

Seeking the tribe

Ethno-politics in Darjeeling and Sikkim

by | Sara Shneiderman and Mark Turin

“We must learn how to be tribal. This is difficult for us, but very, very important,” said Mr Mukhia in his lilting boarding-school English. Wearing thick horn-rimmed glasses, a neatly starched handkerchief folded into the breast pocket of his tweed jacket, and a bowler hat cocked rakishly to one side, the 70-year-old leader of Darjeeling’s Mukhia/Sunuwar Rai ethno-political organisation looked more like a colonial caricature than a radical indigenous activist agitating for his people’s place as one of India’s Scheduled Tribes. While Mukhia cut an amusing figure, the fight for tribal status in which his group is currently engaged – alongside other ethnic organisations representing Indian citizens of Nepali origin in Darjeeling and Sikkim – is no laughing matter: The struggle for recognition as a distinct tribal entity, a classification that can entitle a community to educational and economic benefits from the state on the basis of their unique cultural history and language, is one of the most critical political issues in this region today.

In the early 19th century, the British Raj encouraged migrant labourers from Nepal to cultivate the fertile hills that now make up the state of Sikkim and the Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Besides working on tea plantations, the migrants also toiled on road-building projects, in holiday resorts and as menial staff supporting the colonial administration and its military. Although some of these labourers quickly returned home satisfied with cash in hand – in waves of seasonal migration that continue to this day – others chose to settle permanently in this booming region, where a level of economic success and social mobility appeared within reach that would be unimaginable in Nepal’s caste-constrained midhills.

Most of the permanent settlers in Darjeeling and Sikkim were members of Nepal’s ethnic groups, now commonly referred to as *janajati*, such as the Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Tamang or Thami. As is often the case in diaspora situations, these discrete ethnic

identities were initially subsumed under a broader ‘national’ identity. Beginning in the immediate aftermath of Indian Independence, the unifying struggle for recognition as Indian citizens of Nepali origin, with full linguistic and cultural rights, reached its apex in the 1980s with the violent Darjeeling-based Gorkhaland movement, which agitated for a separate state. Led by Subhas Ghising, a Tamang, one of the movement’s demands was that ‘Gorkhaland’ be recognised as a tribal state under the Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. Such a move would have ensured tribal benefits for all of Darjeeling’s people of Nepali origin, regardless of their specific caste or ethnicity. As it was, Gorkhaland never became a state, and in 1989, Ghising settled for chairmanship of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), which remains under Calcutta’s jurisdiction as part of West Bengal.

At around the same time, thanks largely to pressure from the Mandal Commission, the Indian government set about revamping the country’s stagnant reservation policy. Released in 1980, B P Mandal’s report revitalised the practice of setting aside a certain percentage of government jobs and seats in public



Thami Welfare Association members perform for the Union Minister of Tribal Affairs in Gangtok

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Himal Stylebook: *Nepali or Nepalese*

What to call a person from Nepal, or whose origins reach back to Nepal? The term 'Nepalese', with the anglicised -ese, has found favour since colonial times and remains in extensive use, including in the official titles accepted by the government of Nepal. However, there is also an increasing trend towards 'Nepali' while writing in English, which is also part of *Himal Southasian's* style. We would be willing to go along with 'Nepalese' if there was a hard-and-fast rule of English grammar that insisted on -ese to be added to the name of a country or region ending with -i. But a person from Bengal is not 'Bengalese', nor is a citizen of Israel 'Israelese'.

We believe that, where possible, the local-language 'adjectification' must be preferred when English grammar rules are not clear-cut. Such is the case with 'Nepali', which is also the proper term used in the parent language to refer to any person or thing from or of Nepal. There have been attempts

to categorise 'Nepalese' as denoting the people of Nepal, to distinguish this from 'Nepali' as a broader descriptive term. But that would be usage limited to discourse in the English language, and hence inadequate.

There is some genuine confusion when one leaves the borders of Nepal, because Indian citizens of Nepali origin face a political problem by being identified as 'Nepali'. Given that the term 'Nepali' is not about to change in its reference to the citizens of Nepal, however, the Nepali-speaking Indian citizens of the Indian Northeast, as well as Darjeeling/Sikkim, have tried to come up with alternative formulations by which they would prefer to be called. These include the term 'Gorkha', propagated by Subhas Ghising of Darjeeling, which has not found significant acceptance elsewhere in India; as well as the more recent 'Bharpali' and 'Nepamul'. The experiment continues.

universities for disadvantaged communities. Even though such a system had existed since 1950, only when the government introduced a new benefit schedule in the 1990s did concrete benefits begin to trickle down to those classified as Scheduled Tribes (ST), Scheduled Castes (SC) or Other Backwards Classes (OBC).

For the first time, being a member of a Scheduled Tribe or Caste could actually alter one's educational or professional chances for the better. The race had begun. For many Darjeeling residents of Nepali ancestry, disillusioned with the failure of the Gorkhaland movement to gain any special status for the Nepali language and its speakers, the search for classification as a Scheduled Tribe presented an alternative option for demanding benefits from New Delhi. But this also meant dismantling the sacred cow of pan-Nepali identity in favour of many discrete 'tribal' identities, and this presented an obstacle. Most Darjeeling citizens who had grown up in the post-Independence era had little idea of how to be culturally Tamang or to speak Limbu, for example, much less how such identities might be 'marketed'.

With the exception of more substantial Bhutia and Lepcha communities, Sikkim's demography is almost identical to that of Darjeeling. However, the state's unique political history has led to a great prioritisation of tribal issues at the policy level. Sikkim remained a sovereign kingdom until 1975, after which it was incorporated into India as a separate state. Darjeeling, however, is only a provincial district of the state of West Bengal. This means that important decisions that are made in Gangtok for Sikkim by its

local political leadership are made in Calcutta for Darjeeling by largely Bengali politicians. The sensitive geopolitical location of Sikkim has meant that it wields a political clout at the national level disproportionate to its size and population. For example, it was only after concerted political pressure from Sikkim that the Nepali language, also known as Gorkhali in India, was admitted as an official language to the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution of India.

Homeland to performance hall

The homogenising influence of Nepali diasporic life over two centuries in Darjeeling meant that specific ethnic, linguistic and regional identities were jettisoned in favour of a common sense of Nepaliness (based primarily on use of the Nepali language). As the cultural capital of tribal distinctiveness increased in the 1990s, however, members of Darjeeling- and Sikkim-based groups of Nepali origin sought to reconnect with a largely alien ancestral identity. And where better to turn than to

Nepal itself, the very place that their oppressed forefathers had abandoned to try their luck with the Raj? Scouting parties from Darjeeling made forays into Nepal's midhills, retracing the steps of their migrant ancestors, in the hope of collecting the necessary cultural ammunition to launch successful campaigns for tribal status in India.

At the same time, members of ethnic organisations in Darjeeling and Sikkim began connecting with seasonal labourers from their own communities who still traveled back and forth to Nepal. At times, these

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interactions can be almost farcical, with cash-strapped *janajati* men and women from Nepal's hills taking time out from their portering or dish-washing duties to perform songs and dances, which their Indian cousins then record on video for eventual presentation to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs in New Delhi.

At one such event in Gangtok in November 2005, members of ethnic organisations in the process of applying for tribal status performed 'traditional' dances in honour of Shri P R Kyndiah, the Tribal Affairs minister. In a rehearsal before the official event, the director of Sikkim's Department of Culture instructed the performing troupes to smile nicely and exaggerate their movements to mimic a Bollywood act, as this would increase their chance of a positive reaction from the audience. His advice was not misguided: the Magar association's presentation of a subtle and slow-moving traditional dance, performed by two old men to the beat of a single *madal* was booed, while the hip-grating antics of Rai and Thami youths set to Hindi-inflected 'indigenous' pop tunes generated thunderous applause. From such stage-managed productions, it becomes clear that the battle for tribal status rests as much on a group's ability to recast cultural practices appropriated from the homeland in crowd-pleasing Indian performative styles as it does on any alleged indigeneity.

Tribal competition

Why did this event in honour of the Minister of Tribal Affairs take place in Sikkim and not in Darjeeling? In terms of tribal policy, not to mention central-government subsidies, Sikkim is the envy of its neighbours. According to official statistics from the 2001 Census of India, of a total population of little more than five lakh, 20 percent of Sikkim's residents have secured Scheduled Tribe status. The Lepchas, Sikkim's indigenous ethnic community, and the Bhutias, descendants of eastern Tibetans who settled in Sikkim beginning in the 13th century, together form a fairly unified tribal political unit. Popularly known as the 'B-L Block', they continue to exercise a disproportionate level of economic and political power, even as their population share drops. The reservation of 12 seats in the State Legislative Assembly for Lepchas and Bhutias is but one example of the implementation of Sikkim's tribal policy.



A symbiotic, if sometimes tense, relationship exists between Sikkimese and Darjeeling-based ethno-political organisations. In Sikkim, such groups have easier access to sympathetic politicians at the state level, but they represent much smaller populations than do the Darjeeling associations, and so have less manpower for organising large-scale conventions and demonstrations. In short, while Darjeeling organisations are eager to pursue their agendas through the apparatus of the Sikkimese state – where they have an ally in Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling – Sikkimese organisations need

the resources and hard-won cultural knowledge of their Darjeeling counterparts to make a compelling case.

As much as the 'pro-tribal' policy advanced by Chamling in Sikkim pleases those who are included, it can frustrate those who remain on the outside. With the accession of the Tamang and Limbu communities of Sikkim to the much-coveted level of Scheduled Tribe in 2002, the remaining numerically dominant and politically active citizens of Nepali ancestry were deprived of two of their most prominent allies in the struggle for ethnic recognition. But such is the currency of tribalism in India: once a group penetrates the glass ceiling, it rarely looks back.

From the diverse nature of the campaigns mounted by ethnic communities for recognition as Scheduled Tribes over the past decade, it has become clear that no standardised checklist exists for a successful application. Every state has its own criteria, and New Delhi appears to judge each case on its own merits. Groups must first be recognised at the state level, with the state government then forwarding a recommendation to the Centre. Tribal recognition in one state does not guarantee it in other states, nor at the national level. The Tamang and Limbu, for example, are still waiting to hear about their accession to nationwide tribal status, despite having already received it within Sikkim and West Bengal.

While aspiring tribes hope for tips from the recently recognised, the leadership of the groups who have already attained tribal status are reluctant to divulge their hard-won strategies, for fear of further weakening an already much-diluted tribal stew. In some cases, members of competing communities have even come to blows over access to political connections and selection criteria. After all, the scant

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pickings of reserved seats in governmental and educational institutions will only be subject to more-intense competition as the number of Scheduled Tribes grows.

There are several ways of potentially minimising these nascent rivalries, and preventing the Balkanisation that many fear. In Sikkim, there is a movement to avoid inter-tribal competition by allocating a specific set of reservations to each tribal group, rather than pooling them all together. In Darjeeling, a recently established group calling itself Bharatiya Gorkha Janajati Manyata Samiti has revived the old Gorkhaland platform, but in the new tribal idiom: they argue that all people of Nepali origin should be recognised by the central government as a Scheduled Tribe en masse, rather than as individual groups. Some ethnic activists scoff that this Bahun-led organisation is simply an attempt by those excluded by the definition of *janajati* current in Nepal – namely, Bahuns (hill Brahmins) and Chhetris – to cash in on the benefits of tribal identification in India. Yet thanks to generations of intermarriage, there is some validity to the argument that no Indian group of Nepali ancestry is more ‘tribal’ than any other, and that the uneven recognition of individual groups may eventually lead to a social dissonance far more violent than the Gorkhaland agitation.

Sacred scripts

A curious feature of the tribal discourse in Darjeeling and Sikkim is that aspiring communities are convinced that their language needs a unique script in order to be taken seriously. Anthropological evidence from around the world points rather to an inverse correlation between tribe and script: small-scale, kin-based ethnic communities – or ‘tribes’ in the most traditional sense – are more likely to be groups without a distinct written tradition. In fact, it is precisely their distance from centres of state learning and ‘civilisation’, and their concomitant reliance on oral cultural transmission, which historically has marked these communities as ‘tribes’. Why, then, are the upwardly mobile ethnic organisations of Darjeeling and Sikkim so eager to rediscover their ‘lost’ scripts?

The answer lies in a clearer understanding of the term ‘tribal’ in the political context of modern India. In Darjeeling and Sikkim, the claim for a tribal identity has less to do with primitivism, indigeneity and autochthony than it does with ethnic discreteness and cultural distinctiveness. A tribe, in

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its politically-charged modern incarnation as used in India, is a bounded ethnic community held together by a tidy catalogue of cultural, dietary, linguistic and religious habits distinct from those held by its neighbours.

Dictionaries of endangered languages have become valuable commodities for the ethnic communities of Darjeeling and Sikkim, and are frequently used as political tools. One of the writers of this article, for example, recently

published a word list of Thami, a Tibeto-Burman language indigenous to the Himalaya, together with a member of the community from the Nepali homeland area. Since the aim was to document the endangered native lexicon of this mother tongue, loan words from Nepali and other languages were excluded, resulting in a thin, pocket-sized volume. While the book is in circulation in Thami villages in Nepal, it did not serve the purposes of the expatriate ethnic community in India, who found it too small to help their claims for Scheduled Tribe status. The same year, in fact, a more substantial Thami-English dictionary was published by a member of the Indian Thami community, bolstered by a high number of Nepali loan words. This served the ethno-political agenda far better: the more words that could be included, the heavier the book, and therefore a more appropriate component of a tribal portfolio (*see photo*).

While a unique language is a must, a distinct script is a valuable bonus. A peculiar consequence of such scriptophilia, compounded by the recognition of tribal tongues as official languages of state communication, is that the *Sikkim Herald* – the Sikkimese government weekly – is published in thirteen official state languages, each in their own script (*see photo*). Whether members of tribal groups can, and actually do, read the newspaper in their ancestral mother tongue rather than in English or Nepali is largely beside the point. Even though many ‘tribal scripts’ are of dubious antiquity and

unmistakeably derived from Nagari characters also used by Nepali, this is no hindrance to the ethno-activist agenda, since their importance is more symbolic than practical. For the leadership of most ethnic organisations in Darjeeling and Sikkim, then, the primary value of a unique script is its emblematic distinctiveness; use in schools and administration, and widespread adoption by community members, are only secondary concerns.



Little and large, two Thami dictionaries published in 2004

Out-tribed

On 29 January 2005, the State Cabinet of Sikkim approved a proposal recognising the Lepcha community as Sikkim's 'Most Primitive Tribe' (MPT). In this anti-caste hierarchy, in which the degree of a group's connection to the earth raises rather than lowers its standing, the previously unassailable category of Scheduled Tribe had just been upstaged with the new category of Most Primitive Tribe.

Yet even the most disadvantaged Lepcha settlements in Sikkim maintain a relatively high standard of living. Dzongu, an officially demarcated Lepcha reservation in north Sikkim, is remote by Indian standards, but still boasts electrified villages, well-run schools, and Community Information Centres with battery-powered computers and broadband satellite connections. Rather fittingly, the Indian reservation system has indeed created a 'reservation' – a discrete homeland territory where only members of Sikkim's Most Primitive Tribe may settle and own land. Indeed, the Lepcha reservation of Dzongu appears to offer a fairly sustainable livelihood for its inhabitants.

What, then, are the benefits of the existing Scheduled Tribe category, and why has it been deemed necessary to create yet another grouping, the MPT? Economically, members of Scheduled Tribes and Castes stand to gain through low-interest loan schemes and reserved posts in government agencies. Educationally, they benefit from a lowering in the marks required to pass their board exams and exclusive access to reserved positions in universities and vocational schools. Members of Other Backwards Classes have access to a smaller number of reserved seats, but do not qualify for the direct financial support available to ST and SC individuals. This has created a situation where those groups currently classified as OBC – such as the Magar, Rai and Thami – see their position as only a temporary stepping-stone to the more desirable category of ST. Summing up their frustrations, OBC ethno-activists commonly use the Nepali phrase: *na jat, na bhat* – no tribe, no rice. Similarly, as more groups penetrate the ST category, its benefits are perceived to diminish. In turn, Scheduled Tribe may become just another stepping-stone on the way to the new pinnacle of Most Primitive Tribe.

Purity paradox

Still, for a sizeable number of people the benefits of the reservation system remain conceptual, since regardless of whether their ethnicity is currently classified as OBC, ST or MPT, each



Issues of the Sikkim Herald in 11 different languages - and scripts!

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individual must apply for a personal certificate in order to qualify for special treatment. This process entails presenting one's credentials to the district magistrate or block officer, and then appearing for a one-on-one hearing in front of a judge who assesses the application's validity. Aspiring individuals must present an official letter from the appropriate ethnic

organisation, attesting to their status as a 'genuine' member of the group in question, as well as reference letters from two male relatives of the same group who have already obtained the certificate. Depending on the case, school transcripts, employment records or proof of residence may also be requested. This lengthy and complicated process means that only a small percentage of the population who are in theory eligible for ST, SC or OBC classifications have actually applied for and subsequently received their certificate.

One of the primary problems with the current certification procedure is its reliance on patriarchal definitions of descent and ethnic identity. A person can only claim membership of a given ethnicity through his or her father. There is no legal way to claim ethnicity through the mother, nor are female relatives accepted as legitimate references. Given the high rates of inter-group marriage in Darjeeling and Sikkim – approximately 75 percent of couples come from mixed ethnic backgrounds, according to an informal survey conducted by the authors – this creates problems for people who have been raised with their mother's cultural identity and wish to claim OBC or ST status through maternal ancestry. Furthermore, the policy of requiring references from two male relatives of the same group means that only paternal relatives can be called upon. For those people who happen to have no uncles or male cousins on their father's side, or who are not in touch with their father's family, it is particularly difficult to enter the system. Ultimately, only around half of the people with genetic ties to an ethnic group are actually eligible for legal membership in it.

More than anything else, such archaic rules of reckoning membership demonstrate the impossibility of claiming ethnic purity in India's melting pot. For the moment, this paradox is overshadowed by the thrill of cultural performances and mass meetings that dominate the region's day-to-day ethno-political life. But the more complicated realities of mixed cultural identities will continue to pose personal and political challenges for the descendants of those now desperately seeking tribal status. ▲

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