individual, be they Patidars or for that matter Khambu Rais, within their respective communities cannot be placed in the same level in terms of their socio-economic conditions. Then how should one prove one's candidature for the benefits of protective discrimination? Is it merely by the sheer number (that actually determines their capacity as a vote bank) of a community that should be taken as a legitimate basis for raising or even agitating (like the Patidars) for reservation benefits? If the implications of the reservation policy show that it did not reach its proposed goal (which often is the case) of uplifting the real needy then the justification of granting reservation benefits to SCs, STs or OBCs appears to be suffering from inherent flaws. As a matter of fact, reservation benefits over the years have been cornered by the 'well off' sections from among the backward communities themselves. Simply put reservation policies in India in contemporary times, appeared more as a 'political device' to garner political support by uplifting 'those selected ones' from the aspiring communities who enjoy the full privilege of the same provided the community in reference can fulfill the political calculations. Initiated with a welfare motive, reservation programme thus, no longer desires a real transformation of the deprived ones rather a political strategy determines whether to address the concerns of a particular community. The rationality of choosing the 'selected few' from within a host of aspiring communities (as was the case in Darjeeling hills) for inclusion in the list of beneficiaries either as STs (in Darjeeling hills) has in fact, induced communities towards mobilization. This got reflected in the very decision of granting ST status by the Government (in 2003) to only two hill communities namely Tamang and Limbu, while several others were demanding the same and were sharing similar socio-economic conditions like that of the 'chosen' two communities. The movement for tribal identity by the hill communities could be traced since the 1990s and after the identification of Tamangs and Limbus as Scheduled Tribes all other aspiring communities started believing that the grant of ST status is possible to achieve since they do not see themselves as less competent than the Tamangs and Limbus so far as the issue of tribal status is concerned. Moreover, in a system that favors either the rich or the politically connected, it is ethnicity that has become one of the essential means to ensure the socio-economic aspirations of the common people, to whom the benefits of the welfare state do not trickle down. Once again, this highlights the increasing association of ethnicity with material benefits but within the framework approved by the state (Chhetri 2013: 192). In this regard a boost which is necessary to arouse one's emotions for developing 'self-identity' is provided through community leaders (Shah 1987: 158). The process of segregation and fragmentation starts with the evolving feeling of 'self' as different from 'other' at all levels. This got reflected with another development that has taken place in the Darjeeling hills with the Government's decision of forming community development boards for almost all the hill communities including the Khambu Rais.

The establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988 was a governmental attempt to settle down the Gorkhaland imbroglio that took violent turn during 1985-87 but the same administrative measure had created disillusionment in the minds of the hill people who sacrificed their life, property and suffered severe hardship and police/ para military atrocities. When viewed in the light of benefits accrued from the state the 1980s movement appears to be a failure. Whereas the system of protective discrimination particularly after post-Mandal period has been assessed as a matter of double endowment that can possibly be achieved only when inter-ethnic differences are reworked. The measures of protective discrimination or for that matter the status of being a Scheduled Tribe are considered as double endowment. Firstly, because it has a ready assurance of entitlements and welfare benefits from the part of state. Secondly, by becoming tribe one is not only accorded a 'privileged category' status but also a juridical and administrative recognition of being an Indian citizen, since protective discrimination measures are meant for the citizens alone. Hence, the

rejoice for 'the return of native' quickly gained populism and became a fad indeed that energized the *Bahun*s and *Chhetris* (the so-called *tagadharis* – men of sacred thread – the higher castes) even to join the race of 'enlistment movement'. The notion of tribe appeared as a doubly binding package whose achievement demanded group by group identification that can well run parallel with the so-called movement of Gorkhaland.

Khambu Rai's Development Board: Lollipop Politics

Ever since the new millennium the hill politics has experienced constant claims and demands for development by even those communities who have already attained ST status. This has resulted in the formation of community development boards for the communities. The community development board, a new kind of an experience, began first with the Lepchas and the *Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board* came into existence on 5th August, 2013 like Lepcha in the first instance. Community development boards were formed with the avowed goal of protecting, promoting, and safeguarding the language, tradition and culture of the respective communities. The community development boards were also allowed to undertake activities for the overall development of the respective communities and anything incidental and conducive for attending such goals. As a matter of fact, the development boards promise monetary support and extend their hands in promoting the cultural attributes. The Lepcha experience was further followed by other communities like Tamang, Limbu, Bhutia, Sherpa, Magars and so on. The establishment of development board for one after the other and motivating the others for the same was one of the policies that was implemented only for communities of Darjeeling. This exclusivity of governance by promoting community development in Darjeeling sets it apart from other regions in West Bengal. Since the community development boards were directly funded and controlled by the state government, they opened up the possibility of creating a power base for the ruling party of the state in the hills.

Whether it was the main body like the Kirati Khambu Rai Sanskritik Sansthan (KKRSS) or an ad-hoc organization

AIKKRA (All India Kirati Khambu Rai Association) or for that matter, the youth body KRM (Khambu Rights Movement) all stood together with the demand for ST status for the Khambu Rais, until the issue of development board for the Khambus did crop up. With the announcement of development board by the chief minister Mamata Banerjee for the Khambu community on 23rd Jan 2016, it became a matter of contention. While the newly formed Rai organization like AIKKRA pointed out that 'how can Khambu Rais be given a development board without being declared a tribe first?' As prior to them the communities receiving a board were all STs (like the Lepchas, Tamangs, Limbus, Bhutia's, and Sherpas). Disfavoring the decision of development board for the Khambus the AIKKRA stood for the demand of tribal status. But KKRSS which was initially seen not favoring the board issue, later worked for the same and it was under their banner the development board was sanctioned. This led the other branches like the KRM much to their surprise as they were kept outside of the whole issue, while the KKRSS did accept the government decision and started working with the execution of a board for the Khambus (The Telegraph 14th October and 19th October 2020). The West Bengal Khambu Rai Development Board with its head office in Darjeeling, West Bengal was formed in accordance with the provision laid down under section 24 and 27 of the West Bengal Societies Registration Act, 1961 (West Bengal Act XXVI of 1961) and a prior Gazette Notification was made on February 10, 2016 (vide Appendix for the copy of the Gazette Notification). Khambu organizations started considering the board and the funds to be allocated for running its activities as a temporary solution, while their objective of attaining the ST status remained intact. Although many sensed a motif of diverting the community's interests out of the tribal track through playing out the 'board politics, but since the board was accepted by the mother organization of the Khambus (the KKRSS), the organizational activities like distribution of money to the homeless and poor Khambus have started operationalizing soon after the Board was formally established in 2016. As the demand of statehood of the Gorkhas has always been understood/ misunderstood in the light of development and recognition questions and thereby the compulsion to kneel and settle down the agitation with councils compromising the cause of

statehood, in a similar manner the Khambus knelt for the board arrangement, which was deemed by the KKRSS leadership as “it’s better to have something than to have nothing”. This kind of settlement obviously had its long-term repercussion while the short-term effects of it were expressed in the forms of splits, fractions, interpersonal animosities, and even aversion towards the organization itself.

Tribalism, State and Community Relations in Darjeeling Hills: Consequences and Concerns

What merits attention is the issue that through their acts of reviving the ‘tribalist’ cultural traditions the aspiring Khambus of the Darjeeling hills are trying to depict their search to be known as ‘something’ and clarifies their relationships with the positions of power and privilege and thereby opening up the scope for inter-community conflicts based on differential political affiliations. This is how tribal identity issue has taken an ‘ethnic detour’ in contemporary Darjeeling hills and trying to get its justification realized within the circumstantial situation where the state itself is seen to encourage such activities (Sarkar 2014: 26). In fact, the encouragement of the state towards tribalism in Darjeeling hills can be realized through the favorable policies like say recommending tribal status for hill communities or for that matter establishing community development boards for almost all the communities of Darjeeling hills. No doubt the ruling regime of the state has gained a political currency through these steps but what was more significant is that these courses of action has encouraged the consciousness of micro community identities among the various hill communities. This has been viewed by many as detrimental to the larger Gorkha identity and the state encouragements were increasingly being posed as attempts to destabilize the statehood movement running for more than a century. Scholars like Schneiderman (2009) has argued that tribal identity politics in Darjeeling hills would result into inter-community animosities and ultimately wane down the scale and magnitude of the Gorkhaland movement in the long run. Even Middleton (2016) was of the view that Darjeeling’s tribal identity politics received huge acceptance and enticement largely because Gorkhaland movement has become a failure.

It is not enough to pinpoint that the growing tribalism in the Darjeeling hills in a certain sense is a response encouraged by the state policies related to protective discrimination. What becomes important is also to understand what consequences these responses create for the entire society and politics of the Darjeeling hills. As mentioned above that some scholars have registered grave concern in terms of community clash and gradual weakening of Gorkha identity and if the growing tribalism is ultimately leading the hill society and politics towards this end then the phenomena of tribalism appear to be a ‘self-defeating’ project. However, a quick review of the situations of the Darjeeling hills during the last decade (2010-2020) when the tribal identity issue was at its peak, we hardly experience the incidents of community clashes in the Darjeeling hills although animosity between the Lepchas and the present leadership of GJM did certainly grow. It should also be noted that the Lepcha aggrandizement was more against the GJM leadership and the GTA which appeared to have created administrative bottlenecks in the way Lepcha Development Board functioned.

So far as the question of weakening of the Gorkha identity is concerned, it needs to be pointed out that there exists no fundamental difference between tribal identity and Gorkha identity. The Gorkha identity and Tribal identity has been often misunderstood by pitting the one against the other. In fact, it would be a fundamental mistake to pose the issue as Gorkha vs. Tribal identity. Gorkha identity is not a Hindu identity it has its own historicity and it is essentially a political identity constituted of Nepali speaking population mainly of Darjeeling hills and surrounding areas having a particular reference to their Indian root. It is in this sense an identity of the Indian Nepalis who claim to differ from the Nepalis of Nepal. As a matter of fact, Gorkha identity as such is constituted of the Nepali speaking population irrespective of the fact whether they belong to Hindu caste categories or Mongoloid racial stock. One can therefore very much be a tribe and at the same time a Gorkha. This fact became prominent in the revival of the Gorkhaland movement that happened in 2017. During the strike that went on for more than 3 months and various agitational programmes ensued in the wake of the renewed call of Gorkhaland, all the tribal status aspiring communities and their organizations suspended their mobilizational activities and took part

in the renewed call of Gorkhaland. The point is that there is no likelihood that aspiration of tribal status would result in the demeaning of Gorkhaland. At least the empirical realities during the last few years did not yield such possibilities. This thus suggest that the communities in Darjeeling hills like the Khambu Rais, who have been leading their movement for tribal status, are not leading a separate and isolated movement shading off all the connections from the existing socio- political currents of the Darjeeling hills. Moreover, it is also observed that the tribal status aspirant communities were capable of switch positioning their demands and mobilizations. In other words, based on the circumstantial requirement they have been shifting their position either on the issue of tribal identity or on Gorkhaland, without jettisoning any one of them.

Again, the issue of language and linguistic identity that has also become an issue of concern and needs to be discussed in some detail. As we have already noted that distinctive language constitutes an important component of what is labeled as 'tribal traits' and in Darjeeling hills all the tribal status aspiring communities, including the Khambus, have been busy in developing their language primers, scripts and disseminating them in published form. This process is going on for more than a decade but none of these languages or rather dialects have not questioned the relevance of Nepali as a *lingua franca*. The point is that the emphases on micro community languages have more symbolic value than practical use. It is not very uncommon even to experience that the leaflets those circulated the urge of one's own community language were printed in Nepali. The linguistic cleavage between Tibeto-Burman languages (all community languages/ dialects are falling within this) and Indo-Aryan language (Nepali falls within Indo-Aryan language family) that gets emphasized in the movement of tribal status is probably not going to affect the linguistic bond of the Gorkha identity that is premised on Nepali language (an Indo-Aryan language). Reality suggests there is less likelihood that the relevance of Nepali language in the Darjeeling hills is going to be questioned by the symbolic value of the community languages/ dialects. It is therefore pertinent to comment here that tribal identity movement in the Darjeeling hills will continue to inflict the hill politics and in this process the claim of the Khambu Rais would remain central because of their numerical strength compared to others.

The very act of switch positioning by the Khambus which was involved in the way the organization and the general Khambus shifted continuously their position from Gorkha to tribal identity. The point that both Gorkha and tribal identity are complementary to each other. That is to say in other words, a community can at the same time be a Gorkha and a part and parcel of the tribal identity recognition movement. This possibilities were revealed in situations whenever political outbursts of Gorkha identity – in an attempt to revive the Gorkhaland movement after Ghising – have taken place during 2007 (that showed the emergence of Bimal Gurung as the new leader of Gorkhaland movement), 2011 (when the renewed call for Gorkhaland was settled by scrapping the DGHC and forming the new administrative body called Gorkhaland Territorial Administration), 2014 (from July 30, a final battle *antimlada* for Gorkhaland began to take shape and was repressed in no time by the state), 2017 (third phase of movement for Gorkhaland continued for 104 days with large scale violence and counter-violence, mass imprisonment and lengthiest strikes), and during 2009 and 2014 Parliamentary election (in which BJP won both the times from Darjeeling only because the Gorkhas secured an ethnic block voting pattern for the party). In all these instances the Gorkhas registered oneness in terms of a community whose political image was not affected by the cause of tribal identity movement in which the respective hill communities were involved since the 1990s. All these shows rather distinctively that a community like Khambu Rai and their aspiration to achieve tribal status has never appeared to be a hindrance in the path of Gorkha assertion. As and when it is required, the tribal aspirant communities switch over to the larger Gorkha identity suspending their micro identities, otherwise each of them mobilize themselves in their own way to consolidate their tribal identity claim. This study argues that tribalism phenomenon is not going to curb down the political valence of Gorkha identity/movement and the hill politics is not heading towards Gorkha vs. Tribe like situation.

Again, multiple positionalities were also reflected by the issue of Hindu identity. Cohabiting with the Hindu neighbors for years in Darjeeling hills, made it obvious that the Khambus or for that

matter any other community belonging to Mongoloid race would appropriate Hindu customs and rituals. Reciprocal relationships existed between the caste Hindus and the Khambu Rais. Such interactions however, did not yield into Hinduisation of the Khambus. In fact, the Khambus made selective appropriation of Hindu traits and moulded them to suit the Khambu life processes. It is that is why we did not find the conceptual categories like Hinduisation, Sanskritization or Hindu Method of tribal absorption could explain the situation in Darjeeling hills. It is undoubtedly true that the *tagadharis* are still today highly respected in overall Nepali society in Darjeeling hills but that did not result into the subjugation of those who do not fit within the caste categories. Historically the routes of social mobility in Darjeeling, unlike Nepal was premised on secular grounds where one's economic condition, educational background and professional engagement were deemed to be more important than one's religious or caste affiliation. This has led communities to live a life following their own customs and rituals along with the veneer of Hinduism. In fact, the Khambus were neither known as Hindus or even as anti-Hindus. It was only in the recent past, an attempt was made by the Khambu organizations to stress on their anti-Hindu identity. The authoritative courses of actions of the organizations in popularizing the anti-Hindu identity among the Khambu Rais, especially by boycotting Hindu festivals like *Dasain-Tihar*, have miserably failed in Darjeeling hills. Unlike Nepal, the politics of *Dasain* have failed to gain ground in Darjeeling and communities like Khambu Rais went on claiming the tribal status along with the veneer of Hinduism, circumventing the hesitations of community organizations on the issue.

The routes of tribalism in Darjeeling hills have also made it clear that the aspiration of tribal identity registered by the communities like the Khambu Rais is not to be confused as a 'subaltern' assertion. The Khambus or for that matter the *matwali* communities in Darjeeling hills were far from being subjugated by the social history of Nepali caste system or Hinduism. So far as the questions of subordination, exploitation, subjugation or for that matter crisis of identity are concerned the largely accepted view is that the entire Nepali/ Gorkha community has been suffering from such a feeling which actually fuelled the urge of separate statehood. The crisis that is there in the tribal identity claim as raised by the Khambu Rais and others is not in their identity as such but in the processes of identification that has created a feeling of crisis as the repetitious attempts made by the Khambus were turned down by the state.

Similarly, some scholars (like Sara Shneiderman 2015 and Mona Chhetri 2016) have used ethnicity as a lens to examine the micro identity politics in Darjeeling besides other places in the Eastern Himalaya. It is true that tribal identity claims as raised by the communities in Darjeeling hills share many similarities with ethnic identity (especially when the cultural components of it are considered), but equating the tribal identity claims as ethnic claims would be misleading. One of the core elements of ethnicity or for that matter of ethnic identity is the presence of the 'other'. It is in relation to the 'other' that ethnicity builds itself up as a process. Conspicuously, in the present case the 'other' component is missing. To put it in other words, the Khambus have not been raising their voice favouring tribal identity as a response to an 'other'. There are others who have also joined the Khambus in raising similar claims and thereby following similar trajectories. The claim of tribal identity came as handy to the Khambus, as also to others, as a strategic choice in moments of political stagnancy to secure their future by virtue of their past and present. The cultural contents of it were germinated in and through the social and often expressed in a language parallel to politics, which received further refinement with the patronization of community identities by the state as the potential political resource while dealing with the Darjeeling hills in political terms. Hence, there is less likelihood of inter-community clash, and above all the capacity of the communities, including the Khambu Rais, to switch position their multiple selves made the whole issue far more complex and intriguing from a sociological point of view.

The routes of tribal becoming have manifested tribal incarnation in diverse layers, where, while some found a 'new self' in it, others practiced it as a makeover which was highly oriented towards tribal recognition. Whatsoever the case may be, the subject/agent discourse was affected through the way recognition processes gradually entered the personal space of the subject population where preference, choice and tastes in terms of clothing, celebrations of private events, and

inclination towards tribal distinctiveness were all prioritized. However, these were more prominent among those who found more pride in their 'new tribal self'. Intertwined were the questions of class, expertise (skill/ knowledge) and one's status in the society which basically determined the traits of promoting some individuals/ sections of the Khambus as the face of the community in matters of negotiation with the state. In turn, they modified the ways the members of the community thought, felt and experienced the world, in a manner that Khambu commoners perceived tribal elements as ingrained in their 'life-world'.

ST demand in Darjeeling mooted with political flavor

The situation in Darjeeling hills can be viewed as a resultant effect of the intersection between politics, policy and practice, which has created an atmosphere where cultural differences are getting continuously produced and reproduced often by undermining the identities shaped by the modern forces and resulted in the transformation of sociality (Gregory 2003: 4). According to Morton Fried tribes are the product of specific political and economic pressures emanating from already existing state-organized societies (Fried 1975: 44). As the emanation of any force does have its roots somewhere, the political insecurity crept in with the Indian Nepalis/ Gorkhas and the economic instability in terms of unemployment led the educated ones among them to use the 'tribal card' to its best. The outbursts of the politico-economic pressure did find its minimum outlet through these state sponsored policies of positive discrimination. Viewing Darjeeling situation as such it seems appropriate to label the growing tribalism phenomena in Darjeeling by following Morton Fried as 'secondary tribalism'. Fried argues that 'secondary tribalism is a political phenomenon bearing little resemblance to conventional notions of tribal behaviour. It occurs as already indicated, largely as a reaction to the presence of one or more states' (Fried 1975: 103). Thus, what Appadurai (1997: 141) has argued and what the Khambu Rais have been doing by engraving their historical roots of distant past which are not easily changeable but are potentially available to ignition by new historical and political contingencies. Taken together, these positions suggest that tribal identity politics is a culmination of interaction between the state and the aspiring communities, centering primarily on the issues of control and access to economic and political resources (Chhetri 2013: 1). All said and done, demand of tribal identity by the Khambu Rais in Darjeeling hills cannot be viewed as an isolated phenomenon. It is neither thoroughly about primordial identity nor even is it the typical case of elite manipulation. However, given the mediation of the state it is both.

While reflecting on the ethnic politics of the Eastern Himalaya scholars have discussed how ethnic identity has been used as the prime basis of accessing socioeconomic rewards following political routes. Chhetri in her research made two contentions: First, the choice of ethnicity as a political identity might be driven primarily by instrumental motives but non-instrumental, emotive motives may also be an important factor in the choice of a political identity. Second, these choices are rather a combination of numerous instrumental and impulsive factors, the boundaries of which are liminal and therefore intersecting. Viewed as such tribal identity question in Darjeeling hills appears to be a complex phenomenon. Such complexities increases further when we see that while the 'tribal resurrection' or the demand for tribal status in other parts of India can be analyzed as a demand for reservation and privileges but for communities in Darjeeling it means more than that. It means a security, an assurance and a belonging. We need also to understand that the emergence of tribal identity politics is emerging as a potential political force at that point of time when the statehood movement of the Gorkhas has been on the wane. Tribal identity politics therefore can also be viewed as an important route to rise in prominence at the local level politics.

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