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A Study of the Sherpa Tribe of Darjeeling Hills: Changes and Adoption

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Abstract:

Darjeeling is known as “queen of hills”. Darjeeling has been surrounded by the three international borders with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh and state of Sikkim, India. The dominant population of Darjeeling hills is Gorkha or Nepali but other caste like Tibetan, Bihari, Marwari and Bengali are also found. The Darjeeling is the land of many tribal communities like Bhutia, Lepcha, Subba, Tamang. The Sherpa is one of the tribe but it has been clubbed with Bhutia group of tribe. It may be because of the cultural and religious affinity with Tibetan and Bhutia. But the Sherpa is a distinct tribe having the separate culture and language. The Sherpa speak their own language but they do not have their own script. So, at present they use Tibetan and Devanagari scripts in writing purposes. The Sherpa tribe has many clans and follow their tradition and customs of their own during festival and other occasions. The Sherpa are changing in term of their culture and language. They are adopting many new things in their day to day life.

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 has international borders extending 145 km, 52Km and 26 Km with Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh respectively. Sikkim the Himalayan state of India also shares 165 Km borders with Darjeeling. Topographically, the district can be divided into two district tracts. Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong in the north and the plains areas Siliguri subdivision. At present the dominant race in Darjeeling is the Nepali

We can broadly divide this Nepali/Gorkhali community into two different races. 1. The Aryan 2. Non-Aryan or Mongoloid, locally distinguished as tagadhari (sacred tread wearer) And Matawali (who drinks wine or liquor) the Chettri, Bahun and Thakuri falls under the first category i.e. Aryan and the Newar, Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Sherpa and Limbus etc. fall under second category i.e. Mongolian (Matwali)

2. Method

This paper has been written on the basis of secondary sources of information and the personal experience and observation by the author done throughout Darjeeling hills for a long time.

2.1. A 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 group of the multi-ethnic district of Darjeeling, West Bengal, India. The word "Shar-wa" “Shar” means east and “wa” means person in Sherpa and Tibetan language. Thus, Sherpa means the people of the east.¹ (Kumar R.R). Northey and Morris write about the Sherpa of Nepa that “in their own homes the sherpas are almost wholly Tibetan in their manner and customs. Extremely superstitious, their religion appears to be almost the same as the somewhat corrupt form of Buddhism followed in adjacent Tibet. But surrounded by the followers of the Hindu religious people. It is not unnatural that they should have adopted certain Hindu practices” ²(Brook W. Northey and Morris C.J. p. 252-253). It has been observed that the Sherpa are very proud of their culture heritage. The centuries ago, when they were in Tibet, they were proud of being Tibetan, when they migrated to Nepali approximately 1480-1520. After residing they were proud of being Nepalese. “Originally of pure Tibetan stock they have mixed with the local inhabitant and are now extremely proud of being considered as Nepalese subjects”.³ (ibid) They migrated to Darjeeling hills in search of job since 1839-42, and after being resided some five generation now they are proud of being Indian and locally they feel good to be known as Gorkhas. The Government of West Bengal and local administration issue them Gorkha certificate for the recruitment to the Indian Army and other armed forces. Thus, the Sherpas have different identities in different places as according to the time and situations.

2.2. Clans of the Sherpa tribe

The Sherpa tribal community have amongst themselves eighteen surnames or (historically originating in the Tibetan province of Kham) eighteen clan names listed below: -

1. Lama, Lama Gonba	2. Mende	3. Nawa	4. Pankarma
5. Shire	6. Sharwa	7. Shangup	8. Khambache
9. Munming	10. Lhukpa	11. Lakhshindu	12. Jongdomba
13. Chusherwa	14. Chaiwa	15. Salaka	16. Goparma
17. Gole, Pinasa, Thaktok [Brother Clans]		18. Paldorje [Khumbu] or Salaka [Solu]	

Table 1

Clans like Lama and lama Gonba (Brother Clans) Pankarma, Khambache, Chaiwa, Goparma. / Gole, Pinasa, Thaktok [Brother Clan]

2.3. Physical Features

The Sherpas tribe are mostly in yellow complexion with flat nose and slightly oblique eyes and beardlessness. Generally, they are small in stature, physically they appear not so big but they are very strong and powerful.

2.4. Occupations

The Principal Occupation of Sherpas are agriculture, grazing and petty trade. Potatoes and Maize, reddish, carrot cabbages are their principal crops. The Sherpa are now following different types of occupations like mountaineer, guides, trekkers, businessman, Hoteliers etc. There are numbers of the educated Sherpas who are very well established in different govt. jobs like Doctors, Civil Service Officers, College and school teachers and other govt. Services holders in Darjeeling hills. My observation of more than ten year clearly convinced me that very few of them are engaged as labour in the tea gardens of the Darjeeling hills. Whereas few of them are engaged as labour in the cinchona garden especially in the Mongpu areas

2.5. Costumes and Dress

The Sherpa female wears cloths like long skirts called Bakhu and Hanju and an unusual feature of women's dress is the multicoloured striped aprons called "Pangden" worn to cover the front and backbody below the waist. Both married and unmarried women wear the rear apron, while the front apron is worn only by married women. Various ornaments and a distinctive cap called a "shyamahu" complete the dress of the Sherpa woman. Both male and female wear high, woollen boots with hidden soles. The upper are coloured maroon, red, and green (or blue), and the boots are tied on with coloured garters.⁴ (pilgrim publication page 29). The time has changed now. The Sherpa tribal has started wearing casual dress. Man folksseldom wear their traditional dress specially during the festivals and occasions and sometime during community get together most of the time. We can observe some female wearing their dress but most of the young generation do not wear regularly. The young generation of the Sherpa can be seen wearing a western dress as like other common people in Darjeeling hills.

2.5.1. Housing

The Sherpas used to make single roof houses of two storeys, on the ground floor they used to keep livestock, firewood and other side rations like Potatoes, etc. The floor above is used for cooking, living and sleeping purposes. They have a living room with fire pit, drawers and shelves for their utensils, bedding and goods as well as a prayer room with Buddhists idols. Where refer, excrement is dumped into the stable below and later spread on the fields.⁵ (Pilgrim publication page 31) at present this kind of the house rarely seen in Darjeeling hills. Recently I have observed lot of change in their housing pattern. Which can be easily seen in the villages. There are few houses on the above-mentioned structure but most of the Sherpa now are building either of cement houses or wooden instead of the stones with modern design and decoration with their desired shape and size. There we find many transformation in their house pattern but one thing still has the same that is a prayer flag which is known as "Lungdar" and "shyambu". The Lungdar is the symbol of the Buddhist house. Which is stranded beside their house or at the roof of the house. We can observe a very beautiful "Chosum" a temple in their prayer room. As per chairman's statement "The west Bengal Sherpa culture Board have started building a house of same size and shape in Darjeeling hills. Which looks different and they have already built 1000 houses in Darjeeling hills"

2.5.2. Ornaments

Sherpa women wear golden bangles, golden necklace and golden earring etc. Turquoise and coal (from Tibet) are found mounted on silver necklaces, some of the ornaments are called Takeha, Patuk, chhou, Kaedak, and Allong.⁷ (pilgrim, page 30) New generation Sherpa community prefer designed and decorated golden necklace with precious stones, etc. Traditionally both men and women grow their hair long and even men plait their hair and decorate it with clips studded with semi-precious stones. But nowadays this sort of long hair style is fast disappearing⁹ (pilgrim, page 30-31) New generation of the Sherpa tribe are not seen fascinated about the traditional attires, ornaments etc. the attractive and comfortable things have been the choice of the most of the people.

2.6. Food habits

The Sherpa are generally non-violent people and do not kill animals. However, they are allowed to consume meat and fish. They eat beef, pork, mutton, fish. They prefer to eat varieties of food made from potatoes and wheat, they also eat rice and other vegetables.

The Sherpa drink a local fermented beer called 'Chhang' and 'Tongba'. In morning, the Sherpa like to have salt tea as the common food beverages. Only few Sherpa smoke cigarette and bidi, many affluent Sherpa drink western drink rum etc. Ultimately Tibetan dishes like 'Momo' and 'Thukpa' are the favourite of all the Sherpa in the hills of Darjeeling in both vegetable and Non-vegetable variation.

As all Gorkhas of Darjeeling the Sherpa also like to eat 'Gundruk'. Which is prepared from the leaves of reddish and cabbages etc. "leafy vegetables (saag) are first dried up and after washing them properly in hot water stored in a pot for ten to fifteen days and taken out and dried up which is called Gundruk" ⁷ (Liwang Min. Page. 63) Another rare dish of hills is "Dhiro", It is cooked from the wheat and pounded finger millet. Which is taken with soup of meat, Vegetables and specially Sisnu. Beside these foods, the Sherpa now have all kind of modern foods, rice and chapattis, aludum, pizza etc.

3. Linguistic Status

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 Sherpa 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 in Darjeeling Hills. The Sherpa language is the one of the attested language by linguistic survey of India.⁸(Kar.C. p 13.) The Sherpa tribal community of Darjeeling hills are struggling to save their tribal linguistic identity. The tribal are actually identified through their peculiar language and cultural identity. The Sherpa language which is surveyed by the linguistic survey of India in Darjeeling just after independence and having their own language. They have different identity of language and cultures. But the numbers of the speakers of Sherpa language have drastically decreased. The language plays an important role in tribal identity but the Sherpa language is in the verse of erosion. The government and educational institutions never try to cater Sherpa tribal language even if in the primary level educational institution. Now only few of the old generation know their language and can speak. The maximum influence of the Nepali language can be seen everywhere among the Sherpa tribes in Darjeeling hills. The Sherpa use Nepali language and Devanagari scripts in communication, reading and writing purposes. The Devanagari script is used to publish the News, Books, cards, flex, obituary references, etc. It is seldom seen that a Sherpa uses a Tibetan script.

4. Social Status of Sherpa Tribe

There are no strict social division among the different community of Darjeeling hills. Among the Hindu, Bahun and Chettri are seen with higher social status whereas all scheduled caste such as kami, Damai, Sarki are seen as lower class in social stratification. The tribal society do not have such social stratification. Theoretically, The Sherpa have their own clan system, the lama (clan) Sherpa are the highest in their social position whereas the Yukpa are treated as the lowest in their social category. But practically there is not such social discrimination.

5. Social Status of Sherpa Women

The Sherpa women get equal status in every field of their life. There is no such discrimination in their society. They also get the same respect as their male counterpart. The traditional ceremony, rituals, convention, customs are not complete without the full participation of women. For example, when the marriage ceremony is held, the traditional songs "Swargey" is song together by the men and women in their own verses, this is not only the status of the women but there is a separate songs and style especially dedicated for women. The famous dance of the Sherpa i.e. "Shrebru" is meaningless without the women participants. Women folk fill a heart to the songs and dances of the Sherpa culture and traditions. There is no obstacle to the widow to get remarried. The Sherpa women folk may get remarry if her husband is died or divorced. But the case of the divorce is not practice or I did get a single case of divorce in rural areas. The ritual called 'Larashika' which is a final ritual of the Sherpa tribe during marriage ceremony which is actually protection for the real status of the women. The parents have total control over their wards even if they are married. A home security will be always there in the minds of women, daughter.

6. Dowry System

The dowry system, although, it is legally prohibited but it is the social system which is practiced at large in the other societies of the plains. The people of the plain must see upward to the hills to learn more about the dowry free marriages. The Sherpa tribal society is also an example of the same where there is no system of dowry. The parents willingly provide some gift or presents to the bride during marriages. The marriages are held peacefully and no murder or physical assault cases for dowry have been reported among the Sherpa tribal in Darjeeling hills.

7. Conclusion

The Sherpa of Darjeeling hills like other tribal group in India are facing many challenges for modernization, urbanisation, globalisation and mass media etc. The Sherpa tribe is one of the backward tribe of Darjeeling hills. It has its own beautiful tribal language, culture, and religion. But nowadays the Sherpa tribal are changing and adopting new things in their life styles. They have adopted the Nepali language as their lingua-franca in Darjeeling hills. They have adopted Devanagari scripts for the writing proposes. The pattern of the houses is changing, the life styles, food habits, the dress and costumes they are wearing also changing, only few of them wear their traditional dress specially during the festival and some occasion. The young generation of the Sherpa society seldom wear their traditional dress. The cultures are changing slowly and gradually and ultimately the ethnic identity of the Sherpa is also changing and camouflaged by Tibetan, Nepalese and Gorkha identity.

8. References

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