



ISSN 2278 – 0211 (Online)

Changing Marital Status of Tribe in Darjeeling Hills: A Study of Sherpa Tribe under Upper Sonada Gram Panchayat, West Bengal, India

Narbu Sherpa

Research Scholar, Department of Political Science with Rural Administration, Vidyasagar University, Medinapore, West Bengal, India

Abstract:

The Sherpa (originally Sharwa) are one of the numerous ethnic group of the multiethnic district of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. The word "Shar-wa", Shar means "east" wa means "person" in Sherpa and Tibetan language thus sherpa means the people of the east. The Sherpa tribal community has its own particular rituals, customs and tradition regarding marriage ceremony. No tribal society is static, everything is changing, so the changes in the marital status of the Sherpa tribe can also be observed in Darjeeling hills, inter-caste marriages are taking place, the widow remarriage are socially recognised phenomenon in the tribal society. The distinct tribal identity of the Sherpa is slowly losing ground with rapid decline of language and changing social custom and rituals in this juncture.

Keywords: tradition, cultural, inter-caste marriage

1. Introduction

The name of "Darjeeling" means "the place of thunderbolt" the word 'Doris' is a Tibetan origin which means "Thunderbolt" on the spectra of 'Ling' house or abode. Hence the name means the place of thunderbolt. Darjeeling the queen of hills is situated between 26° 53' and 27° 13' north latitude and 87° 59' and 88°53' east longitude. Presently Darjeeling is covers an areas of 3075 sq. Kms. It is the only hill district of the state of west Bengal. ¹(Mukhopadhyay, page 8)

The Upper Sonada Gram Panchayat (USGP) is the one of the Gram Panchayat of the Sukhia-Jorebunglow Development Block of the district Darjeeling and at present it is within the Sonada Pacheng Constituency of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. It is composed of eight wards. At present there are no elected members because since 1999 there has not been any election, all the members had resigned because of the political turmoil. It comprises the khasmal and permanent forest villages and touches the Sonada Bazar. The location of the main office lies in Upper Johnson Hatta, above the Hill cart Road, P.O. Sonada, In the west, there is Hill Cart Road. In the East side there is the Sincheal Wild life sanctuary, In the north there is Jorekhola and in the south there is lower Chatakpur forest and 8th mile khola. Since the 1998, the areas of the panchayat Raj extended in the tea garden areas also but there is no single tea garden area but two forest villages came under its jurisdiction. The main occupation of the people under this Gram Panchayat is the agriculture and manual labour, business, government services. The working people of the areas are still poor, illiterate, backward and superstitious, follows the traditional way of life and comprises above 40% scheduled tribe population Census report of Upper Sonada Gram Panchayat, 2011. (Table 1)

Details	Total	Male	Female
Population	4784	2399	2385
Literate	3930	2070	1860
illiterate	854	329	525
Below-06	292	143	149
SC	227	120	107
ST	1773	902	871
Minority Christian	115	75	40
Minority Buddhist	227	111	116
Minority Muslim	60	30	30

Table 1

Sources²: (Upper Sonada, Gram Panchayat office. Visited on 4/2/2013)

The Total population of the Upper Sonada, Gram Panchayat, Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokri Block, Dist: Darjeeling is 4784 as per census 2011. Where, the male population is 2399 and female population. An important feature of this gram panchayat of Upper Sonada is ST population I found more than 35% of population are ST. i.e. The Total ST population is 1773, Male- 902 and female population is 871. Which is the higher than the percentage of the District Darjeeling which has 30.4 % ST Population.

1.1. Method

The present research paper is based on both the primary and secondary sources of information. The Darjeeling hill areas of the district Darjeeling were chosen as the universe of the study and sample size of 40 households from the upper Sonada Gram Panchayat's word No 5 and Word No 6 were selected for the field study. The head of the family was interviewed by the interviewer with semi structured schedule. For the census report the office of the gram Panchayat was visited by the interviewer. Others secondary sources such as books, journal, newspapers were other secondary sources of information.

1.2. Aims and Objectives

The present paper has tried to achieve the following aims and objectives.

1. To assess the Sherpa tribal's traditional marriage system in the remote villages of Darjeeling hills.
2. To examine the social and culture changes among the Sherpa tribe.
3. To make tribal people conscious about their slowly losing cultural heritage and other.

1.3. Brief Profile of Sherpa Tribe

The word "Sherpa" is actually the western mis-pronunciation of the ethnic designation "Shar-wa". The Sherpas (originally Sharwa) are one of the numerous ethnic groups of the multiethnic district of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. The word "Shar-wa", "Shar" means east "wa" means person in Sherpa and Tibetan language. Thus Sherpa means the people of the east.³ (Kuwar R.R p 26). "There is no unanimity regarding the origin of the word 'Sherpa' but many social scientists after much research have said that the "Sherpa" is derived from 'serva' and the word serva is derived from "Sher Khumbu" at present "Khumbu". Whereas few other believe that the forefathers of the Sherpa used to live in Shalmogang in Kham (presently Dhirke) province of Tibet. Later on the word serva is derived from Shalmogang and Sherpa from the serva."⁴(Lama Namgi, p 15)The Sherpa speak their own language which is the branch of Tibeto-Burmese language family, but they don't have their own scripts that is why they use Tibetan scripts in writing purposes. The sherpas now- a- days use Nepali as subsidiary language in the hills of Darjeeling because of the acculturation. The most Tibeto-Himalayan group of people now use Nepali language; The Sherpa language is the one of the attested language by linguistic survey of India. Grierson had classified the Tibetan language to six groups which he calls Bhotia because he thinks that Tibetan does not connote all form of speech. Among them sherpa is one of the Bhotia group of language.

1. Bhotia of Tibet (Tibetan)
2. Bhotia of Baltistan (Balti)
3. Bhotia of ladakh (ladakhi)
4. Bhotia of East Nepal (Sherpa)
5. Bhotia of Sikkim (Denjong-de)
6. Bhotia of Bhutan (Iho-ke)⁵(Chiranjib kr. Kar page 13)

The Sherpa are the Mongoloid people. Their height is generally short, but occasionally taller Sherpa can be seen. They have the straight black hair and their eyelids have the epicanthic fold. Their face is generally broad whereas the flat nose and small eyes make them different. Their skin complexion varies from fair to reddish and some darkish skin complexion is also found.⁶ (pilgrim publication page 7.

Serial No	Sub-Tribe of the Sherpa	No of the Households	% of the Households
1	LAMA	12	30%
2	PINASA,	03	7.5%
3	CHAIWA	04	10.0%
4	SALAKA	12	30%
5	PANKARMA	1	2.5
6	GARJA	08	20%
Total		40	100%

Table 1: Different sub-tribe of the Sherpa tribe (table:2/sample households)
Sources. Table² prepared by researcher after data collection through interview

There are more than 22 clans of the Sherpa tribe in Darjeeling hills but under the Upper Sonada Gram Panchayat, the total 40 households were surveyed where we found only six types of the Sherpa sub-tribes. Namely Lama, Pinasa, Chaiwa, Salaka, Pankarma and Garja. Among them also Lama and Salaka sub-tribes are found dominating all villages. Lama and Salaka share 30% each in the villages. Whereas Garja are also found in good numbers who shared 20% of their population. The chaiwa sub tribe are 10 % and pinasa share 7.5 % only. The Lowest in percentage were the Pankarma who represent only 2.5% of their community.

2. Traditional Wedding Ceremony of Sherpa Community

Sherpa society uses a clan system or ru to determine marriage arrangements. The clan system is believed to have originated in Kham, where ru (literally, 'bone') clan & marriage system is still in use today. Clan identity is inherited through the father. Traditionally, each Sherpa would select a spouse from a clan outside their own. For example, a Lama cannot marry another Lama, but a Lama is free to marry a member of any of the other clans. The Monk(lama) decides everything after seeing a book which is called thihi or monk seeing the birth year of the both the boy and girl, which is called "lorta" and "Kham". Lorta rotates every year and there is a cycle of twelve years, whereas kham changes every two years(there are five types of kham)

For example

- i. fire 1999 and 2000
- ii. earth 2001 and 2002
- iii. iron 2003 and 2004 (
- iv. water 2005 and 2006
- v. wood 2007 and 2008

The monk fixes everything after studying "thihi" that their marital life will be successful or not. If yes, then following their traditional system they go ahead. Which changes from the first day of the losar "New year" for example.⁸(Sherpa sonam, page 1-2)

2.1. Four stages of the Sherpa tribal Marriage

The sherpa community has four stages of wedding ceremony according to their culture

- i. Tichyang
- ii. Demchyang
- iii. Peckchang
- iv. Gonkutub

Tichyang: - The first one is proposal stage. Here few people (more than one) selected to arrange everything from the side of groom, who are known as "lami" who go to the bride's house with the proposal, they should carry some sagun which is mostly local alcoholic called chhang or homemade wine called 'rakshi" and khada and phemar, they (Lami) are the first and they must be present till the last ceremony of the marriage, in this stage they just propose girl's parents, parents of the girl may reject or accept the proposal. If they accept proposal the parents of the girl call "lami" to fix the date of the marriage,

This is second meeting between parents of boy and girl to fix marriage. This is called demjyang which is actually the confirmation of marriage. The third stage is called "Peckchang" here they meet to fix the exact date of marriage ceremony. And after following their important rituals and culture finally they reached to the last stage this is called "Gonkutub". Which is actually traditions of Sindur.⁹(Sherpa sonam, page 10-11)

Category	With Sherpa Tribe	23 pairs
		General Caste
	Other- Tribal	09
Religion	Buddhist	31
	Hindu	05
	Christian	1
Race	Nepali/Gorkha	36
	Bengali and Other Plain People	NIL
	Tibetan	Nil
	Lepcha	1
Nature of Marriage	Arranged	21
	Elopement Marriage	14
	Both	02
Bachelor Status	Unmarried Male 21 Years Above	04
	Unmarried Female 18 Years	07
No of Divorcee	Divorced Male	NIL
	Divorced Female	NIL
Social Position	Widow	07
	Widower	03
Job Status	Employed	1
	Unemployed	33
	Business	02

Table 2

Source: Table ^{prepared} by researcher after data collection through interview

The Sherpa tribal community of the hills of Darjeeling has its own traditional system of marriage which is performed following different stages according to their customs and traditions. When I conducted the survey of the village in Sonada which comes under the panchayat. There I found 37 couple having married life and total 74 persons which was 47.13% the sample households beside this there were 7 widow and 3 widowers who comprised the 4.45% and 1.91% respectively. The other were the unmarried people some students and some unemployed youth and small children total 73 persons. Following table will highlight the depth details regarding the marital status of the Sherpa tribal community

3. Marital Status of the Sherpa Tribe in the Rural Areas of Sonada (table: 3)

The marital status of the Sherpa tribal community (the sample households) is analysed in details which is the indication of the change in the Sherpa tribe. When I compiled the above chart I came to know that there were 23 couples who had got married within their own Sherpa community. That is treated as the most prestigious in their tribal society. To get married within their own community is their first choice and the family also prefers for the arranged marriage. But it does not mean that the Sherpa tribal does not get married with other, above chart clearly show that the marriages have been held with the general caste category people as well as with the other tribal communities of the hills of Darjeeling. There are 5 married males who had married from the general caste category. There were again 9 married males who had married with the other tribal communities.

The marriages have been held not only with different caste and tribes but with the different religious faith. Although the maximum number of 31 male married with the Buddhist female because the other tribal like "Tamang" and Lepcha are also Buddhist. Those who married with the general caste female 5 in number, they are Hindu by religion. There I found one man who was a Christian by religion and married to a Christian.

The Sherpa marriage ceremony is a unique in the traditional way. During the arranged marriage which takes place following four stages in different time period. Within my sample households there were 21 pair who had told me that they had done arranged marriage. Another type of marriage in the hills of Darjeeling is marriage by elopement. It is followed by the couple after love affairs. There are 14 males who married through elopement. This is also done if the groom does not belong to the Sherpa tribe in the many part of the country where many cases of child marriage is taking place during. In the state of West Bengal too, this kind of marriage is happening in the district of Malda, Dakshin Dinajpur etc. The system of child marriage is totally absent in Darjeeling hills. There are 4 unmarried males and 7 unmarried females above the age of 21 years of age and 18 years of age which is constitutionally recognised marital age of the people. Total there are 73 people who were unmarried male and female.

There is the widow remarriage system in the Sherpa tribal people. But age is the main factors. The table show us that there are 7 widow women within my sample households whereas there are only 3 widowers and total 10 persons fall in the category of the social position. Hills society is different than the plain where widow are seen from the different angle. Even the widow remarriage is legally justiciable but practical reality is totally opposite in the plain, whereas not only in Sherpa tribal community but all hills community support the system.

There are very few working women in the hills. The Sherpa women who are very energetic and active in their manual working but due to lack of proper education system they seldom get government jobs. The picture is very clear from the above table that there are 33 unemployed women who are housewife and only two of them are engaged in the business sector and one is employed.

Conclusion: The Sherpa tribal community of hills of Darjeeling is also changing culturally, linguistically and their marital status is also changing. The inter-caste marriages are taking place among the Sherpa tribes of Darjeeling hills. The Sherpa tribal community there is no case of divorce I did not find a single case of divorce. So every tribal society is now changing slowly and gradually, above table is the indication of the changing marital status of the Sherpa tribes of Darjeeling hills.

4. References

- i. Mukhopadhyay R.S, (1999) Social Contour of Darjeeling hills on Glimpses of the Eastern Himalayan culture. Published by the centre for communication and cultural action, Calcutta.. Page 8.
- ii. Census report 2011, Upper Sonada Gram Panchayat.
- iii. Kuwar R.R.(2000) A glimpse of the Sherpa community, printing department, Tibetan Refugee self Help Centre. Page 26.
- iv. Pilgrim publication, Varanasi, (2007), On the people of Nepal "Sherpa".
- v. Chiranjib kr. Kar, Sub-regional Movement in India. Page 13 and 14.
- vi. Pilgrim publication, Varanasi, 2007, On the people of Nepal "Sherpa".
- vii. Kuwar R.R. A glimpse of the Sherpa community, printing department, Tibetan Refugee self Help Centre. Page 26.
- viii. Sherpa Sonam, (2012) Sherpa Jati ko Vivah Sankar on Himalayan Research Journal, page 1-2.
- ix. ibid page 9
- x. prepared by researcher after data collection through interview.
- xi. prepared by researcher after data collection through interview.
- xii. prepared by researcher after data collection through interview