

**POLITICS OF ETHNICITY AND IDENTITY FORMATION: A  
STUDY OF THE SHERPAS OF SIKKIM**

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**DECLARATION**

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*Dedicated To*  
*My Loving Family*  
*And To*  
*All the Sherpas Of Sikkim*

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## **List of Maps and Tables**

Map 1: The Map of Solu-Khumbu in North eastern Nepal.....	21
Map 2: The Inroads of Chumbi Valley, Nathu La pass, Jelep La pass and the Haa Valley....	69
Table 1: Table 1: Ethnic Composition of the Legislators.....	91

## **Table of Contents**

<b>Introduction.....</b>	<b>1</b>
What is Ethnicity?.....	1
Theories and Approaches to Ethnicity .....	5
1. Primordialist Approach.....	5
2. Constructivist Approach .....	7
3. Instrumentalist Approach.....	8
Cultural Deprivation .....	9
Positing and Identifying Sikkim as a State .....	10
Locating and Identifying the Sherpas .....	12
Approach Adopted for the Study .....	15
Research Questions.....	15
Objectives .....	16
Methodology .....	16
Outline of the Study .....	16
<b>Chapter I: The Sherpas; Early History, Social Structure And Migration Pattern.....</b>	<b>19</b>
Introduction.....	19
Tracing the Origin of the Sherpas .....	19
Deconstructing the Word ‘Sherpa’ .....	22
Overview of the Gorkha Conquest and the Formation of Nepal .....	22
Locating and Identifying the Sherpas in Nepal.....	23
An Egalitarian or a Non-Egalitarian Society? .....	25
Clan Formation, Family and Inheritance pattern of the Sherpas .....	26
Kinship Pattern.....	29
The Leadership and Power Distribution Pattern among the Sherpas .....	29
The Significance of Religion and Monasteries in a Sherpa Society .....	30
The Economic Framework.....	32
Tracing the Wave of Sherpa Migration to Darjeeling and Sikkim .....	42
Conclusion .....	49
<b>Chapter II: An Analysis Of The Political History Of Sikkim: The British Paramountcy, Inter-Ethnic Relations And Ethnic Politics (1200- 1975).....</b>	<b>51</b>
Introductio.....	51
The Categorization of Ethnic Communities in the State.....	53

The Early Period of Pre-Theocracy (1200-1647) .....	54
The Aboriginal Lepchas, Limboos and Magar of Sikkim .....	54
The Wave of Bhutia Migration to Sikkim .....	56
The Period of Medieval Theocracy (1642-1888).....	57
The Inter and Intra Ethnic Conflicts .....	58
The Prevalence of Feudalism and Stratification in the Early Traditional Society of Sikkim.....	60
The Impact of the First Wave of Gorkha Intrusion: A Critical Analysis.....	61
The Impact of British Intrusion and its Hegemonic Influence .....	62
The Episode of Annexation of Darjeeling .....	63
The Treaty of Tumlong, 1861 .....	64
Internal Affairs: Increased British Influence in Sikkim (1874-77).....	66
The Second Wave of Nepalese Influx to Sikkim.....	66
The Anglo-Chinese Convention: The End of Tibetan Hegemony over Sikkim .....	67
Colonial Feudalism (1888-1949) .....	70
The Lessee System.....	71
Protectorate Sikkim and the Indian Union (1975) .....	73
The ‘Parity Formula’ .....	77
Integration of Sikkim to the Indian Union .....	78
Conclusion .....	79
<b>Chapter III: Ethnic Politics And Identity Formation Of The Sherpas In Sikkim Post 1975 .....</b>	<b>81</b>
Introduction.....	81
Locating and Identifying the Sherpas in Sikkim.....	82
The Second Assembly Elections.....	86
The Sherpa Representation in the State Legislative Assembly .....	89
Identification of Limboos and Tamangs as Tribes .....	91
Ethnic Boundaries between the Ethnic Groups: The Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese ....	92
The Denzong Sherpa Association and the Three Major demand of the Sherpas.....	94
The Sherpas in Search of Identity .....	100
Language and the Question of Identity .....	101
Conclusion .....	103
<b>Conclusion.....</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>Bibliography.....</b>	<b>111</b>

## INTRODUCTION

### What is Ethnicity?

The world today is not a homogenous group as has frequently been characterized by the idealistic views of globalization. It is instead filled with what Appadurai (2006) would call the "anger minorities"<sup>1</sup>, who pose a great challenge to the institution of contemporary democracy. The world is made up of people who differ in multiple attributes like colour, race, religion, sect, caste, descent, region, language, nationality, and culture which represents different "ethnicity" or ethnic groups. The word ethnicity today has become the most ubiquitous phenomenon all over the system. It has gained immense popularity both in the academic domain and in contemporary politics. Therefore, on several occasions, it gets radicalized and poses a severe challenge to the existing structure of society. However, the concept still appears to be rather subjective in its nature and origin. According to Oommen (1997), "ethnicity has become something like a beauty, which is said to be located in the eye of the beholder or observer" (Oommen, 1997: 5). It has been used and applied in a variety of contexts and interpreted differently by different people depending upon their varying experiences.

In order to understand a term, it becomes essential to throw a glance at the etymological understanding of the same. The word ethnicity first appeared from a Greek word 'ethnos' meaning a group of humans living and acting upon together, which we today refer to as the 'people' or 'nation' (McDonald et. al, 1996: 19) It was also used to describe a large undifferentiated group of either animals or warriors (ibid: 19). From the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, the word 'ethnos' was used to denote a cluster of people sharing common characteristics. In the course of time, various compound and derived words like ethnology, ethnography, ethnic, ethnicity, ethnocentric and so on were popularly used in academics. The concept of ethnicity was used for the first time by David Reisman in 1953 (Moynihan and Glazer, 1975: 1). It was initially used during the Second World War as a term which referred to the Irish, Jews Italians and other people,

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<sup>1</sup> "anger minority" was a term used by the Appadurai in his book *"Fear of Small Numbers: An Essay on the Geography of Anger"*, where he analysed the elements of globalization which contributed to a resurgence in violent forms of national and cultural identification.



who were considered inferior to the dominant groups and who were largely of British descent (ibid:1). Terms like ethnicity or ethnic groups involuntarily emerged and differentiated between one group against the others. This led to the term ethnicity being associated with ‘differences’ and ‘otherness’. Its adjective ‘ethnic’, was initially referred to those groups who had recently migrated and were hence perceived to be different (McDonald et al.1996: 22).

The word ethnicity carries both subjective and objective connotations. It is subjective since it is a product of the human mind and human sentiments. Therefore, it is a matter of identification or a sense of belonging to an ethnic group (Yetman, 1991: 2). Ethnicity can also be objective, as it is based on some objective characteristics and is constructed by social forces and power relations (Chakraborty and Ghosh, 2013: 134). Oommen (1997), mentions five situations in which a person or a group may become ethnified. In the first case, the nation (people) may continue to live in their own ancestral or adopted homeland and still maybe ethnified by the colonizing or native dominant collectivises, who reduces them to marginalised groups (Oommen, 1997: 15). The second case of ethnification happens where an immigrant collectively is denied full-fledged participation in the economy and polity, on grounds that they have just newly migrated to the land. The third case occurs due to self-externalization, where there is a tendency of immigrants to still identify themselves with their ancestral homeland, in spite of several centuries of migration. In the fifth case, an eligible migrant is denied basic human and citizenship rights. Through all these definitions we can also conclude that in short, ethnicity is considered as an outsider status, either because one is considered as an ethnic group by the people at their point of arrival, or because one has not made up their mind to become a settler in the place of their migration (ibid: 15). Therefore, a group becomes ethnified when they are marginalized or discriminated against in terms of their primordial characteristics. Yinger (1997) puts forth the argument that everyone belongs to an ethnic group.

Few scholars are of the view that there are bound to be ethnic boundaries between ethnic groups. If there are boundaries between ethnic groups, there are also mechanisms to maintain the same (Nash, 1996:23). These boundary mechanisms are cultural markers of differences and these differences among the groups are index features (ibid: 25). The boundary features indicate the less visible, less socially apparent aspects of the group. These boundary-marking features indicate who are the members

of which group and what are the minimal cultural items involved in the membership. The meaning that is associated with the boundary differences among the groups need not be and are not isomorphic. Barth (1969), also highlights the boundary maintenance mechanism of ethnic groups, to which he refers to as cultural 'boundaries' (Barth, 1969: 8). According to him, cultural variation is discontinuous i.e. there are groups of people who essentially share a common culture and interconnected differences that distinguish each such discrete culture from all others. There are discrete groups of people or ethnic units, which corresponds to each culture. These ethnic boundaries persist to exist, despite the interchange of people from one ethnic unit to the other (Barths: 1969: 15).

Therefore, as we can see that the definition of the term ethnicity, through its complex fabric may vary, according to the scholars or researchers' perspective, understanding and experiences.

It is also important to note that when studying the word ethnicity, a reference to identity or identity formation is also fundamental as both the terms are attached to each other. Therefore, most of the definitions on ethnicity, given by several scholars and researchers revolve around the aspect of community identity of self-determination and self-recognition. Ethnicity may also be defined as an affiliation or identification with an ethnic group. According to Barths (1969), ethnic identity implies a series of constraints on the kind of role the individual or group of individuals are allowed to play. It is also determined by the partner one chooses for different kinds of transactions (Barths, 1969: 17). Ethnic identity is therefore superordinate to most other statuses or social personalities, which an individual with the identity may assume (ibid: 17). So, ethnic identity is similar to that of sex and rank, which constrains the incumbent in all his activities and not only in some defined social situations (ibid: 17). While according to Kom (2011), ethnic identity refers to nominal membership in an ascriptive category, including race, language, caste or religion. This is consistent with the broad definition now taken as standard one in the field of ethnic mobilization. (ibid:148).

According to Weber, ethnic groups are,

*Ethnic groups' are those human groups that entertain a subjective belief in their common descent because of similarities of physical type or of customs or of both, or because of memories of colonization and migration, this belief must be important for the propagation of group formation, conversely, it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists (Weber, 1996: 35).*

Weber postulated that ethnic memberships were presumed identities and not groups having specific social actions like that of the kinship group (Weber, 1996: 35). However, it is also important to note that in spite of political groups being artificial in nature, it aroused a belief in a common ethnicity. This belief in common ethnicity persisted to exist even after the disintegration of political groups, unless of course if there were a drastic difference in the custom, physical type, or most of all the existence of language amongst its members. There are instances where close ties like shared political experiences, persistent ties of the old cults and the strengthening of the kinship and other groups, both for the old and new communities ceases to exist. During such instance, the sense of ethnic group membership also disappears regardless of whether the kinship may be strong or not. There is also a sense of superiority in one's custom over the custom of others, which they consider as inferior, an agreement that sustains the sense of ethnic honour.

According to Narang (1995), in his book "Ethnic Identities and Federalism" he defines ethnic groups as,

*A group of people who share a feeling of peoplehood based on real or fictional common ancestry, or real or presumed shared socio-cultural experiences or memories of a shared historical past and focus on one or more symbolic elements of religion, language, dialect, race, tribe or nationality diffused as the epitome of their peoplehood* (Narang, 1995 : 6).

The definition given by Narang (1995) shows that historical continuity may be necessary for ethnic group formation. However, the formation also depends largely on the mobilization process during which the symbols become important.

The above definitions may be amongst the most common and simplest definitions on ethnicity and ethnic groups. There are several other definitions of ethnicity which would extend its scope furthermore than the above mention definitions may permit. Yuet Cheung (1993), took the definition of ethnicity a little further and stated that ethnic identification is the result of psychological attachment to an ethnic group or heritage, and so centres on the construction of self-perception (Cheung, 1993: 1216). In spite of an individual having psychological attachments with their ethnic group identifications, Cheung's definition may not be suitable or reliable while defining ethnicity in situations of exclusion and inclusion of ethnic group members due to

political factors (like the categorization of the population by the census, reservation classificatory system, and so on). As these, factors would be independent of his or her psychological or emotional feelings. It is in this context that Kom's definition of ethnicity enters in to fulfil the gaps left by Cheung. According to Kom "ethnicity is fundamentally dual, encompassing both meaning and politics. It refers to a multitude of socio-cultural phenomenon, an identity which demands a sense of belongingness" (Kom, 2011: 147). Kom has tried to show how ethnicity today has taken its deep roots into political aspirations. In recent years, the process of capitalistic modernization and globalization seemed to have intensified ethnic competition and conflict and have contributed to the rise of ethnic movements" (Smith, 1981: 13). Ethnicity is perhaps the most important influence on third world social and political systems, inflicting discrimination on minorities, undermining the other and development and even putting the very survival of some states at risk. (UNESCO 1992, cited in Kom, 2011).

### **Theories and Approaches to Ethnicity**

There are three commonly used approaches of ethnicity namely the primordialist approach, the constructivist approach and the instrumentalist approach. The theoretical discussions further will enable us to explain how ethnic relations are being perceived. It will also throw light on how ethnic relations are further defined by people and what are their perception towards their own group as well as that of the others.

#### **1. Primordialist Approach**

The intellectual tradition of primordialist approach can be traced from the work of Weber. However, ethnicity is always a relational construct which cannot be defined without the existence of ethnic groups or categories. Smith (1981), has been among the few to have used the word 'ethnie' which denoted a collective group of people. Smith (1981) in the first chapter of his book "The Ethnic Revival" used the word 'ethnie' to define the word ethnicity, which is characterised by a multiplicity of attributes like, religion, sect, caste, region, language, nationality, descent, colour, race, and culture (Smith, 1981: 1). The culmination of all these terms are used to define ethnic groups or ethnicity. He also further defines ethnic groups as being passive, isolated and politically discriminated group of community or communities. Smith gives six characteristics of ethnie and they are, a collective name, a common myth of descent, distinctive shared

culture, a shared history, an association with a specific territory and a sense of solidarity (Smith, 1981: 17).

The idea was further postulated in the work of Geertz and Van De Berghe, who stated that people belonging to an ethnic group becomes a member of the group as they share common biological and cultural origins (Geertz 1973, van den Berghe 1981). According to Geertz,

*By a primordial attachment is meant one that stems from the “givens” – or, more precisely, as culture is inevitably involved in such matters, the assumed “givens” – of social existence: immediate contiguity and kin connection mainly, but beyond them the givenness that stems from being born into a particular religious community, speaking a particular language or even a dialect of a language, and following particular social practices. These congruities of blood, speech, custom, and so on, are seen to have an ineffable, and at times overpowering, coerciveness in and of themselves (Geertz 1973: 259).*

According, to Geertz the blood, speech, language and custom postulates power to act coercively over the group. These primordial ties are significant as they are unique and differs according to the person, society and time. Therefore, such collective identity such as ethnicity is an important vehicle for claiming legitimacy over a territory and for demanding autonomy. The primordialists consider ethnicity as an innate category with an existence of their own. According to them, it is a natural bond between peoples which is ineluctable and immutable or primordial.

Therefore, from the above discussions, it is clear that the primordialist approach lays emphasis on the biological entities of human existence which is a natural phenomenon and member of an ethnic group is bound by the network of kinship. The primordialist perspective can further be divided into two types, namely the Sociobiological Perspective and the Cultural Perspective. The sociobiological perspective is represented by Pierre van den Bergh (1981) who argues that ethnicity is an extension of kinship. Ethnic affiliation is therefore bound to stay forever as kinship is such a factor which never perishes. He used the concept of ‘ethnic nepotism’ to explain ethnicity that people attempt mutual aid of networks to the entire ethnic group (van den Berghe 1981: 143, Vanhanen 2004). The cultural perspective, on the other hand, gave emphasis on the importance of common cultural factors like language to determine the genesis and tenacity of ethnic identity, even if the common ancestral

affiliations are absent. According, to this perspective, different groups of people, originating from the same country can form an ethnic group and develop a common ethnic identity in an immigrant society, in spite of not having any common biological routes (Yang 2000: 43).

However, the primordialist approach has been unable to explain why ethnic membership or identities of individuals and groups have disappeared. It has also failed to grasp with the changing dimensions of ethnic groups with the emergence of new identities amidst diverse biological and cultural human groups. The economic and political interests which are closely associated with ethnic sentiments and practice have also been ignored. Today the scholars have moved on to what we call the ‘Constructivist Approach’, which stresses on the constructed characteristics of ethnicity which they argue developed in a particular historical and social context and can be utilized to serve a group’s social, economic and political claims (Kukuczka 2011).

## **2. Constructivist Approach**

This approach was specifically dominant since the 1970s and posed a sharp contrast with that of the primordialist approach. It viewed ethnicity as a socially constructed identity and as something that is created over time and is hence changeable. According to them ethnicity is highly dynamic in nature and is a result of changing social environment. This theory also states that while studying ethnicity, attention should be on the *boundaries* of the group. According to this approach, the boundaries of ethnic groups is however not permanent and is instead highly flexible and dynamic in nature.

Fredrick Barth (1969), in his influential essay on “Ethnic Groups and Boundaries”, emphasized that ethnicity is a relational construct and he formulated the idea of ‘boundary maintenance’. He deconstructed the notion of ‘culture’ as a discrete category and argued that ethnic groups are socially constructed and hence are subject to environmental constraints (Barths, 1969: 9). The central argument of Barth work is that ethnic identities are sustained by the maintenance of ‘boundaries’, the demarcation of which marks off one group from another. These demarcations are not just drawn by cultural difference but are also maintained by socio-cultural boundary because of the existence of other ethnic groups (ibid: 14). Barth’s focus of investigation is not on the cultural but on the ‘social boundary’ that defines the group. According to him, an ethnic

group is a form of social organization in which the participants themselves make use of certain cultural traits from their past. However, the cultural feature of the ethnic group may change over time, due to contact and exchange of information with various other groups. Yet the sense of separateness, of distinctive ethnicity, often continues to persist. Therefore, according to Barth, the focus should shift from cultural factors towards the maintenance of ethnic boundaries (ibid: 15).

Therefore, this approach views tradition and identity as a socially constructed cultural process within the fabric of political platforms. So, culture becomes a politically motivated object to represent various distinctive features of ethnic communities. This approach remains the most widely used one in analysing ethnicity. However, it tends to ignore the role of political and economic interest in the construction of ethnicity.

### **3. Instrumentalist Approach**

In contrast to the primordialist position, the 'instrumentalist' or 'circumstantialist' position argue that ethnicity is something that can be manipulated and is invariable, situationally expressed and subjectively defined (Brass, 1974: 3). Therefore, the definition of instrumentalism is often confused with constructivism. The scholars have also failed to separate the two approaches as they lack any concrete distinction in most of the works on ethnicity. One of the central ideas of instrumentalist approach is the socially constructed nature of ethnicity and the ability of individuals to 'cut and mix' from a variety of ethnic heritage and cultures to forge their own individual or group identities (Cohen, 1969).

Glazer and Moynihan (1975), who are considered as among the pioneer of this approach stated that ethnicity is not simply a mixture of effective sentiments, but like class and nationalism, it is a means of political mobilization for advancing interest groups or ethnic groups (Glazer and Moynihan, 1975: 6).

According to Brass (1991), the ethnic identity formation, on the other hand, is viewed as one of the effects of state, the official ideology and its specific policies. According to him, the ethnic identity formation takes place in three sets of struggle within the state. Firstly, it takes place within the ethnic group itself for control over its material and symbolic resources which involves defining the group boundaries and its rule for inclusion and exclusion (ibid: 16). Secondly, it takes place between ethnic groups as competition for rights, privileges, and available resources. Thirdly, it occurs

between the state and the group which is dominant (ibid: 16). However, these three sets of struggle occur at different time and in different ways. Brass also puts forth that the study of ethnicity and nationalism is largely the study of politically- induced cultural change (Brass, 1991: 75). It is the study of process through which elites and counter-elites within an ethnic group select aspects of cultural group's culture, and attaches new values and meaning to them and thereby uses them as symbols to mobilize the group (ibid: 75). Thereby it defends its group so that they can compete with other groups.

One of the formulations of the instrumentalist approach is that ethnic groups are similar to interest groups and are motivated by the 'rational choice theory.' The theory implies that the people act to promote their own socio-economic positions, by minimizing the cost of and by maximizing the potential benefits of their actions (Yansey et al, 1976: 392). So, Rational Choice theory, when applied to ethnic identity implies that affiliation or ethnicity is based on the rational calculations of costs and benefits of ethnic associations. Advocates of this theory also state that ethnicity is an option.

Therefore, the instrumentalists attribute 'interests' as the sole criteria of ethnic identity and ethnic affiliation and are dynamic and flexible as the benefits of ethnicity shifts. According to Bell (1975), ethnicity has become more salient because it can combine with an interest with an effective tie" (Bell, 1975: 169). However, the instrumentalists have also not escaped criticism. It has been criticized on the grounds that not all acts of men are based on rational or utilitarian principles. In fact, religion, language and other cultural categories at times are worth paying attention to.

### **Cultural Deprivation**

The theory specifically stresses on the fear of losing the minority cultural identity amidst that of the majority. Narang (1995), who coined the term "Cultural Deprivation" states that one of the important inducements to ethnicity comes from the feeling of insecurity, which is felt by the ethnic minorities in the sea of the majority. The insecurity is specifically felt due to three factors. Firstly, they may feel insecure due to the discrimination and oppression by the majority. Secondly, the state may also identify itself with the majority and thirdly there may arise homogenization process due to modernization leading to the creation of synthetic state culture (ibid: 35). These dominant groups are also usually the ones at the political forefront and have an upper hand in politics. Therefore, they start questioning the so-called privileges or rights of



the minority and also has the tendency of going to the extent of imposing their own religious or cultural values as that of the whole society. Such measures naturally arouse a strong pressure towards the minority ethnic groups assimilating into a united whole to fight the dominance of the majority over them. (ibid: 35). In most of the cases, the state refuses to recognize the limited traditional rights of the minority like their religion, language and culture. This further escalates the already existing ethnic rivalry between the minority and majority ethnic groups whereby the traditional elites find its authority increasing unchallenged and the supreme one. “Unfortunately in the inter-and intra-ethnic rivalry or conflicts the state, rather than acting as an impartial arbiter, assumes the role of sword arm of the prominent ethnic group” (ibid: 35). According, to Narang, ethnic demands or aspirations are divided into four types, that is for affirmative action, for greater autonomy and unquestioned power, for autonomy demand related to systematic change and for secession (ibid: 36).

The cultural deprivation approach explains some of the conflicting nature of modern or a multi-ethnic society. However, it largely stresses on the cultural and political elements of it, thereby ignoring the economic elements in a society.

Therefore, the phenomena of ethnicity is an essential component of the socio-political realities of most of the multi-ethnic states today. There always arises an issue of coping with the complexities of multi-ethnic state and hence ethnicity remains pivotal.

### **Positing and Identifying Sikkim as a State**

By asserting a central stage in the contemporary politics, ethnicity today has evoked major concerns everywhere around the world and Sikkim is no exception to it. A state in North Eastern region of India, it integrated with the Indian Union on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1975 as its 22<sup>nd</sup> state. It went on from formally being a traditional feudal theocracy under the Namgyal Dynasty, which ruled over Sikkim from 1642-1975 to a democratic polity. Sikkim is today the least populated state in India with a population of 6, 10,577. It is also the smallest state in the country after Goa in terms of land area, spreading over 7,096 square kilometres (Sikkim Human Development Report 2014, 2015). Its geographical locale commands strategic importance, as it shares its boundary with countries like Nepal, Bhutan and China. Sikkim has in the past enjoyed its trade relations with all of its neighbours and specifically with the then independent country

of Tibet, which was later taken over by China in 1950. Due to this reason, one may find in the history of Sikkim, numerous warfare with either of its neighbouring countries. Therefore, one may find in the later chapters of the dissertation, which specifically focuses on the political history of Sikkim that its history is in fact intertwined with the history of its neighbouring countries. What also makes Sikkim of strategic importance is its extremely fertile land, which gives way for a large number of wild fruits, agricultural yields like grains, dense forests which provides for a larger number of timber, wood and so on. Sikkim also houses 4000 species of flowering plants, with 500 species of orchids, 300 species of ferns and its allies and about 30 species of rhododendrons (Sikkim at a Glance: 41).

The state is multi-ethnic in nature and houses numerous communities and ethnic groups with people who have over the years migrated from Tibet, Nepal and Bhutia. Due to such an influx of people from various neighbouring countries, the ethnic composition of the state remains a very complex one. However, most of the scholarly works on Sikkim has identified three major ethnic groups in the state namely, the Bhutias (Lhopos) the Lepchas (Mons) and the Nepalese. The Bhutias are believed to have migrated to Sikkim in the 13<sup>th</sup> century from the eastern part of Tibet and Sakya in central Tibet via the neighbouring valleys of Chumbi and Ha (Balikci, 2008: 66). The descendant of the first Bhutias went on to become the Kings (Chogyals) in Sikkim who ruled over it for more than 300 years. The Lepchas, are believed to have been residing in Sikkim before the coming up of the monarchy in the state. Therefore, they are usually considered as among the first few inhabitants of the state along with the Limboos and Magars, the latter two being clubbed with the Nepalese group. According to Mullard (1979), the Lepchas were the Western Tibeto Burmese migrants, who came to Brahmaputra basin and later extended to various parts of South-East Asia and Assam hills and from there made their way to Sikkim (Mullard, 1979: 3). These two communities namely the Bhutias and the Lepchas are considered to be the 'indigenous' communities of Sikkim. The Nepalese, on the other hand, are considered the 'immigrant' group who came to Sikkim during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. The Nepalese constitute a heterogeneous category of a cluster of communities namely the Newar, Bahun, Chettri, Jogi, Sanyasi, Limbu, Rai, Magar and Thami, and the Scheduled Castes like Kami, Damai, Sarki and Maji (Chakraborty, 2000: 3806). Many Nepalese made their way from Nepal during 'Anglo-Gurkha War' of 1814-16, while the majority of the

influx was the result of stimulation by the British. The Nepalese were encouraged to settle in Sikkim by the British as they would help them stimulate wasteland and would bring about economic growth and development in Sikkim (Singh, 1975:15). Today the Bhutias constitute 20 per cent, the Lepchas, 13.16 per cent while the Nepalese constitute 66.84 per cent of the total population (Census of India 2011 Sikkim). There is also the prevalence of people from the Indian plains, like Marwaris, Bengalis and Biharies, who came to Sikkim in 1917, so as to profit from the expansions of cardamom trade (Balikci, 2008: 6).

The history of Sikkim thus shaped during the British intrusion had severe repercussion on the socio-economic and political scenario of Sikkim. The colonial intrusion in Sikkim had its inception with the signing of the Treaty of Titalia in 1817, which brought Sikkim under the direct influence of the British with the assurance that Sikkim could rely on them in aspects of protecting their sovereignty. The intrusion was however backed by their selfish motive of opening up trade routes with Tibet, via Chumbi Valley. The British therefore played a major role in the history of Sikkim. In fact, the ethnification or political ethnification of the state can also be tracked during the same period. The significant role played by the British in crystallization of ethnic identities in the state has been further elaborated in the later chapters.

Sikkim is divided into four districts namely, North, South, East and West. The Northern Himalayan Range in Sikkim were inhabited by the Bhutias, Dukpas and Lepchas who were mostly pastoral traders and yak herders. The Nepalese of Sikkim, on the other hand, were mostly peasants and workers who were popularly known for their perseverance in the labour industry and were mostly found in the western and southern districts of Sikkim, as the regions were fertile for agriculture. The east district, relatively, remains a region attracting all three communities.

### **Locating and Identifying the Sherpas**

The central focus of this dissertation is to critically evaluate the role of ethnicity in the politics of Sikkim over the years and how it has led to identity formation among the ethnic groups specifically focusing on the Sherpas. It also focuses on the current position of the Sherpas in the politics of Sikkim.

The word Sherpa is derived from a Tibetan word *shar*pa meaning the easterners, with the word *Shar* meaning east and *pa* denoting the people, as they are believed to

have migrated from Kham, in Eastern Tibet (Subba, 2011: 279). According, to Ortner (1989), they migrated from their homeland between 1480 to 1500 to the North Eastern regions of Solu-Khumbu and Pharak to escape the turmoil being carried out by the Mongols (Ortner, 1989: 2). They belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid family and linguistically, environmentally and religiously retained their proximity with Tibet. Eventually, the term Sherpa was given a separate, independent and a full ethnic identity (ibid: 281). With the Government of Nepal opening up its door to the outside world in 1953, this pastoralist and agriculturalist group were exposed to tourism and mountaineering. Their performance in mountaineering made them famous and distinguished their identity from the rest (Sarkar, 2017: 130). In on time they were known for accompanying the Westerners in undertaking mountaineering expeditions to high altitude mountain ranges as guides or porters. Their profession eventually had started being attached to their ethnicity and the Sherpas were stereotyped as usually being ‘high altitude porters’.

Their first entry into Sikkim can be traced back to when Rabden Sherpa came to Sikkim as a regent in 1750s during the time of the fourth king Phuntsog Namgyal II (Singh, 2009: 66). They further migrated during the Nepalese wave of migration that took place during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. They are also believed to have entered West Sikkim while undertaking mountaineering expeditions from Darjeeling and later settled their permanently. It is due to this reason, we today find a higher number of Sherpas in the western district of the state. Few, also believe that the Sherpas are hunters who have descended from the Bhutia-Lepcha cross group (Sukla cited in Nepal, 2009). However, the migration of Sherpa to Sikkim at different times in history still remains very obscure, with very few materials and sources on the same. According to a report by the Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) in 2017, the Sherpa population in Sikkim is around 50,000. As they are represented under the Bhutia census, their appropriate share of population in the state, cannot be determined. Therefore, going by the report issued by the Denzong Sherpa Association, the Sherpas in Sikkim comprises of 8.18 per cent of the total population. However, such percentage remains far from being an accurate one, due to which there is a need of having a distinct census representation for them.

In spite of being few among the oldest citizens of Sikkim, the Sherpas have over the years not been able to acquire a position for themselves in both administrative and political realm of the state. In the dissertation, one may find while discussing on the

political history of Sikkim that the Sherpas have hardly been mentioned. However, the truth remains that they rarely had any roles to play in it. The community almost goes unmentioned in majority of the textbooks and articles which deal with the political history of Sikkim. The central aim of the dissertation remains to analyse the political position of the Sherpas in Sikkim over the years, and how it has led to the creation of their identities. As the identity of an individual speaks subjectively on the basis of how they feel or how they interpret their position in the social context (Allahar, 2001: 197). The Sherpas, also till date do not find belongingness to anyone groups. They have been included under the Bhutia category from 1978 along with seven other communities namely Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo. However, in contrary to this view, according to Sarkar (2017) the Sherpas, were found in the region known as Dorji Ling (which is today famously known as Darjeeling) in 1800. They were then clubbed under the ‘Bhotia’ meaning the Bhutias who had come from Tibet (Sarkar, 2017: 122). Darjeeling was back then under the territoriality of Sikkim before being taken over by the British in 1835. However, in spite of being clubbed with the Bhutias, the Sherpas did not find entitled to The Revenue Order No. 1, 1917 which safeguarded the land rights and privileges of the Bhutias and Lepchas. According to the Order, the Lepcha-Bhutia group were not allowed to sell, mortgage or sub-let any of their lands to any person other than a Lepcha or a Bhutia” (Sinha, 2009:77). It was further stated in 1931 that “no Nepali can purchase Bhutia or Lepcha’s land unless the special permission has been accorded by His Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim” (General Department, 1931). They were denied access to the order as after the integration of the Sikkim with the Indian Union, Article 371 (F) was added to the Constitution which guaranteed special provisions to Sikkim. According, to the Article “all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority” (Cited in Vandenhaksken,2010: 179). Therefore, as per the law, the Sherpas were not entitled to the Revenue Order No. 1, as it was introduced in 1917, that is before the integration of Sikkim. However, as mentioned by Sarker (2017) earlier that the Sherpas were actually included under the category of Bhutia since the 1800 which is much before the Revenue Order No.1 came into being in 1917. Therefore, they are actually entitled to all the privileges enjoyed by the Bhutias under the tag of being the ‘indigenous minority’ including the entitlement of the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917.

However, such Acts, such as the Order No.1 of 1917, has gone on further to create an ethnic divide and cultural differences and, in turn, has established boundaries amongst the 'indigenous' and the 'migrants' groups. The Sherpas were also at one point of time, clubbed under the category of the Nepalese, as anyone besides a Bhutia or a Lepcha were considered a Nepali at one point of time. Therefore, as the Sherpas have all along been facing misrepresentation and 'othering' from the ethnic groups, they are bound to have undergone what Narang (1995) termed as 'cultural deprivation'.

### **Approach Adopted for the Study**

The study analyses the ethnic groups not just as a social group but also as the group that ensures the effective basis for demanding social, political and cultural resource and also acts as a political resource. This leads to the mobilization of ethnic politics in a political system and furthers the development of ethnic organizations. For this study, the following definition of ethnicity will be used,

*Ethnicity is used to signify self-consciousness of a group of people, who uses its ethnic symbols for political mobilization to attain specific goals, including political power and socio-economic advancement.*

The study has adopted the instrumentalists' approach which comments on the socially constructed nature of ethnicity, and the ability of individuals to 'cut and mix' from a variety of ethnic heritage and cultures to forge their own individual or group identities (Cohen, 1969). One may also find in today's scenario that ethnicity is highly flexible to the contemporary dynamic political environment.

### **Research Questions**

- 1) How has there been a creation and shift in the identity of the Sherpas over the years?
- 2) How does politics play a role in the creation of inter and intra-ethnic relations among the various ethnic and sub-ethnic groups of Sikkim before its integration with the Indian Union?
- 3) How do we understand the role of the British in the creation of ethnic identities in Sikkim?
- 4) How do we make sense of ethnicity and ethnic politics in Sikkim post-integration, and how has it led to identity formation among various ethnic groups, specifically that of the Sherpas?

## **Objectives**

- 1) To evaluate the historical and social conditions that have led to the creation and shift of Sherpa identity over the years.
- 2) To critically evaluate the political history of Sikkim before the integration.
- 3) To analyse the role of British in the creation of ethnic identities in Sikkim.
- 4) To theoretically and critically evaluate ethnicity and ethnic politics in Sikkim post the integration and how it has led to identity formation of Sherpas vis-a-vis the other ethnic groups in Sikkim.

## **Methodology**

The study is specifically based on secondary sources available in the related research area and has employed a qualitative method of inquiry. The secondary data sources have been collected in the form of books, autobiographies, articles, journals, newspapers, reports magazines, reports, internet blogs and other published and unpublished works (dissertation, thesis and reports) which are relevant for the study, so as to give a holistic approach to it. The study has also employed primary sources such as the Gazetteers of Sikkim, and the Handbook on Census. For materials on the position of the Sherpas in the political scenario of Sikkim, a great deal of reference has been taken from both the National and the Sikkim local daily newspapers which are both in English and Nepali, so as to get a more detailed narrative on the same.

Materials have been collected from several libraries namely, the Central Library of Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, Indira Gandhi National Centre for Arts, New Delhi, The Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, Centre for Himalayan Studies of North Bengal University, Central Library of North Bengali University, Central Library of Sikkim Central University, Darjeeling District Library, The Library of Himalayan Mountaineering Institute and The National Archives of India, New Delhi.

## **Outline of the Study**

The dissertation is divided into five parts. The first part of it is the Introduction, followed by the three main chapters and finally the conclusion. The introductory part throws light on the review of literature which discusses the concept of ethnicity, ethnic politics, ethnic identity and the major theoretical approaches that have been used for the study. The chapter thereby tries to position and identity Sikkim as a state by

focusing on its geographical locale followed by a discussion on various ethnic groups of Sikkim, specifically the Sherpas. It has also highlighted on the research problems, objectives of the study, research questions, approach of the study and methodology.

The first chapter throws light on the early history, traditional social structure and the migration pattern of the Sherpas. It specifically highlights aspects such as origin, clan, kinship and family patterns, economy and subsistence, religious activities and migration patterns. These aspects become important as Sherpas who may later have migrated to different places may still carry the roots of their traditional social structure. The chapter further elaborates on the introduction of tourism and mountaineering and the huge impact it had on the Sherpas, which altogether went on to create a new identity for them as being 'high altitude porters'. Therefore, over the years their ethnicity has been associated with the profession they have carried out. It lastly, throws light on the migration pattern of the Sherpas over the years.

The second chapter focuses on the political history of Sikkim. It highlights on the period from the pre-historic phase that is from 1200 AD till the integration of Sikkim with the Indian Union on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1975. The chapter throws light on three different eras namely the pre-theocratic era (1200-1975), the medieval theocracy (1642-1888) and the era of British intrusion. It has specifically analysed the inter-ethnic relations amongst the three ethnic groups namely the Bhutia, Lepchas and the Nepalese. The chapter has thereby discussed on the role of British in the ethnicization of communities after Sikkim became a protectorate state under the colonial rule. As it is often said that ethnicization and political ethnicization in Sikkim is the work of the British. Therefore, the chapter thereby discusses the impact of British intrusion on Sikkim which led to the crystallization of identities among ethnic group.

The third chapter theorizes the evolving nature of ethnicity and ethnic politics in Sikkim post the integration of the state with the Indian Union in 1975. It gives an overall view of the political representation of various ethnic groups. It specifically focuses on analysing the case of Sherpas, who since the period of monarchy acquired a very marginalized and an insignificant position both in the administrative and political realm of the state. Keeping note of the same the chapter analyses the ethnic representation of the Sherpas in the political realm of the state. It also focuses on the role of organizations namely the Denzong Sherpa Association, in playing the role of voicing the demand of the Sherpas. The chapter further discusses on the



misrepresentation and 'othering' of the Sherpas by the ethnic group over the years. Lastly, it also throws light on the role of language in the identity formation of the Sherpas.

The conclusion specifically gives an overall view of the three chapters in a serial manner. It hereby also gives few recommendations, scope and relevance for further studies on the related issues.

## **CHAPTER I**

### **THE SHERPAS; EARLY HISTORY, SOCIAL STRUCTURE AND MIGRATION PATTERNS**

#### **Introduction**

Before carrying out any study of a community or an ethnic group, it firstly becomes pivotal to throw light on its historical spectrum. Therefore, this chapter makes an attempt to trace the origin, early history, traditional social structure followed by the migration pattern of the Sherpas, as these factors play a significant role in shaping their identities. The chapter becomes important, as it lays down the various traditional social structures of the Sherpa community namely their origin, clan, kinship and family patterns, economy and subsistence, religious activities, migration patterns and so on. Focusing on such aspects also becomes important as Sherpas who may have later migrated to different places may still carry the roots of their traditional social structure. The chapter further highlights on the significance of tourism and mountaineering and how it shifted the herding and agriculturalist Sherpas to being expert high altitude mountain climbers who accompanied the Westerners to high mountain ranges as their guides or porters. Such a shift in their profession in no time gave them the tag of being skilled 'high altitude porters'. Therefore, it becomes crucial further to discuss the historical and social changes that lead to such a shift from their former profession to being expert mountain climbers. Thereby, the chapter also throws light on the migration pattern of the Sherpas over the years and the factors that encouraged such migration.

#### **Tracing the Origin of the Sherpas**

The origin of Sherpas can be traced back to the Kham region of Eastern Tibet. According to Ortner (1989), the Sherpa ancestors came from different localities of Salmo Gang district of the Kham region in Eastern Tibet between 1480 and 1500. They migrated from Kham, specifically to escape the turmoil being carried out by the Mongols. Different scholars, however, may have different interpretations of the reason for the migration of the Sherpas from Kham. Oppitz (1973), was of the view that their ancestors migrated from their homeland in Kham during the 16<sup>th</sup> century, with their first wave of migration starting from 1530 A.D, which continued till the 1850s. They migrated due to the various politico-religious and internal conflicts that took place

between the people of Kham and their powerful neighbours in the north namely the Mongols. Jestard (1969), gives a different account and states that conflict that had erupted between the *Gelukpa*<sup>2</sup> and *Nyingmapa*<sup>3</sup> sects of Buddhism, in Kham during the 17<sup>th</sup> Century, where the former got the victory, while the Sherpas belonging to the latter sect escaped persecution by moving southward. They further reached the Khumbu region located in North Eastern Nepal. Therefore, one can clearly see that the reason behind and the time frame of their migration from their homeland still remains a topic very debatable, with few scholars like Brower (1990), even tracking the migration period to the 15<sup>th</sup> century. Paul (1970), basing his research on account of religious practices among the Sherpas, opines that they migrated in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to Khumbu, as there has been no proof and documents on the establishment of monasteries which were also known as the *gompa*<sup>4</sup>, in Khumbu, before the mentioned period. From the works of various scholars, it can be noted that there has been no precise reasons for their migration, with even the time period of their migration, still remaining very debatable.

What also remains uncertain is the place they first migrated to after having left behind their homeland. Few scholars like Jerstad (1969), and Brower (1990), are of the view that they first migrated to Khumbu in North Eastern Nepal via the *Nagpa La* pass. Contrary to their view Haimendorf (1964), puts forth that the Sherpa ancestors migrated south along the Rongshyar Chu-West of the Rolwaling Himal, from where they took a turn towards the east and settled in Solu, from where they further moved northwards to Khumbu. While scholars like Ortner (1992) on the other hand, states that they first moved to Tinkey, in the south-central part of Tibet, but due to the rumours of an invasion from the West decided to move further in 1533. They further crossed the *Nangpa La* Pass the same year and settled in upper Khumbu, at Pangbonche and Dingboche, which were in fact by then already sites of meditation retreats for Tibetan lamas. The original group of immigrants constituted twenty-five to fifty persons (*ibid*).

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<sup>2</sup> *Gelukpa* is a new school of Tibetan Buddhism who are the followers of the Dalai Lama. Their monks and nuns practices celibacy.

<sup>3</sup> *Nyingmapa* is the oldest school of Tibetan Buddhism, whose monks and nuns do not practice celibacy and are free to marry at their will.

<sup>4</sup> *Gompas* are fortified monasteries of Buddhists' which provides a space for praying and meditation and also centres of learning for Buddhist monks and nuns

While scholars, like Kunwar (1989), states that after leaving their homeland in Kham the Sherpas first came to Lhasa and then to Dingri, after which they went to Khumbu and settled there. They later moved forward from Khumbu to Solu and finally settling there in a region known as Junbesi which was previously known as *gomba dzyung*. Later the population there increased and moved further to areas like *Chortung La* and further to the North Western side.

It is also important to point out that none of the works by scholars have mentioned about the population that was already present in regions of Solu, Khumbu and Pharak and their encounter with the Sherpas. Haimendorf (1984), does mention the presence of the Rai community, who used parts of the Khumbu land for grazing. However, he did not mention the kind of encounter or interactions if any between the Sherpas and the Rais.

**Map 1: The Map of Solu-Khumbu in North Eastern Nepal**



Source: <http://visitsolu.blogspot.com/2013/01/solukhumbu-district.html>

## **Deconstructing the Word ‘Sherpa’**

The word Sherpa is derived from a Tibetan word *sharpa* meaning the easterners, with the word *Shar* meaning east and *pa* denoting the people. There is, however, no clear history as to when the term was associated with the population. As looking at it from the Tibetan vantage point, the Sherpas living in the highlands of Nepal were actually southerners, rather than easterners. It may be assumed that as their actual region of origin happens to Eastern Tibet, therefore the word was associated with them. On the contrary, according to the Sherpas of Solu, the word ‘Sherpa’ originated much later, before which they were referred to as ‘Bhote’ a term given by the Nepalese to people coming from Tibet (Kunwar, 1989:35). The Nepalese according to Basnet (1975), comprises of a loose conglomeration of Indo-Aryans and the “Gorkha” Mongoloid tribes. The Sherpas in order to differentiate themselves from the ‘Bhote’, accepted the term ‘Sherpa’. Therefore, over the years the descriptive term ‘Sherpa’ has come to identify the community. According to J.R Subba (2011), the landmark year of the usage of the term ‘Sherpa’ can be traced back to as the 1950s (Subba, 2011: 281). Eventually, the term was given a separate, independent and a full ethnic identity (ibid: 281). Moreover, their performance in mountaineering made them famous and distinguished their ethnic identity from the rest (Sarkar, 2017: 130).

## **Overview of the Gorkha Conquest and the Formation of Nepal**

In order to understand any event, it is important to look at the roots of that event. Therefore, history here plays a pivotal role in understanding or analysing an event or a cause, which in turn helps one understand the present better. At this juncture it becomes important to look at the history of Nepal in brief, being the country where we can trace most of the historical details relating to the Sherpas. It is also the place where one finds a large population of Sherpa, where they spent the first half of their lives before a few of them migrated to parts of Darjeeling and Sikkim.

Nepal is located in a very sensitive and a conflict-prone zone in the Himalayas, bordering India and China. So, in order to look at the history of Nepal in relation with the Sherpas, it also becomes important to simultaneously look at the historical accounts of places in India surrounding Nepal namely, Darjeeling and Sikkim which will be dealt with later.

Nepal at the beginning of 18th century was a fragmented region which paid loyalties to the Mughal Emperor in Delhi. However, the year 1743 marked the beginning of the history of modern Nepal when Prithvi Narayan Shah, who was the son of Raja Narabhupal Singh became the king of Gorkha districts (Tamang, 2015:32). During the period from 1768 to 1790, Prithvi Narayan Shah along with the kingdom of Gorkha conquered Kathmandu, Patan, Bhadgaon, Eastern Nepal which included Solu-Khumbu and Western Nepal in between 1772 to 74 (ibid: 32). However, no such records on the Gorkha's conquest treaty of Solu-Khumbu have been found so far. It was when the Gorkhas conquered the Sen Princedom in the course of eastern expansion that the Solu-Khumbu region came under conquest (Ortner, 1992: 45). Their interest in Solu-Khumbu was due to the vested interest they had in controlling the Tibet-Nepal trade route, upon which the Sherpas sat (ibid:90). This period brought in a turning point in Prithvi Narayan Shah's career after he made Kathmandu valley his capital. He forecasted the need to reorganize and to unify the small principalities of the then divided Nepal into United Nepal (Tamang, 2015:34). With his efforts of unifying Nepal as one nation, he was successful in bringing together the diverse ethno-religious cultural groups under one banner and developed a consciousness and feeling of nationalism among the people of Nepal. Therefore, he is remembered in the history of Nepal specifically for his contributions towards the creation of Modern Nepal by uniting several small principalities. Thus, the unified county that we today call Nepal was created in the 18<sup>th</sup> century, through the persistence and strategic vision of Prithvi Narayan Shah.

### **Locating and Identifying the Sherpas in Nepal**

The three main regions in North Eastern Nepal inhabited by the Sherpas were Khumbu, Solu, and Pharak. Khumbu extended from Dudh Kosi gorge, where the villages lay in the banks of the river, and partially on broad and slightly sloping terraces high above the deep and narrow gorge (Haimendorf, 1964:2). Their average elevation was 8,000 to 9,000 feet and at the Southern end of Pharak, Sherpa villages occupied the higher ridges, whereas the lower slopes were inhabited by a population of Rais (ibid:2). Solu known as Sha-rang, among the Sherpas extended southward of Pharak and was a region best suited for agriculture and farming as it provided a good landscape as

compared to Khumbu and Pharak. The Sherpas were scattered across Likhu Khola<sup>5</sup>, the Khimti *Khola* and Sun Khola. The people of Yelmu region, located in the Northeast of Kathmandu also called themselves Sherpas although they were different in terms of material culture and dialects (ibid:3). East of Pharak extended across the valley of Indu Khola, where the ancestors who migrated from Pharak and Solu some three to four generations back were found at Arun Khola. The Sherpas were also found in Taplejung, an area originally inhabited by the Limboo population of Nepal (ibid:3). However, the Sherpas in Nepal formed an ethnic minority. According to one of the famous folklore of that time, Solu-Khumbu was known to Tibet as wilderness and was in fact used for the purpose of meditation by Tibetan hermits, before being predominantly settled by the Sherpas. The region was wild and uninhabited, with few of the southern portion belonging to the indigenous Rais (ibid: 3).

Unlike the Nepalese, the majority of whom including the tribes where Hinduized, after centuries of prolonged contact and intermarriages with the Hindus, the Sherpas continued to follow the *Ningmapa* sect of Buddhism. Kunwar writes that ‘though the Sherpas migrated to Nepal in the 1530s, it is not known if they were acquainted with the other ethnic groups or not’ (Kunwar, 1989: 120). The Sherpas were unique from the other residents of Nepal in term of religion, dress, kinship, language, marriage and social life, which still resembled with that of the people in Tibet (Fisher, 1990: 32 ). It may also be due to this reason that the Sherpas did not forget their ties with Tibet and also made frequent visits there not only for trade but also for religious purposes. As North Eastern Nepal was quite far from the Central Government of the country, they enjoyed a great amount of *de facto* autonomy. ‘Trade with Tibet formed the subject of a number of Government orders and decisions embodied in documents, copies of which are still in possession of individual Sherpas (Haimendorf, 1975: 61).

It was also difficult for the Central Government to pay frequent visits to North Eastern Nepal, given the distance between them (Kunwar, 1989: 123). This had played an advantageous role for the Sherpas, as they remained out of the purview of the stringent and fascist Central government of Nepal. The Gorkha rulers were all from high caste Hindu families and had propagated orthodox Hindu laws, one among which was the ban on cow slaughter (ibid:123). The Sherpas in the 19<sup>th</sup> century did not

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<sup>5</sup> Khola in the local Nepali language means the river.

comply with the law. Therefore, the rulers had to later remove the imposition on consumption of beef for the Sherpas, with just some amount of fine being imposed on them, while being banned across the country (ibid:123). Thus, as there were no avenues of interference from the Centre, the Sherpas for a long period were able to retain their traditional practices and no avenues of change in the society were witnessed. While, King Prithvi Narayan Shah tried to unite Nepal politically under the pan-Hindu fold, thereby including non-Hindu groups as well by following a comprehensive caste policy, the Sherpas of North Eastern Nepal remained out of the purview of these rules for a long time. The Central Government formulated the legal code and established vertical social ladder, where the Brahmin and the Chhetris specifically the Kshatriyas, to which the Kings belonged were given a dominant position in the realm of religion, economics and politics of the country (Ortner, 1992:37). The non-Hindu groups like Tamang, Rai, Limboo, Yakkas and so on formed the group below the Brahmans and Chhetirs and were known as Matwalis (the one to whom drinking is not a taboo). The Kami (blacksmith), Dami and Sarkis forming the Shudra caste in Nepal's caste hierarchy. 'The Sherpas too were regarded as the 'lower caste' or 'tribal' who were included under the Matwali group, on the basis of their economic, political and cultural grounds' (ibid: 37).

### **An Egalitarian or a Non-Egalitarian Society?**

What highly impressed the Western scholars towards the Sherpa society was its egalitarian principles, which is practised in its community-oriented society, amidst the fascist Hindu regime in Nepal. However, contrary to the ideal picture of the Sherpa society as being egalitarian and free from the practice of purity and pollution, there were the prevalence of few such practices in small pockets. Fisher (1986), states that pollution was practised by the Sherpas with certain groups of people such as the low-caste Nepali Kamis, or blacksmiths who were found in few places of Sherpa settlements like Namche Bazaar and Khumjung and among the butcher class Tibetans. Such practices were directly the outcome of the influence of casteism that existed in Nepal who considered Kamis, Damai and Sarki as the 'lower castes'.

The *Khambas* were also regarded as slightly inferior to the Sherpas, given the fact that they had arrived at Khumbu from Tibet several decades after the Sherpas. A major source of livelihood was also gained through helping the Sherpas in agricultural tasks for which they were provided food and shelter (Haimendorf, 1964:32). The name



*Khamba* was derived from the place they had originally migrated from, that is Kham province of Tibet. They were believed to have migrated to Khumbu, having found life in Khumbu much easier, with no shortages of food (ibid:33). There were a lot of inter-marriages between the Khambas and the Sherpas. The Khambas also participating in every festive occasion of the Sherpas. The subgroup of the Khambas known as the *Khemandue Khamba*, meaning the ‘bad mouth’, were considered as underprivileged, while the Sherpas and non-*Khemandue Khambas* referred to themselves as the *Khemdu* meaning the ‘good mouth’. However, there has been no further explanation made on why the *Khemandue Khambas* were regarded as ‘underprivileged’ in comparison to the Sherpa’s and *Khemdu Khambas* (ibid: 35). ‘*Yembas*’ were the other such group considered as ‘underprivileged’, having descended from the slaves, in Nepal before slavery was abolished in 1926 (ibid: 35). Besides the prevalence of such practices, the Sherpa society did not have any intensive pollution practices and these two groups namely the *Khemandu Khambas* and *Yembas* were only debarred from drinking from the same cup as the Sherpas did, as a part of their local custom. Marriages of *Khemandu Khambas* and Sherpas were also not permitted. If a person happened to marry a *Khemandue* they were expelled from the Sherpa society and would further become a *Khemandue* themselves (ibid: 36). Marriages between Sherpas and Newars, Gurungs and Tamangs were permissible (ibid: 36). These groups were even considered equivalent to the Sherpas, as they all came under the Matwali category, which fell in the third rank of caste hierarchy as mentioned earlier.

Therefore, observing the Sherpa society, Ortner states that the ‘Sherpa egalitarianism is very much like the American variety, in the sense that it is an egalitarianism of opportunity’ (Ortner, 1989: 33).

### **Clan Formation, Family and Inheritance pattern of the Sherpas**

In a Sherpa society, the clans are known as *ru*. ‘*Ru* here refers to either the bone or descents from recognized ancestors which are commonly known as the clan’ (Levine cited in Kunwar, 1989: 166). A Clan consists of a group of selected kins, who tracks their descents from a similar ancestor and considers themselves as part of the same bone. As stated in one of the famous theories, in ‘Asia, the agnatic descent is passed through and expressed through bones, while the uterine descent is passed through and manifested in the form of flesh (A.Paul,1989: 21). Here, the bone signifies the patrilineal inheritance which is symbolized by strength and endurance, while the flesh

represents the matrilineal relationship, which is, in turn, symbolises obedience (ibid:22). These clans established a commonality and solidarity amongst themselves, as they worshipped the same deity.

The Sherpas and the Bhotias shared a similarity in the structure and organization of their society. The most common similarities between the two groups being that they are both homogenized and not stratified like the Hindu caste society. The Sherpas follow a pattern of the patrilineal exogamous clan. As the Sherpas and Bhutias both migrated from Kham, they share the ancestral traditions of Tibet. According to Haimendorf (1984), there is no written document to track the history of Sherpas, which could show the various clan genealogies. The first few Sherpas to have migrated to Khumbu were from two proto-clans namely the Minyagpa and Thimmi (Oppitz, 1964: 4). The former clan was said to have settled in Khumbu and founded villages like Pangboche and Phortse.

Scholars, state the presence of twenty-one clan groups among the Sherpas namely, Chiawal, Chusherwa, Gardza, Gole, Goparma, Jongdomba, Khambadze, Lakhshindu, Lama, Lhukpa, Menda, Munming, Nawa, Paldorje, Pankarma, Pinasa, Salaka, Shangup, Shir, Sherwa and Thaktu (Kunwar, 1989:167). These clans may be known by different names, in different regions. Few of these clans were agnate and hence were identical to each other and were considered as 'brother clans'. Inter-Marriages between the agnate clans were considered as incest and were therefore forbidden. For instance, the clan Paldorji in Khumbu and Salaka at Solu were considered similar and were regarded as consanguineous kinsfolk. Likewise, Gole, Thaktu and Pinasa were also known to be 'brother clans' and the clan-endogamy applied to them as well (ibid: 167). 'Their unstratified society is further divided into named, exogamous patrilineal clans (A.Paul, 1989:21) The above-mentioned twenty-one clans were the recognized Sherpas in the region of Solu-Khumbu and Pharak, while the recent immigrants from Tibet like the Khambas, and settlers from their communities like Newars, Gurungs, and Tamanga, remained outside the core Sherpa society. According to Oppitz (1964), among the various clans Gardza Shire, Trakto, Binasa, Pankarma, Gole, Yulkogma were from the *Nyingmapa* clan, while Salaka, Khambadze, Chakpa, Paldorje and Lama were considered as the proto and the sub-clans who came to Nepal in 1530 to 1600 AD. The Lamas were considered to be from the descendants of *Nyingmapa* sect and hence most of the legendary figures in history came from this

tribe. These clans were internally divided on the basis of lineage, whose members were tracked through common ancestors. According to Kunwar, the Sherpas tracked their ancestors usually not further down than their great grand-fathers among the living adult male lineage, or to any particular ancestor who may have been renounced or prestigious (Kunwar, 1989: 168).

The Sherpa family pattern, as mentioned earlier is patrilocal and descent is carried out through the male lineage. The father is the head of the family, upon his death, the property is divided among the sons and the daughters are just entitled to the ornaments of their mothers. The Sherpas were, however, more specifically concerned with the birth of a son, who according to them would help the family further in the foundation and perpetuation of clans. Even amongst the sons, the eldest takes over the role as a senior male member in authority within the family, replacing the role of his father after his death, in both lineage and clan functions, prestige ranking and office (Paul, 1989:22). The eldest son became the father's successor in the social status. On, the other hand, the property of the father was exclusively given to the youngest son. This property formed a continuing ancestral estate which was handed down in perpetuity through patrilineal inheritance (ibid: 22). The middle sons if any were not entitled to any property rights, unless of course if the family would be generous enough to give him some share of the family inheritance. The relation that existed between the brothers were also important in portraying the contradiction between egalitarian and in egalitarian discourse. While on one had the Sherpas preached of egalitarianism in society, on the other hand, more preference was always given to the eldest and the youngest son. Ortner (1992) observed during his fieldwork that due to the highly competitive relations that existed between the brothers for property rights, they usually shared strained relations when it came to sharing of property and land. This fraternal conflict was found throughout the Sherpa history. 'The major dimension of Sherpa ethnic of egalitarianism and achievement is a strong streak of competitiveness in the culture' (ibid:33). Therefore, egalitarianism is always threatened by a discourse that is contrary.

Ortner (1992), talks about the presence of a few families, where land was distributed equally amongst the sons. Such patterns of distribution were believed to have come from Tibet. Such patterns also proved to be highly problematic as it would not take many generations for the share of land to become very small for supporting a

family which would, in turn, lead to a decreased standard of living. Due to this reason in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, in Tibet, polyandry was practised in small pockets where all the brothers married a single woman with a set of children, which ensured that the fathers land remained undivided among the brothers (ibid:36). This feature of polyandry, however, did not become very popular within the Sherpa society, with exception to a few families. It is also to be noted that the genealogical texts, usually mentioned women in only a few instances, with just confining their role to being a wife whose duty was to give birth to a son. Therefore, we can see that the Sherpa society had a very patriarchal setup.

### **Kinship Pattern**

Kinship is the unit which designates one's lineage, the basis of organization of clan, the actual mode of reckoning descent and the patterns of behaviour of different members towards each other and the term for address used by them (Kunwar, 1989:172).

Inter-clan relationships are often used to affirm kinship and to establish alliance relations in a Sherpa society. In an exogamous patrilineal society, like that of the Sherpas', a child developed their first contact with their immediate primary kin groups, such as their parents, grandparents and their siblings. It is much later that the child becomes aware of their secondary and other groups.

So far as the Sherpa kinship terminologies were concerned, it may, however, vary from place to place, with most of them preferring instead to use Nepali terminologies like *mama* for maternal uncle, *kaka* for an uncle, *phuphu* for father's sister, *boju* for grandmother and *baje* for grandfather. While in the Sherpa terminology, honorific terms are used very often, where the brother is called *chichu* and the eldest brother of the village was called *achyu*. 'The entire kinship universe of the Sherpas are broken into four major categories, that is, members of one's own clan, members of mother's clan, members of wife's clan and everyone else' (Paul cited in Kunwar, 1989: 173).

### **The Leadership and Power Distribution Pattern among the Sherpas**

The role of leaders within the Sherpa community was to lead migration and to establish new settlements and clanships. These leaders were usually chosen on the basis of his seniority in the patriarchal lineage and also on the basis of vision and supernatural

experiences they have gained (Ortner, 1992:38). Sherpa leadership pattern was usually represented as being peaceful and a non-violent one. They had a governor who was known as a *phembu* whose main purpose was to collect taxes, goods and labours over a given area (ibid: 38-39). What remains uncertain here is the origin and early history of the *phembus*. Few believed it to have arisen from non-kin co-residence relations. Only an individual having no relation with the *phembu* and residing in a particular area had to pay him some form of rent. Even in instances where unrelated individuals, namely the new immigrants, known as Khambas, who came to the region from Tibet, had to pay rents in the form of goods or labour to the kinsmen, for the right to settle on the land (Ortner, 1992:39). The position of *phembus* were however not hereditary and not consistent with the Sherpa values. Anyone having the required qualifications could succeed in the position. An egalitarian ethic was at work within the *phembu* politics. The *phembu* politics was also an aspect which brought in conflict and violence within the otherwise peaceful Sherpa society.

### **The Significance of Religion and Monasteries in a Sherpa Society**

The Sherpas follow the Mahayana Buddhism and belong to the *Nyingmapa* sect, who migrated from Eastern Tibet. They not only practised religion from the very inception but also made contributions and donations for the building up of monasteries which were known as *gompas*. These *gompas* were usually located in conjunction with their private homes, where they would be gathered in groups during the performance of various rites. It is believed that the coming of Sherpas from Tibet to Solu-Khumbu, was accompanied by a person named Lama Sang Dorjee, whose teachings later were considered to have laid the foundation for Buddhist teachings in Khumbu, and he further went on to build several monasteries (Ortner,1992:42). According to Haimendorf (1984), the establishment of the first few temples, at Khumbu occurred during the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the development of monastic institutions, which included the communities of celibate nuns or monks, were a very recent phenomenon.

Ortner in her book 'High Religion' talks about the presence of two types of Lamas or monks in the society. One was the ordinary monk who conducted a routine ritual within the village and were also called the clan lamas, while the other was the hermit or a tantric who were usually busy in meditational or mystical practices, raising their own spiritual power. There were also no demarcating lines between the religious and the political realm, most of the Lamas were themselves indulged in political

aspects. In most of the cases, the lamas were themselves the leaders of these political realms, since the time of early senior-kinsman leadership model (ibid: 44).

The Sherpas who went to the monastic institutions as monks or nuns had to be responsible for their own maintenance, unlike in most other societies where the monastery provides all the necessary facilities for livelihood. The parents of the novice were to make the necessary arrangements for a separate house and food (Haimendorf, 1964:138). Due to this reason, one could only find Sherpas from affluent families going to these monastic institutions.

By 1960s, there were varied changes in Khumbu due to the coming up of rampant tourism, which had a direct impact on almost every aspect of the Sherpa society and religion and religious institutions were no exception to the same. Haimendorf writes that 'by 1971 the number of monks had dropped to fourteen and there were only two small boys in the early stage of their training for a monastic life' (Haimendorf, 1984: 91). Such instances were bound to happen, after the influx of tourism and mountaineering, where majority of the young and able-bodied men, sought an easy means of earning an attractive sum of money, as a porter from mountaineering expeditions. This brought in a steady decline towards religious dedication among the young people. Due to tourism, the number of families going for monkhood had reduced drastically. By 1978, there were very few monks from the Sherpa community, due to which the monks and nuns had to be called from outside the community (Fischer, 1986: 57).

However, the monasteries later witnessed a silver lining during this period from the donations they received from well to do Sherpa families. This was also the time when the Sherpas were witnessing a boom in their economy due to tourism. A lot of money was being donated for the overall maintenance of Monasteries, which the Sherpas performed as a part of their social service. By 1985 due to the influx of strong financial assistance, the monks and nuns were provided all the necessary facilities like lodging and food by the monasteries itself where they no longer had to depend on their families. This made the monastic life more feasible for the monks and nuns, which in turn encouraged many more young Sherpas to join it (Fischer, 1986:57).

## **The Economic Framework**

The traditional economy of the Sherpas' comprised of three aspects namely agriculture, herding and trade. While agriculture mostly revolved around the plantation of wheat and potatoes, herding was dependent on animals like yaks and cows. Trade, on the other hand, included bartering of rice brought from the low-altitude regions of Nepal to Tibet, and in exchange, Tibetan salts were given. Their trade also further included breeding and selling of dairy. However, only a handful of Sherpa families privately owned land and animal.

Mountaineering and tourism gained a lot of popularity, after the opening up of Nepal to outsiders in 1953 and post the closing up of *Nagpa La* Pass that linked Sherpas with Tibet, via which they carried out a trade. Therefore, tourism and specifically mountaineering emerged as one of the new economic activities among the Sherpas.

### **1. Agriculture**

Even when Solu and Khumbu are mentioned together most often, they are two different places which are exactly the opposites in terms of its weather. While Solu and also Pharak situated southwards from Khumbu, were relatively warmer and had very favourable climate for agriculture, the soil in Khumbu were frozen almost for half the year, due to which agricultural activities remained almost next to nothing. While the people of Solu and Pharak grew crops like wheat, barley, buckwheat, potatoes and maize throughout the year, the Khumbu Sherpas had only a single cropping season, where they could only grow potatoes, radish, buckwheat and spinach (ibid:7).

'Potatoes also formed the mainstay of Sherpa diet' (Haimendorf, 1984: 13). After the Sherpas discovered potatoes as a crop, they started depending enormously on it so much so, that it was difficult to imagine how the Sherpas survived before the introduction of potatoes. Potatoes are believed to have been introduced by Joseph D. Hooker, from regions of Yangma in the western side of Kanchenjunga during the 1840s (ibid: 14). They are also believed to have been found from the gardens of Europeans in Darjeeling and Kathmandu. While, in the study conducted by Haimendorf in 1964, he was informed by one of his respondents that several decades ago an old man of about ninety years, was said to have brought the plant (potato) to Phortse, which is one of the villages in Khumbu. To, substantiate this argument, the potato cultivation also happened to have started in the middle of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (ibid: 9). After its

introduction, potatoes have been the only crop which suited the light sandy soil of Khumbu, and have been supporting the lives of several Sherpa of Khumbu village like Kumjung, Kunde, Phortse and so on.

The introduction of potatoes is also said to have coincided with a reduction in mortality rate and this led to population growth (Haimendorf, 1984: 15). Since the 1950s, potatoes had also started being exported to places as far as Tibet and the middle ranges of Nepal like Terai from Namche Bazaar. Namche Bazaar served as the economic hub of the Sherpas for trade and was also a place where weekly markets were held.

The potatoes were later harvested by men during the month of October and stored in deep pits as a means of protecting them from the cold weather (Haimendorf, 1964: 9). The harvest time was usually a community affair where family members and relatives came in groups and sang and danced while harvesting. After the season of potatoes, the buckwheat was ploughed, and that's where they sought the help of animals like yak or *dzo* which is a cross-breed between a yak and a cow, or sometimes they did it themselves by employing men specifically the Khamba people (Haimendorf, 1984:19). However, interestingly very few of the Sherpa families used the cattle for ploughing their fields, with this task usually being carried out by men of the family.

With the coming up of tourism and with the popularity being gained through mountaineering, many young Sherpa men were slowly leaving behind agriculture and herding and instead were completely shifting to tourism and mountaineering. Eventually, the celebrations and get-togethers during harvesting season did not have many men in it, and such practices moved on to become women-centric. With the influx of rampant money earned with the introduction of tourism and mountaineering, rice as a crop was added to the Sherpa diet. There was also a surplus of potatoes available for export. (Haimendorf, 1984: 15).

## **2. Animal Husbandry**

Pastoralism was always seen as a much nobler occupation than agriculture. According to Haimendorf “though agriculture provided the Sherpas with the bulk of their food supply, they regarded the breeding of yaks and other cattle as a far nobler occupation” (Haimendorf, 1964: 11). Owning a herd of yak was always associated with privilege and it was only the relatively well to do Sherpas that could afford to own it. Breeding of yaks was only one of the economic activities carried out by the Sherpas



and not a pan-Sherpa economic activity like agriculture, with some even preferring trade over animal husbandry. Therefore, it would be incorrect to call the Sherpas as pastoral people.

Yaks were the thick long-haired bovine male, which was only found in Tibet and other highlands of Central Asia, the female of which were known as *nak* by the Sherpas (Haimendorf, 1984: 19). These Yaks were also cross-bred with other cattle like the Tibetan bull which was called *lang*, with the result of the hybrid being called *zopkiok* in case of male and *zhum* in case of a female (ibid:19). While Yaks and *zopkiok* were used for transportation of luggage to Namche Bazaar, the later were used by merchants and tourists for the same. *Zhum* and *nak* were used for yielding milk. These hybrid cattle were not just for use as dairy animals but were also in high demand sale in Tibet, Solu and also at districts of Western Nepal like Manangbhot, Mustang and Thal Khola. While Khumbu may not be as fertile as Solu for agriculture but was very conducive a place for the rearing of yaks and *dzo* herding (Ortner, 1992:30). Therefore, herding which yielded a lot of profit through the production of butter, wool, milk and so on may have been a more preferred means of trade for the Sherpas, which is why most of them decided to return to Khumbu, after having migrated to Solu, as Khumbu was ideal for herding. Until the frontiers between Nepal and Tibet were opened, trade in cattle formed a backbone for the Sherpa merchants. The Sherpas gained a lot of profit through the sale of butter, which was used for various purposes. It was consumed with Tibetan tea, it was also used during rituals and was consumed as a fuel for butter lamps during Buddhist ceremonies (Haimendorf, 1984: 20). It was also used for making figures out of a dough called *torma*<sup>6</sup>. Another major produce yielded out from these animals of both sexes was the wool, which was usually gained when these animals naturally shed their coat during winters. The wool were used for weaving ropes, blankets, and coats and so on. Until the coming up of tourism and mountaineering, the Sherpas wove their own clothes out of the wool, which was exported from Tibet. The Sherpas were known for their passion for weaving carpets, sweaters, coats and so on, a profession in which the women were vehemently and profitably found engaged in. The cattle were also consumed for meat, which was slaughtered by members of the Magar community,

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<sup>6</sup> *Torma* is a figure made up of flour and butter, which is used during rituals or as offerings in Tibetan Buddhism.

belonging to the Matwali group, as the Buddhist Sherpas refrained from killing animals themselves (Haimendorf, 1984:21).

### **Seasonal Migration**

The owners of yak also had another important task to carry out, that is moving from pasture to pasture, to sustain their cattle economy. Here the owner moved two and fro between their own settlements and to higher pastures (Haimendorf, 1975: 52). The extent and range of settlement varied according to the size of herds. If there were only a small herd of cattle, then the herds were kept at the owner's main settlement for five months a year and they only spent two months in higher settlements known as the *gunsa* settlements, while if there were bigger herds they only spent one month at the main settlement with the rest being spent at higher settlements known as the *yersa* settlements (ibid: 55). These activities were usually carried out by men, who spent a large amount of their time away from all the comforts of their main settlements. Due to this reason few of these men, who usually went for pasture and who spent a considerable amount of their time away from home, had well-built houses in the *yersa* settlements so that they could bare the intensity of cold during winters in high pastures (Haimendorf, 1975: 55). One may assume that as it was a strenuous task of having to stay away from the warmth of one's home in the cold high pastures most of the time, agriculture was a more popular and preferred economic activity by almost all the Sherpas of North Eastern Nepal. Due to such high maintenance needed for the herds, the Sherpa families had later moved on to keeping only cross-bred animal and fewer yaks as the latter had to be taken on pastures to higher settlements. These men undertaking pastures later moved on to mountaineering and tourism, which thereby led to more decrease in pastures. According to Haimendorf (1975), only the traditional and conservative villages of Phortse in Khumbu, did not witness a decrease in yaks with increase in cross-breeds, with most of the other parts showing a sharp tendency towards decrease in yaks and increase in cross-breed, which required less hard work and also helped the Sherpas in ploughing the field.

One could also witness an increase in the breeding of sheep and goats due to the restrictions imposed on trade with Tibet, where before there was a free flow of wool and dry meat from Tibetans (Haimendorf, 1975: 56). 'Moreover, the Nepalese

Government encouraged the breeding of sheep and several Sherpas received loans which enabled them to build up some flocks (ibid: 59). These animals were used by Sherpas for wool and meat, which compensated for the wool and meat they used to receive from Tibet before the restrictions on trade. As after the annexation of Tibet by China in 1953, the Chinese Government first imposed complete restrictions on trade via the *Nagpa La* Pass and later re-opened it again but with a lot of restrictions. The trade of cattle was not free from this restriction, and they imposed restrictions on trade of female yaks from Tibet and import of male cross-breeds that is *zopkiok* to Tibet (Haimendorf, 1975: 57). The Chinese rarely permitted the transit of even the men from Khumbu to Namche Bazaar. Such changes could be seen in the size and pattern of herds being kept by the people of Khumbu.

### 3. Trade

Haimendorf (1964) talks about the role of trade in the lives of Sherpas and narrates,

*Agriculture and animal husbandry could never have enabled the Sherpas of Khumbu to attain a standard of living far superior to that of Rais, Tamangs, Gurungs and Magars inhabiting the middle ranges of Eastern Tibet. It was trade with Tibet that gave the Sherpas the chance of acquiring valuable jewellery, clothing, household goods and ritual objects of Tibetan and Chinese origin, while the many journeys connected with this trade kept them in touch with the aesthetic and intellectual interests of their Tibetan neighbours* (Haimendorf, 1964: 13).

The Trans-Himalayan trade included one of the main subsistence activities for the Sherpas. It may be attributed to their physical ability and adaptability that enabled them to trade between Tibet and lower ranges of Nepal and South Eastern parts of Khumbu and Pharak, as they had resistance to the cold weather which helped them play the role of middlemen in trade (Haimendorf, 1984: 22). They traded grains from the lowlands of Nepal to Tibet, and from Tibet, they exported salt to southern and eastern parts of Nepal (Haimendorf, 1964:13). Therefore, it may be due to this reason that the folklore portrays the Sherpas as being very fluent not only in their own language but also in the national language of Nepal, that is Nepali, which played to their advantage. The Nepalese, on the other hand, did not know the language of the Sherpas.

A trade route linking Khumbu with the Tibetan province of Tingri lead across the *Nagpa La* pass was about 18,000 feet high, which developed as a channel for

substantial commercial exchanges, for fertile grains from Dudh Kosi to the Tibetan plateaus (Haimendorf, 1964:13). The Sherpas of Khumbu had monopoly over trade via the *Nagpa La* pass, as the Government of Nepal had put restrictions on the Solu Sherpas to trade directly with Tibet and had banned the traders from Tibet to carry goods further down from Namche Bazaar, which served as the economic hub for trade (ibid:14). However, the Solu Sherpas created their opportunity in trade, by either marrying someone from Khumbu or by indulging in trade partnerships at Namche Bazaar, both of which qualified them for trade with Tibet (Kunwar, 1989:78). Trade was mostly carried out either among the big business merchants from Namche Bazaar or by the ordinary farmers who only undertook two or three trips via the *Nagpa La* pass. While the big business merchants primarily traded commodities like sugar, paper, butter, cotton and cattle, the ordinary farmers traded and bartered limited items like salt with their grains (Haimendorf, 1964:14). Namche Bazaar was recognized as the main trading centre of North Eastern Nepal, while the main centre for Tibet being the Kyabruk village of Dingridzong. Trading mostly happened twice a year, one during early summer that is between May and June and the other during autumn that is during October and November (Kunwar, 1989: 78,79).

From the middle ranges of Nepal, agricultural products like grain, cattle, butter, paper, hides, sugar and various other commodities were exchanged for sheepskins, fur, clothes, woolens, hats and boots, carpets hand printed religious books, ritual objects, silver ornaments, with salt and tea being the most important ones being traded from Tibet (Haimendorf, 1984:22). Khumbu, which also served as a centre for exporting Nepalese iron to Tibetan markets WERE declined due to the discovery of an easier route via Kalimpong, which opened cheaper Indian iron to Tibet (Haimendorf, 1975:68). Few, Sherpas of Solu, preferred to visit neighbouring places like Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam, where a local trade was carried out. In most of these places, they collected a few plants having medicinal herbs, and hunted down animals like red panda, deer and so on. (Kunwar, 1989:80).

Before the invasion of the Chinese in Tibet, external trade constituted one-third of the Sherpas' total income (Haimendorf, 1975: 72). As trade generated wealth from an outside means, it was also used to help the Sherpa society in terms of chronic and structurally-defeating inheritance problem. After closing of the border between Nepal and Tibet, trade came to a standstill. Even when the Chinese Government re-opened it,

the Sherpas now crossing the *Nagpa La* pass refrained from trading directly with Tibet and instead had to position off their wares at Chinese trade depot located in Dingri, due to which the prices for the wares were unpredictable (Haimendorf, 1984:23). This led to the penetration of much cheaper Indian salt into the middle ranges of Nepal, which slowly replaced the Tibetan salt, which had become difficult to access.

According to Ortner (1989) trade was seen as a primary source of large-scale wealth, and the people who were indulged in it were viewed as affluent people having an upper hand in the community. Therefore, people who could not make their fortune in North Eastern Nepal and did not benefit from the above economic activities migrated further to India in search of a better fortune. In the work of Kunwar's '*Fire of Himal*', he mentions that during his survey he found quite a few number of people, from areas like Junbesi and Biju which were villages located in Solu, as having migrated to India, specifically for carrying out portering jobs or manual labourers. Later, there came a trend among Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu of going to places neighbouring places like Darjeeling, Bhutan, Sikkim and Assam in the hope of earning more money (Kunwar, 1989:73).

#### **4. Tourism**

As trade played a very influential role in the economic life of the Sherpas, the abrupt closing down of it brought their life to a standstill. This closing of trade with Tibet in 1959, coincided with the rapid development of mountaineering and tourism, which largely made up for the loss incurred via trade (Haimendorf, 1984:23). Tourism made its way at that juncture in 1953 when the Government of Nepal finally decided to end its isolation from the outside world and opened its door to outsiders (ibid: 24). However, the interest in mountaineering was not a sudden upsurge but was something that was being carried out by the Westerners in Nepal from the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The earliest British travellers like Kirkpatrick in 1793, Hamilton in 1802-1803, Hodgson 1820, Hooker 1848-1851, mostly made their initial trekking and travelling in parts of Kathmandu valley to Darjeeling, but did not enter Solu-Khumbu (Ortner, 1989:22). Most of these Westerners undergoing mountaineering expeditions operated out of Darjeeling until 1953. These mountaineers approached Mount Everest from the Tibetan side, reaching it via *Jelap La* from Sikkim (ibid: 22). These foreigners even carried out trekking in Sikkim, where most often Sherpas were employed as porters, guides or helpers (Haimendorf, 1984:56). The role of organizing expedition was

undertaken by men having leadership qualities, who could control and lead the porters and they were known as *sirdars* (ibid: 65).

Haimendorf, who was among the first few scholars to have carried out a study on the Sherpas, began out his first study on the Sherpas of Khumbu, in 1953, and published a book on the same in 1964, titled 'The Sherpas of Nepal: Buddhist Highlanders'. In this book, he describes the Khumbu Sherpas as a very simple homogenised, jovial and friendly group of people, who depended on agriculture, animal husbandry and trade for their livelihood. One vital aspect of their life was the celebration of festivals where they all gathered together and even welcomed the outsiders. Years later in 1971, Haimendorf decided to carry out yet another study in the same area, which followed after the two important events that were believed to have impacted the lives of every Sherpa. The first such event was the closing down of *Nagpa La* pass and the second was the opening up of Nepal to the outsiders, which led to a rampant influx of tourism and mountaineering. He could then see the drastic changes that had come about in the economic activities of the Sherpas, who no longer claimed to be the old homogenized group of people depending on cattle, breeding and trade for their livelihoods. What had entered into the lives of the Sherpas now was tourism, which had an impact on almost every aspect of their lives like family, religion, environment, culture, tradition and so on.

Most of the able-bodied men, spent most of their time in tourism which included trekking and mountaineering, where they would undertake expeditions as guides, cooks, *sirdars* and so on. Haimendorf (1984), writes that a single high-altitude porter in a single successful season earned enough to buy himself a plot of land and to engage in modern trade deals. But not everyone could earn as much, with few daily wage-earners and impecunious men, having to put in hard labour before they could afford to acquire some land or cattle of their own. Haimendorf notes that this also brought in a class divide in the society, which did not exist before. Nevertheless, Sherpas gained immense popularity as guides and high-altitude porters, that it made trekking an attractive sports activity due to which Khumbu received a large number of tourists annually. It was due to such popularity that trekking and mountaineering later had started being organized in Kathmandu, where Sherpas were hired. 'Employment with these expeditions, which attempted peaks all over Nepal, reduced the economic pressure to go to Darjeeling and presumably helped snatch the migration from Khumbu

to India (Fisher, 1990: 63). Increasing popularity of tourism among the Sherpas had a direct impact on their family lives, as most of these men stayed outside Khumbu, specifically in Kathmandu and started spending their time away from home. The Sherpas in Kathmandu particularly stayed at Bodhnath, which had become an area populated by the Sherpas of Khumbu, with few there even going into second marriages (ibid: 70). They returned home only during monsoon, when the season for tourism was low and when the timing also coincided with the most celebrated festival of the Sherpas namely the Dhumji festival (Haimendorf, 1984:69). However, these Sherpas never left their houses in Khumbu permanently.

Therefore, while the men had started spending most of their time away from their homes, the women in Khumbu were left solely in charge of looking after the house, cattle, agriculture and also their children. Besides, the feeling of isolation and desertion, these women now also had to indulge themselves in hard labour at their fields, for long hours, which used to be a task performed by men. As most of the able-bodied men were in Kathmandu, the young women were also not being able to find a suitable match for themselves (Haimendorf, 1984: 81-82). This had a direct impact on the demographic set up of the society, as fewer marriages led to a decrease in birth rate. As mountaineering expeditions also lead to accidental deaths of young men involved in it, the population of Sherpas in Khumbu was reducing, due to increased mortality and decreased birth rate (ibid: 82).

With the growth in tourism, most of the people and mostly the middle brothers in the family, who were otherwise sent to become a monk, now had embraced tourism. Therefore, as tourism was found to invoke easy money, most of the monks too dropped out of their monastic institutions to join tourism (Haimendorf, 1984: 84). Therefore, one could also see a sharp decline in the enrolment of a number of monks in the monasteries or the *gompas* which otherwise formed the backdrop of Sherpa society. However, the monasteries slowly started receiving donations from a few families out of the earning they received from the boom in tourism. Due to such funds being received by the monastic institutions for their maintenance, the lives of monks and nuns became much more feasible and smoother, thereby alluring young Sherpas to join the monasteries (Fischer, 1986:57).

For the Sherpas to deal with the Westerners also required fluency in English, else they had difficulty as tourist guides or *sirdars*, in conversing with their clients. Once into tourism, they were always in an advantageous position if they could converse in English. However, only a few were equipped with speaking in English. This limited knowledge of conversing in English speaking too had been cultivated in the course of contact with British and the founding of school by Edmund Hillary under the Himalayan Trust. As the school was a private-public agency, it was also aided by the Government of Nepal under the Rana regime (Haimendorf, 1984:62). The schools, however, attracted a limited number of students and the ones who joined would drop out eventually. In spite of the school providing free education, it could not attract more students as most of the young children from age of 12 were allured by expeditions, which to them ensured easy money (ibid:62). Due to such reasons in the earlier times, one could hardly find Sherpas in higher posts or public services as most of them found easy jobs in mountaineering and tourism. It may be due to the same reason that there were very few Sherpas as teachers even in the schools of Khumbu, with the majority being from other communities (Haimendorf, 1984:61). While the other communities like Gurungs, Thakalis and Bhotias were found in higher ranks as Government offices and influential politicians, one could find very few Sherpas in such high positions.

However, the Sherpas had gained immense popularity in tourism and mountaineering, yet their positions in this sector were not as secure, as they believed it to be. Due to the unique position of the Sherpas over the year in the field of Himalayan mountaineering, they had started flaunting themselves of being Sherpa (Fischer, 1986:51). Their profession of being expert mountaineers had come to define their ethnicity at the same time. Therefore, there was a high-level tendency of stereotyping the identity of Sherpas as always being or destined to be 'high altitude porters'. Therefore, people from other communities and specifically the Tamangs tried to pass themselves as being Sherpa (ibid: 31). Therefore, something called 'Sherpaization' was encountered at that time among the Tamangs. Later, various other communities like Tamangs, Rais and Gurungs had started trying their luck in tourism and they had a potential of emerging as tough competitors for the Sherpas in the long run (Kunwar, 1989:33).

However, while authors like Haimendorf, show their dislike towards the changes brought about by tourism, in every sphere of the life of the Sherpas, scholars



like Fischer are of the view that rather than Westernisation and nationalization, there had been an intensification of the Sherpa culture post the tourism wave. (Fischer, 1986: 52). The Sherpas had instead come to value some of their traditions, more than they did prior to the advent of tourism. Moreover, the coming of mountaineering and tourism not only brought with it better economic prospects for the Sherpas, but it also gave them all the more a newer identity.

## **Tracing the Wave of Sherpa Migration to Darjeeling and Sikkim**

### **Sikkim and Darjeeling**

Under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan Shah, the Gorkhas made preparations for invasion into the then independent country of Sikkim. They went on to capture Sikkim's territory from the West of river Tista. These Gorkha fighters were difficult to resist and therefore the British feared that the Gorkhas coming further to Eastern and Southern Himalayas would take control of all the trade routes into Tibet, on which they had long coveted on and had wanted an independent access and control on Tibet (Tamang, 2015: 33). There was thus a war between the British and the Gorkhas at this time where it ended with the victory of the former. This Anglo–Nepalese (Gorkha) War lasted till 1816 and settled with the Treaty of Sugauli which was signed between Nepal and the British. According, to the agreement of the treaty, the tract lying between the River Kali and the Sutlej, that had been annexed by Nepal recently from the Raja of Sikkim, was to be ceded to the British. Therefore, all the possessed territories of Sikkim were captured and repositioned to Sikkim (ibid: 34).

However, right after Sikkim got back its lost territories, its already weak position was taken advantage of by the British. Sikkim was henceforth directly dependent on the British who again had their own selfish motives for establishing relations with Sikkim. Their aim was to open up a trade route into Tibet, Western China and Inner Asia, via the Sikkim corridor, connecting Tibet and India, falling between Nepal and Bhutan (Singh, 1988). On 2<sup>nd</sup> December 1815, they established the treaty of friendship (The Titila Treaty) under Article III with Sikkim Raja at Morung with the assurance it could rely on the British in aspects of protecting their sovereignty (ibid). Following this, Sikkim witnessed the influx of Nepalese population like Newar, Bahun, Chettri, Tamang and Rais from the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> century till the early 19<sup>th</sup> century, for settlement into the country. It was at this juncture that few Sherpa population from

North Eastern Nepal also migrated to Sikkim, along with the other Nepalese communities. This influx was encouraged and permitted by the British, as they were in need of increased number of workforce and taxpayers and as a bulwark against Tibetan influence in Sikkim, which slowly led to the growth of the Nepalese population there (Vandenheksken, 2010: 163-64).

The British further taking advantage of the gullible nature of Sikkim, also demanded the southern part of the capital of the country known as Dorji Ling, which is today known as Darjeeling as a compensation. According to the British, Darjeeling served as the best place of stationing their militaries and also as a sanatorium and a summer resort. The Raja of Sikkim signed a deed for Darjeeling with the British under the promise of yearly compensations to be paid to Sikkim (Singh, 1988). Therefore, the whole trace of Darjeeling came under the British occupancy in 1835 (Tamang, 2015: 34). The Raja was however highly criticised for handing over Darjeeling to the British, which further escalated when the later did not confer to the payment of regular compensation. Due to this reason few of the writers state that, in a way, Darjeeling was actually forcefully annexed by the Bengal Government under the British, for their selfish convenience. Due to this dissatisfaction on the part of Sikkim, there were continuous kidnapping, raids and various indignities against the British. The British in return in 1861 sent its armed force to Sikkim and reduced its position from an independent state to that of a naïve one (ibid).

The British also further captured the eastern part of it, which included the trans-Himalayan trade entrepot of Kalimpong from Bhutan in return for the Bhutanese raids (Ortner, 1989: 103).

The local economic development of Darjeeling apparently began from 1865, after the British started tea plantations in 1841 and its industries had started setting up from 1856 (Singh, 1988). This was followed by the construction of mechanized roads and railways, in spite of the steep and hilly regions of the Himalayas. It was at this particular juncture that the roads which connected Darjeeling with the Grand Trunk Road on the plains of India were completed in 1866, for the convenience of the British (Ortner, 1992:103). This was followed by the construction of railway roads that connected Calcutta and Darjeeling, carried out during 1855 and 1878 (ibid: 103). According, to Visvanathan (2010) “much of the colonization of the hills was also about

the networking of the roads (Visvanathan, 2010: 193). There were construction workers who were ill-paid, in fact, the subjugation of the hills began with the construction of roads (ibid: 193).

Therefore, the formation of Darjeeling as a hill station can be attributed to the British. In fact, the British had alongside created several other hill stations, most of which was located in the foothills of the Himalayas (Kanwar cited in Visvanathan, 2010: 202).

It was at this particular period, that the Sherpas of North Eastern Nepal, particularly from the villages of Solu and Khumbu region, began to migrate to Darjeeling to try their fortune. According to Sarkar (2017), Darjeeling becomes a significant milestone for the Sherpa population, as it was this particular place that initially gave the Sherpas their distinct identity and recognition in mountaineering (Sarkar, 2017: 68). The Sherpas were able to capitalize on economic opportunities laid down by the British in Darjeeling and they successfully turned them into fulfilling their own interests (Ortner, 1992: 103). Therefore, since the beginning of the 1850s, the Sherpas had started travelling to Darjeeling (Fisher, 1990:57). One could find most of the Sherpas of Solu and Khumbu in parts of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Sikkim most of whom were found in tea plantation industries as labourers, or as construction workers on roads and railways which were initiated by the British. Haimendorf, further remarks on the arrival time of Sherpas to Darjeeling and writes,

*How Sherpas came to settle at Darjeeling is not known in detail, but it would seem that at first, it was the prospect of trade which drew Sherpas to Darjeeling and Kalimpong and that the association with mountaineering enterprises occurred at a time when they had already established themselves in the Darjeeling district (Haimendorf, 1975: 85).*

Ventures into Darjeeling were also backed by the inheritance problem, within a Sherpa family, with the eldest son being entitled to land rights along with a privilege of being the head of the family after his father's death (Kunwar, 1989:171). The youngest son had rights over the house, while the middle son was not granted anything, unless of course if the family were generous enough to give him his share from the family property (ibid: 171,172). Therefore, in order to generate new resources, these Sherpa men, who were excluded from family inheritance initially joined the monistic institutions but later having found a new avenue of earning good money ventured into

Darjeeling to try their luck in new economic activities being generated (Ortner, 1992:105).

Few of these Sherpas settled in Darjeeling permanently, one among whom was Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, who with Edmund Hillary, undertook a successful expedition to Mt. Everest, which was the very first of its kind then. Therefore, as he was originally from Khumbu and had settled in Darjeeling that was in India and acquired the Indian citizenship, there were long debates over his nationality, with both Nepal and India claiming their rights over him. As put forth by Barnes while introducing the book on Tenzing Norgay's autobiography, he writes,

*Was he a citizen of Nepal? Was he a citizen of India? Each nation tried to grab him for itself and the press, especially the Eastern press, clamoured for an answer. Tenzing's own answer was a clever as it was simple: he was born in the womb of Nepal and raised in the lap of India!* (Barnes and Sherpa:1977: 15).

It had also been eventually stated that the Sherpas of Khumbu, were divided from their cousins in Darjeeling due to citizenship. No one ever knew the bitter repercussions of this situation until the Tenzing Norgay incident in 1953. As the very fact that the Sherpas were inhabitants both in India and in Nepal raised a number of questions on their nationality and social system (Sarkar, 2017: 3). This explained a lot about how identity played a significant role when it came to people who could not produce any proof of their citizenship (ibid: 3-4). This posed a serious question on the identity of the Sherpas.

The Sherpas had been in Darjeeling, settled there and gradually increased in number since the 1800s. It is also believed that it was Darjeeling where the British first began to hire Sherpas as porters in their expedition, in which they went on to excel. According to Haimendorf (1975), the earliest Sherpas to have been recruited as guides and porters, in North Eastern Nepal and specifically Khumbu, were also the Sherpas from Darjeeling (Haimendorf, 1975). As Nepal till the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was closed for tourists, most of the mountaineering was carried out in Darjeeling, which was a ten-day walk from the Khumbu in Northeast Nepal. This Sherpa migration to Darjeeling took place seasonally. Ortner (1992) states that there were 3,450 Sherpas living in Darjeeling according to 1901 census. Many other ethnic groups were involved in such manual work as labourers like Tibetans, Sikkimese, Bhutanese, Rais, Limboos,

and Sherpas as by then Darjeeling had become a trading town. However, the Sherpas appeared in the works of the Westerners much earlier around the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Their works mostly revolved around the Sherpas found in areas of Darjeeling districts, in India. The Sherpas had been in Darjeeling from 1800 but were clubbed under the Bhutias, who were also originally from Tibet (Sarkar, 2017: 122). They were initially mentioned in the annals of mountaineering in 1907, where it was recorded that Dr A.M. Kellas had recruited few Sherpas from Darjeeling to accompany him into the Himalayas of Sikkim, who were the only porters who could undertake high altitude expeditions and had to some extent gained popularity in it (Kohli and Berghose cited in Kunwar, 1989). Such few initial expeditions had started largely as an endeavour to explore and survey few passes rather than peaks, for technical reconnaissance. With the passage of time, such expectations eventually increased with the building up of roads into the Sikkim corridor (Ortner, 1992:102). Therefore, it may prove that the Sherpas started their climbing expedition in 1907, the credit for which can be given to Kellas, because of whom the Sherpas are affiliated with the mountains.

The Sherpas, however, came to more attention much later in 1921, when they were being hired not only in India but also in Europe, for reconnaissance of Mt. Everest from the Tibetan side (Kunwar, 1989:96). 'By 1922, there were around fifty Sherpas employed by the British in their first attempt on Mt. Everest (Fisher,1990: 59).

According to Haimendorf (1964), there were 6,929 Sherpas in Darjeeling by 1947. However, due to the system's change in census operations, the recent year figures were not available. The Sherpas of Darjeeling was in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century recognized as expert mountain climbers by the British, who used them as guides and porters during expeditions. It may also be due to this reason that the Sherpas were not considered as any ordinary porter, but as one who was expert high-altitude climbers and was exclusively meant for mountaineering and trekking due to which they were considered as superior to any ordinary porter. Since then, and until the 1950s, one can find various expedition accounts and highly coloured sketches of the Sherpa's character, as well as anecdotes about individual Sherpas who accompanied and undertook numerous mountaineering expeditions and trekking. Due to this, one can also find various scholars who have highly praised the Sherpas to the extent of romanticizing their abilities to undertake rugged and steep expeditions with ease. Sarin and Singh praises the strength, dedication and sincerity of the Sherpas and writes,

*If God had not created the Sherpas, Everest might yet be unclimbed... like a strong mountain goat humble, sturdy and swift, he climbs carrying loads upon the precipitous and treacherous ice, rocks, and snow slopes, through inclement weather, biting winds and many other serious mountain hazards until the leader of the mountain expedition prevents him. The fantastic endurance and equanimity of the Sherpas, his friendship that never fails, company that always cheers, his assurance born of skill and courage have few parallels in mountaineering history. He is a true tiger of the snows and without him so much by so much could not have been achieved, certainly not at such little cost, in money and life (Sarin and Singh, 1989: 337).*

The Orientalists, on the other hand, described the Sherpas as being ‘non-modern’, ‘innocent’ and ‘carefree’ people who were not driven by any material interest (Sarkar, 2016: 292). Such perception of the orientalist may be due to the association of Sherpas with nature, lack of money and raw nature and behaviour in comparison to the people of Western countries. However, the opening up of Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI), in 1954 at Darjeeling proved the orientalist’s definition of the Sherpas completely wrong. In addition to rising popularity in mountaineering, the Sherpas had now moved on to publicising their mountaineering skills to people all across. This mountaineering institute was an initiative by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa and was funded by the Central Government, partly by the West Bengal Government and by the then few rich industrialists (Barnes and Sherpa, 1977:52). This institute was treated as any other educational institutes in the state, with its staffs, who were mostly Sherpas, being salaried teachers. They trained the students in undertaking full mountaineering expeditions and trekking, which were undertaken in Darjeeling and Sikkim. Tenzing Norgay Sherpa in his autobiography ‘After Everest’ mentions about the frequent expeditions and tours he undertook to Sikkim, which was then an independent country, where they sometimes stayed for several weeks. Slowly, they even started setting up training headquarters in Sikkim. This initiative was undertaken to introduce mountaineering as an adventure and a sport, which would also, in turn, bring the people from other parts closer to the Sherpa community and also to the Himalayas and its pristine beauty. The Institute over the years has received students from all over India and abroad. Such an endeavour undoubtedly broke the Sherpa image

of being mere high-altitude porters and shifted it towards being certified professionals which gave them a much more distinct recognition and a dignified position.

The few Sherpas coming from Solu-Khumbu to Darjeeling permanently settled in Darjeeling, due to which today we have a fair percentage of Sherpa population even there. However, there were few who came there to try their luck in the new economic opportunities but eventually returned back to Solu-Khumbu with their earnings. Therefore, the wages earned by the Sherpas in Darjeeling gave them a sense of empowerment, which they did not experience back home, due to which they had flocked to Darjeeling in some hope of changing their fortune. Few of whom returned to Solu-Khumbu were able to become socially active and important members of their community due to their contribution towards monasteries and their community (Ortner, 1992:160). They were also able to set up small businesses, buy a plot of land or even built a house for the family. According to Ortner (1992), these Sherpas saw the wealth earned at Darjeeling as ‘extra earnings’ that would help them raise their standard of living beside the usual source of livelihood in their home.

The Sherpas besides being just found as labourers and high altitude porters in Darjeeling also sometimes indulged in other professions as rickshaw drivers, they also sometimes sold liquor and some even held police jobs (Bishop cited in Ortner, 1992). According to an anecdote by Bishop in 1978, it is believed that the people of Helambu region of Nepal left Gangtok, which is today the capital of Sikkim and instead flocked to Assam as most of the police in Sikkim were the Sherpas of Khumbu, who did not let the Helambu people have easy permits for setting up restaurants or tea shops at Sikkim (ibid). Such instances state that few of the Sherpas who had entered Sikkim and found a proper job may have settled there permanently. It may also be due to this reason that today one can find a fair percentage of Sherpas settled in various parts of Sikkim.

### **Tracing the Migration of Sherpas to Sikkim**

The migration of Sherpas to Sikkim can be tracked back in different waves. According to J.R Subba (2011), the Sherpas were in Sikkim much before the dates usually given by the Western social authorities. As mentioned earlier, that the presence of Sherpas in Darjeeling could be traced back to the 1800s, which is much before Darjeeling then known as Dorji Ling was captured by the British in 1835 from Sikkim. The Sherpas then were however classified as the ‘Bhutias’ or the people of Tibet.

Rabden Sherpa was the first Sherpa from Tibet, who played a role in the political affairs of Sikkim as a regent to the Sikkim Durbar in the 1750s (Singh, 2009: 66). Later in the early first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, Phuntsog Namgyal, the then Chogyal of Sikkim went on to marry the granddaughter of Rabden Sherpa (Subba, 2011: 279). The Gazetteer of Sikkim (1891) by H.H Risley also mentions the presence of Sherpas in Sikkim in 1891, to whom he referred to as *Shar-pa*. According to Risley (1891), the Sherpas along with other Tibetan groups, who came from Tibet at various point of time, were admitted to Pemiongchi Monastery, on payment of heavy entrance fees. Few scholars also put forth that the Sherpas migrated to Sikkim along with the other Nepalese communities from the end of 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This move was permitted and encouraged by the British, who were in need of an increased number of workforce and taxpayers, which they thought could be achieved from the Nepalese immigrants' settlement in Sikkim. They also entered parts of West Sikkim while undertaking mountaineering expeditions from Darjeeling few of whom later settled their permanently. Therefore, it may be due to this reason that we today find a higher number of Sherpas in the Western regions of Sikkim. Besides such few arguments, there are, however very few or no works or evidence to throw light on the migration of Sherpas to Sikkim.

## **Conclusion**

One can see a shift in the identity of Sherpas from being an agricultural and herding community in North Eastern part of Nepal, to becoming professionals in mountaineering at Darjeeling. Therefore, from an identity under question to being famous 'high altitude porters' and finally converting to professionals in mountaineering, the Sherpas have undoubtedly over the years gained worldwide recognition. More so, after the historic 1953 expedition by Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, it would also be wrong to confine the identity of a Sherpa to just being a 'high altitude porter'. They were however found to be far removed from their religious and social setting of their homeland. Ethnic identities are not permanent and are very dynamic in nature, which may vary from place to place. The Sherpa migration further to Sikkim may have led to the formation of yet another identity, which becomes an interesting aspect to be explored. The Sherpas in Sikkim, however, are seen to be of the ethnic minorities and therefore occupies an invisible position in the ethnic composition of the state. In the next two chapters, I will show how ethnicity plays a role in politics of the state and how it leads to identity formation of the various ethnic groups in Sikkim,



specifically taking the case of the Sherpas. As “regions and political development within those regions play a vital part in the social formation of communities” (Sarkar, 2017: 90). However, before moving forward it becomes pivotal to firstly throw light on the political history of Sikkim, and thereby find out how from being a traditional feudal theocracy of Namgyal Dynasty it went on to become a democratic polity under the Indian Union.

## Chapter II

### **AN ANALYSIS OF THE POLITICAL HISTORY OF SIKKIM: THE BRITISH PARAMOUNTCY, INTER-ETHNIC RELATIONS AND ETHNIC POLITICS (1200-1975)**

#### **Introduction**

The Eastern Himalayan region covers varied geographical landscapes which include the hilly areas of Sikkim, parts of Eastern Nepal, North Bengal (Districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong) Bhutan, Tibet and Arunachal Pradesh. These regions are historical, physically as well as culturally very contiguous. Sikkim falls under the Westernmost part of the Eastern Himalayan range. It is bounded between the Singalila ridges and Donkhya range which are approximately 80 to 90 miles long (Sinha, 2009, 28). While the former constitutes Sikkim's border with Nepal, which here includes the Mount Kanchenjunga (28,150 ft.), the latter separates the North Eastern part of Sikkim from Tibet. The Southern border of Sikkim is formed by ridges of Darjeeling, while the Northeast part of Sikkim meets the country of Bhutan. Sikkim is, therefore, a landlocked region and is often described as the single most strategically important piece of real estate in the entire Himalayan region.

Physically, the mountain mass has three parallel zones namely the Great Himalayas, the Inner or the Lesser Himalayas and the sub-Himalayan foothills (Sinha, 2009: 27). The Great Himalayas have numerous high peaks bordering the southern borders of the Tibetan plateau, which rises to more than 29,000 feet with an average height of 20,000 feet above the sea level. These are the peaks via whose crisscrosses passed the caravan of traders who travelled to the trans-Himalayan countries (ibid: 27). In the Inner, Himalaya lies the most populated areas like Paro of Bhutan, Gangtok of Sikkim, and Kathmandu and Pokhara of Nepal. The Himalayan foothills comprise dense forest regions like Morang and Tarai in Nepal and Duars in North Bengal. This zone of late has turned out to be the most turbulent one, with regular ethnic conflicts emerging in the area, with very less hope for any resolution. Territories of Sikkim are stretched to the Great and the Inner-Himalayan zones. According to Lall (1980), most of the Himalayan regions were mostly coherent and occupied compact areas. Sikkim has however here presented a clearly unique case, as its territories were clearly defined

geographical units which expanded through all the three latitudinal belts like the foothills, middle hills and the high Himalayas (Lall, 1981: 234).

The rulers of Sikkim who were known as the Chogyals meaning the Kings shared very close cultural proximity with the Tibetan theocracy. In fact, there were various cultural and environmental aspects which were used to justify the treatment of entire Buddhist dominated regions in the Himalaya as being a single entity known as the 'Buddhist Himalayas'. (Aris, 1990:88). However, there were differences in political and geographical boundaries separating the region from each other (ibid: 88). Whether it was Ladakh, Bhutan or Sikkim including parts of Nepal and Arunachal Pradesh, almost everyone had witnessed the overwhelming cultural influence of Tibet and also a subtle influence from Hindus in the South. They also encountered similarity in trans-Himalayan trade offering profit beyond the traditional subsistence economies and had the disposition of human settlements along the valleys (Rustomji, 1990: 88). They had access to adjoining pastoral recognition and a wide network of cross contacts that lined Ladakh and its feudatories in the west with Bhutan in the east which brought Buddhist priests from Northern Nepal to Sikkim and further to Bhutan and Arunachal Pradesh (ibid: 88).

Over the years all the Himalayan states have witnessed pre-eminent changes in its social, economic, political structure and also in manner and customs. However, Sikkim witnessed a very unfamiliar concentration of change, particularity since the colonial intrusion, which went on to transform the structure of the state, politically, economically and socially. Sikkim was also the first Himalayan country to have been exposed to a liberal democratic movement against feudal democracy. Due to its strategic location between Nepal and Bhutan on the shortest route between Indian plains and Lhasa (the capital of Tibet made), Sikkim was also a critical region in Sino-British relations (Sinha, 2009: 15). Rustomji (1981), attributed that the misfortune of Sikkim lay in its geographical location, and further wrote,

*It was in some ways, the misfortune of Sikkim that her geographical location and physical contours rendered her the most convenient entrepot of trade between Tibet and India. The trade-route through Sikkim focused attention upon the country and forced her, willy-nilly, out of her protective isolation (Rustomji: 1981:240).*

This chapter, therefore, will specifically focus on the political history of Sikkim before it went on to become a full-fledged state under the Indian Union on 26 April 1975. As the present and the further continuation of civilization is only possible with reference to its past (Bloch cited in Visvanathan, 1993). This chapter throws light on the three different eras namely the pre-theocratic era (1200-1647), the medieval theocracy (1642-1888) and the era of British Intrusion. The chapter will further discuss the ethnic groups of Sikkim namely the Bhutia, Lepchas and the Nepalese and their inter-ethnic relations. It will also shed light on the influence of British in ethnicization of communities and its role in the creation of the identity of ethnic groups. It will also there forth discuss on the impact of British intrusion on Sikkim as an independent country and the role of ethnicity in politics of the state.

### **The Categorization of Ethnic Communities in the State**

Sikkim is the least populated state in India with a population of 6, 10,577. It is also the smallest state in India after Goa in terms of land area, spreading over 7,096 square kilometres (Sikkim Human Development Report 2014, 2015). It shares its border with Nepal, China, and Bhutan. According to the Anthropological Survey of India, there are 25 different communities in the state that can be grouped into three different categories or ethnic groups namely, the Bhutias or Lhopos, the Lepchas or the Mons and the Nepalese. The first two are considered the original or the ‘indigenous’ inhabitants of Sikkim and represents less than 20 per cent of the population. The Nepalese who are considered as the ‘immigrants’ by the former two ethnic groups form the third major ethnic group in Sikkim, constituting 75 per cent of the total population (Sinha, 2009: 30). However, the Nepalese constitute a heterogeneous category of a cluster of communities namely the Newar, Bahun, Chettri, Jogi, Sanyasi, Rai, Thami, Limboo and so on, along with the Scheduled Castes like Kami, Damai, Sarki and Maji (Chakraborty, 2000: 3806). One can also find people from the plains of India, like Marwaris, Bengalis and Biharies, who first came to Sikkim in 1917, in order to profit from the expansions of cardamom trade (Balikci, 2008: 6). Due to such multi-ethnic compositions, Sikkim turned out to be a complex entity culturally, economically, politically and socially.

The Northern Himalayan Range in Sikkim is specifically inhabited by the Bhutias, Dukpas and Lepchas who are pastoral traders and yak herders. However, “a society may consider themselves as pastoral and may cherish pastoral values but may

economically depend on a mixed set of resources (Bollig and Schegg, 2013: 3). Similarly, the Bhutias and Lepchas were mostly indulged in pastoralism, they were simultaneously also engaged in agricultural activities specifically on the cultivation of cardamom. The Nepalese of Sikkim, on the other hand, were mostly peasants and workers who were popularly known for their perseverance in the labour industry and were mostly found in the western and southern districts of Sikkim. However, as stated by Bollig (2013) democratic, political and economic changes allegedly leads to an increase in vulnerability of pastoralism and agriculture. A similar scenario was witnessed in Sikkim, as the colonial groups transformed all the grazing land into cultivable farm to increase their revenue for meeting their own requirements. Wasteland Rules and Forest Acts were enacted in the 19<sup>th</sup> century by J.C White, in various parts of the country according to which these uncultivated lands were given to the selected individuals and no pastoralists could access forests declared as the “reserved forests”. This had negative repercussions on the socio-economic sphere of the pastoral community. Influential families of Nepali origin were encouraged to take over the land for cultivation. Such factor also encouraged the Nepalese influx to Sikkim, for the cultivation of reserved land. This continuous incursion of the Nepalese changed the demography of Sikkim in no time, with the Nepalese being in majority. The history of Sikkim thus shaped during the British intrusion had severe repercussion on the socio-economic and political scenario of Sikkim.

### **The Early Period of Pre-Theocracy (1200-1647)**

#### **The Aboriginal Lepchas, Limboos and Magar of Sikkim**

The aboriginal inhabitants of Sikkim are believed to be the Lepchas. The Lepchas who call themselves the Rongs<sup>7</sup> and are known by the Tibetans as Mon meaning people from the lower Himalayas were people who migrated from parts of Assam and Upper Burma. The word Mon has also been used to refer to the non-Tibetan population, living in the southern Himalayas (Shetty, 2011: 29). There were no presence of central political powers and the country was ruled over by the local Lepcha Chiefs (Datta, 1994: 69). However, few other relevant writings on Sikkim also mentions the presence of two more communities namely the Limboos (who were also known as the

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<sup>7</sup> Rong means the children of God

Tsongs<sup>8</sup> or Yakthumbas) and Magars, who lived alongside the Lepchas, as the oldest inhabitants, before the coming up of Bhutias. According to the Limboo tradition, these three communities namely the Lepchas, Limboos and the Magars were included in Kirati<sup>9</sup> stock, who were ruled by their own tribal chiefs about hundred years ago (Subba, 1999: 31). The proof of Limboos as being the earliest settler of Sikkim can be known from the fact that, the term ‘Sikkim’ itself is a contribution from a Limboo language ‘Suk-him’ meaning the ‘new house’ or a ‘new palace’ (Sinha, 2009: 271). The Limboo community, however, could not develop a full-fledged state, as a large portion of the group later migrated to Illam in Eastern Nepal, in 1825 (Subba Cited in Datta, 1994: 70). While on the other hand, not much has been known about the Magars and their presence in Sikkim alongside the other two communities. According to Risley’s Gazetteer of Sikkim (1894), the Magars are believed to have been in Sikkim from not later than 17<sup>th</sup> century. Risley also mentions the incident when the Lepchas and Magars together were among the first few to have witnessed the first King of Sikkim Phuntsog Namgyal and his followers passing via Yangang (place at present West Sikkim) on ponies. On the contrary, Mullard in his book “Opening the Hidden Land: State Formation and the Construction of Sikkimese History” (1979) mentions that during his tenure of research he did not come across any piece of evidence on the existence of Magars at that point of history. However, the presence of Magar in the Western part of Sikkim in the pre-theocratic era cannot be overlooked, as they were the only aboriginal inhabitants who later adamantly opposed the formation and monopoly of Bhutia monarchy in Sikkim, while the Lepchas and the Limboos gave in to the Bhutia hegemony.

Land, during the pre-theocratic era, were mostly in the hands of Lepchas who cultivators were practising shifting hill cultivation. In addition to it, they were also indulged in food-gathering and hunting. The Lepchas amidst the Limboos and Magars were then a distinct ethnic group having their own language, economy, culture and religion (Datta, 1994: 70).

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<sup>8</sup> Tsongs denote the Sikkimese Limboos, which separates their distinctiveness from the Limbuwsn Limboos of Neapl

<sup>9</sup> The Kirati is a Sanskrit word meaning the indigenous people of the Himalayas which extends eastward from Nepal into India, Bangladesh, Burma and even beyond.

## **The Wave of Bhutia Migration to Sikkim**

Long before the 15<sup>th</sup> century, the Tibetan traders, farmers and lamas were looking for a new area for colonization (Sinha, 2009: 31). Sikkim then was sparsely populated by the Lepchas, Limboos and Magars. These Tibetans migrated in search of fields bearing rich-rice known as the *Denzong* meaning the valley of rice, a name which was given to Sikkim by these Tibetans. They migrated there and later went on to become the rulers of the land for more than three hundred years that is from 1642 to 1975 until Sikkim was integrated to the Indian Union. Initially, this group specifically came in search of new pastures and to potentially convert people into their religion. These Tibetans were also known as the Bhutias or the *Lhopa* meaning people from the south. The Prince of Minyak known by the name Guru Tashi, along with his followers from Kham Minyak in the eastern part of Tibet and Sakya in central Tibet, came to Sikkim via the neighbouring valleys of Chumbi<sup>10</sup> and Ha<sup>11</sup> (which were both part of Sikkim) in the 13<sup>th</sup> century (Balikci, 2008 : 66). His influence went on to become so widespread that his descendants later became the *Chogyals* or rulers of Sikkim from the year 1642 to 1975.

According to Risley (1894), Guru Tashi was the Minyak prince from Kham which is situated in the eastern border of Tibet, a place which was populated by groups like the Turco-Mongol, Tibeto-Burman and the Indo-European (Gazzetta of Sikkim 1891: 4). Due to such ethnic composition, the place was open to frequent ethnic conflicts, population movements and migration (ibid: 66). However, why the Prince of Minyak left their kingdom in Kham, Lhasa and Sakya and instead headed towards Sikkim still remains a question that needs to be resolved. Some suggest that the Mongols may have carried out expeditions to Kham to pacify the tribes of the Sino-Tibetan marches, which may have created a feud that led to the movement of people during the year 1264 to 1268 (ibid: 71). In addition, the Minyak clans were also found further west among both the Sherpas and the Newars in Nepal side of Kanchenjunga which suggested that migration out of Minyak must have taken place at different times and involved different places and different people (ibid: 71). The feature that

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<sup>10</sup> Chumbi Valley is in the Eastern Great Himalayan Range, which fall under the southern part of the Tibetan Autonomous Region in China. Initially it fell under the territory of Sikkim, but became part of Tibet in 1792.

<sup>11</sup> Ha Valley is one among the 20 districts of Bhutia. It lies along the western border of Bhutan and from the northwestern side it is bounded by the Tibet.

distinguished the Lhopos or Bhutias from the Tibetans and Sherpas who migrated to Sikkim from Tibet or from Nepal is the fact that the Lhopos carried out ancestral worships, while the Sherpas and the other 'Tibetan' groups did not (Balikci, 2008). So, every Lhobo either from Ha, Chumbi or Sikkim worshipped the ancestors.

### **The Period of Medieval Theocracy (1642-1888)**

During the latter part of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, a Bhutia patriarch known as Khye Bumsa came to Sikkim from Phari (Chumbi Valley, Tibet) and presented ceremonial offerings to Tho-Kung-Tek who was the Lepcha chief and thereby established 'blood-brotherhood' with them (Sinha, 2009: 31) Sikkim became a political entity in 1641, when the Lama of Lhasa along with the aid of two others converted the then inhabitants of Sikkim namely the Lepchas to Buddhism (Ram, 1974: 61). This was further followed by the appointing of Phuntsog Namgyal as the first king or Gyalpo of Sikkim in whom they discovered utmost leadership qualities "A band of Tibetan lamas installed the first Bhutia ruler of Sikkim in 1642 and thus marked the beginning of effective Bhutia control over Sikkim (ibid: 31).

Further, the Tibetan Lamas left no stones unturned in 'Tibetanization of Sikkim' by proselytizing Buddhism among the animist Lepchas, who then owned most of the land. These Lepchas who were the 'sons of the soil' were not just 'owners' of the land but were, in fact, better cultivators. Therefore, from establishing the perpetual friendship of 'blood brotherhood' the Bhutias also successfully established matrimonial relations with the Lepchas and offered them important administrative positions. Such a diplomatic approach of 'cooperation and patronage' gradually brought the already indolent and docile Lepchas, in no time under complete dominance of the Bhutias. The third King Chador Namgyal went to the extent of learning the Lepcha language and he also invented a new script, in which his own rituals were inscribed (Namgyal, cited in Singh, 2009). Therefore, the aboriginal Lepchas were in no time culturally overshadowed by the dominant Bhutias. To further win the faith of the Kirati tribes, namely the Limboos and Magars, the Bhutia King invited all the Limboos and Magars Chiefs and formally proclaimed that the Bhutias (Lhopos), Lepchas (Monpas) and Limboos (Tsongs) were all one family (Sinha, 2009: 47). The ruler formed a council called the '*Lhomentsongsum*'<sup>12</sup> where the Chogyal (Lhobo) was to be considered the

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<sup>12</sup>*Lhomentsongsum* was a blood-brotherhood treaty, signed at Kabi to affirm indigeneity and among the ethnic alliance of Lepcha, Bhutia and Limboos



‘father’, the Lepchas (Monpas) as the ‘mother’ and the Limboos (Tsongas) as the ‘sons’, all belonging to one family.

However, according to Arora (2007), during her fieldwork at Kabi, it was found that the blood-brotherhood was solemnised between Tekong Tek, a powerful Lepcha shaman and Khye Bumsa, the Tibetan Prince of the Minyak dynasty of Kham in 1366 with sacred stones being raised into the ground (Arora, 2007: 211). This sacred stone henceforth symbolised ‘indigeneity’, thereby legitimizing the Bhutia migration and settlement in Sikkim. However, it nowhere mentioned the participation of Limboos in the same. It was in that 1990s, that several memoranda of the Limboo Association cited the myth about the sacrifice of a Limboo at Kabi as evidence of their indigenous status and further pressed for Scheduled Tribe status (ibid: 211).

Due to various such factors, the Tibetan immigrant Bhutias increased in population persistently, with no opposition being faced by either of the groups. As put forth in the words of anthropologists, that “the immigrants had outnumbered the autochthons in Sikkim” (Sinha, 2009: 34). However, on the contrary, Magar chief did not come to terms with the Bhutias and instead persisted in their resistance against them.

### **The Inter and Intra Ethnic Conflicts**

The Bhutias went on to extend their regime to the North and North Eastern part of Sikkim, while the Limboos and Magars were pushed further down to a more humid, forested and malarial frontiers (Sinha, 2009: 48). While the Lepcha chiefs, continued to align with the Bhutia rulers, the Limboos and Magars, did not give in easily to the dominance. Therefore, the Bhutia rulers, in turn, decided to win over the Limboos through marital alliance and proselytization. In fact, the second king Tensung Namgyal went on to marry the daughter of a Limboo Chief. These two Kirati groups namely the Limboos and Magars were also used as forced unpaid labours during fortification of the capital region, construction of buildings and for household chores. Their hostility against each other further escalated when SiriJunga Hang Thiongshi a Limboo Chief was assassinated by Bhutia Tachhang Lama of Pemiongchi monastery in 1741 when he tried to revive the Kirati Mundhum religion<sup>13</sup> (Sinha, 1975: 15). The Limboos in retaliation showed their vengeance by ripping off the pages of valuable Tibetan Literatures when they were assigned work of construction garrison during the Sikkim-

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<sup>13</sup> Kirati Mundhum Religion is the religion of the Kirati people of Nepal

Nepal war. The revolts and expressions of discontent from the Limboos persisted, where many went on to migrate to the neighbouring countries like Nepal and Bhutan to escape being under the dominance of a Bhutia ruler. In 1725, a Lepcha Chief from the Chakung region aroused a sense of patriotism among the till then conformist Lepchas (ibid: 50). He claimed to be an incarnate of Guru Rimpoche (Padmasambhava) and displayed some supernatural and superhuman capabilities. He also stopped revenues from being sent to the rulers from Siliguri region and further went on to seek the assistance of Magar Chiefs to rebel against the Bhutia rulers (Sinha, 2009: 51). However, the rebel was crushed by the Bhutias. Therefore, slowly the Bhutias emerged as the dominant ethnic group. According to Kom “an ethnic group so dominant may also later be reluctant to share their power, which would make them more domineering” (Kom, 2011: 162). Such reluctance was seen on the part of Bhutias, who through their monopolistic rule went on to surpass all the aboriginal communities, including the Lepchas. The Lepchas in the later part of medieval theocracy, sensed a feeling of betrayal, as the Bhutias had failed to uphold the 13th century oath of eternal friendship and ‘blood brotherhood’ which was sworn between the Bhutia and Lepcha ancestors, when former was invited to settle in Sikkim by the latter (Balikci, 2008: 46). The Bhutias had a sense of cultural superiority which they used as a tool to justify their efforts to rule. The relations between the three communities were so strained during the later part, that the in the Sikkim-Nepal war, the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Limboos had their separate garrisons.

It is believed that the 'Magar' Chiefs of Sikkim in retaliation to the ever-increasing injustices implemented on them by the Sikkim rulers, persuaded the Deb Raja of Bhutan to attack Sikkim (Sinha, 1975: 15). In the first three decades of the 18th century, during the reign of Third Gyalpo Chador Namgyal, Sikkim was overrun by Bhutan in 1706, who went on to plunder its territories and carried off a few hundred inhabitants as slaves to Bhutan (Ram, 1974: 61). It was Tibet at that point of time who came to their rescue and drove the Bhutanese force out of Sikkim (Sen, 1975: 346). Sikkim, in return, as a token of appreciation build the Pemiongchi monastery in West Sikkim, which is wholly Tibetan in nature. In the eye of Tibet Government, Sikkim was always considered as its vassal territory, which was tied to Tibetan theocracy. The rulers were declared as incarnate lamas as sanctioned by the Dalai Lama (Sinha, 2009: 32). In addition, the Lamaistic Tibet also took the responsibility of moral guardian of Sikkim (ibid: 32). The new theocratic kingdom of Sikkim established political relations with

the Government of Tibet. The relationship between Tibet and Sikkim was, therefore, one of patron and supplicant and was less of a political subordination (ibid: 48).

The strained relations between the ethnic groups however persisted. The controversy regarding the succession of the throne in 1740 also was an evidence of the strained relations that continued to escalate between the ethnic groups. The fourth Chogyal, Gurmye Namgyal, took everyone by shock when he declared that an illegitimate child born to a nun would succeed him. When such a move was opposed by a Bhutia minister on grounds of the legitimacy of the child, it was a Lepcha Minister Chagzot Karwang from Barmiok estate, who protected the infant ruler (Sinha, 1975: 16). This incident thereafter led to a lot of war and bloodshed between the two ethnic groups namely the Bhutias and the Lepchas. At this juncture in 1750 “Tibet intervened in favour of the infant-king and in turn sent an aristocrat, Rabden Sharpa (a Sherpa), as the regent till the infancy of the king” (Singh, 2009: 66). Sharpas as stated by Risley (1894) in the Gazetteer of Sikkim, were mentioned as one among the families of Tibetan origin, who came to Sikkim during the medieval reign of Bhutia theocracy (Risley, 1894: 29). As per the Gazetteer, the Sherpas were clubbed within the Bhutias ever since their arrival to Sikkim, as both Bhutias and Sherpas were migrants from Tibet and shared a very similar cultural and political proximity.

### **The Prevalence of Feudalism and Stratification in the Early Traditional Society of Sikkim**

The traditional society of Sikkim was feudal and stratified in nature, where the *Kazis* (landlord) provided for the Government machinery by carrying out regulatory functions. After bringing the Lepchas, Limboos, Magars and Bhutias under his dominance, Phuntsog Namgyal chose 12 *kajis* (landlords) from Bhutia clan and 12 Lepcha jopens or ‘*Dzongpen*’ (district magistrate) from among the “superior” families of Lepchas (Namgyal, cited in Balikci, 008: 72). Thus this move led to the emergence of two parallel phenomena of feudalism and bureaucracy. This feudal structure was provided by the Chogyals (king) at the top of the hierarchy, with the Lamas (clergy) or the feudal lords in between and the commoners (subject) at the bottom, enjoying the social status in a descending order. The Lamas in the state too commanded a lot of respect from the people and favours from the ruler and the aristocrats. The traditional administrative system of the state was therefore highly characterized by formalism, patronage, centralization of power and authoritarian attitude towards citizens

(Dhamala, 1990: 180). The state as mentioned earlier was further divided into separate estates or *illakas*, which were each under the supervision of separate feudal lords. However, until the 18<sup>th</sup> century that is, during medieval theocratic society, there were no revenue systems. According to J.C White (1971), during the prevalence of traditional society, the King used to take what was required from the society. Those nearest to the capital had to contribute the larger share, while those in more remote areas had to pay comparatively lesser amounts to the officials in the name of the king, though little found its way to him (White, 1971: 260).

### **The Impact of the First Wave of Gorkha Intrusion: A Critical Analysis**

As mentioned in the earlier chapter, the migration of the Nepalese to Sikkim can be traced back in two waves. Initially, they made their influx during the Gorkha intrusion which started from 1770 to 1815. The later phase of migration was made when the British made way for Nepalese settlement efforts from 1861. The period from 1770-1815, was a time when Nepal had adopted a challenging position in the Eastern Himalayan region and was in an attempt to consolidate itself as a distinct polity (Sinha, 2009: 67). This period also coincided with the phase when Prithvi Narayan Shah, the king of Gorkhas had achieved victory in Kathmandu valley. From the period of 1768 to 1790, Prithvi Narayan Shah and his Gorkha Kingdom had gone to conquer Kathmandu, Bhadgaon, Eastern Nepal and Western Nepal, thereby making Kathmandu valley his capital. Therefore, intoxicated with such persistent success, these Nepalese further carried out bands of small raids to loot Morong foothills in Sikkim (ibid: 68). This was followed by raids on Rabdentse (the then state capital) in West Sikkim, which took everyone by astonishment. So severe were its repercussions that everyone receding in and around the Rabdentse region had to flee along with the King and Queen. The Nepalese further went on to invade Sikkim as far eastward as the Teesta River including the Morung or the lowlands at the foothills (ibid: 69).

Before the invasion of the Gorkhas, Sikkim had a much larger territory starting from the eastern section of Illam district of Nepal, parts of Chumbi Valley of present-day Tibet, Ha valley of present-day Nepal and Darjeeling of West Bengal (Ram, 1974: 62). However, after such gruesome raids which persisted from 1788 to 1789, Sikkim lost much of its territories to Nepal and Bhutan. During the reign of Gyurma Namgyal, Sikkim lost the province of Limbuana to Nepal (Sen, 1975: 346). Later when a war broke out between Tibet and Nepal, the Nepalese established itself firmly in Sikkim

from South and West of Teesta (ibid: 346). In retaliation, the Chinese expelled the Nepalese from Tibet and called on Sikkim to show their boundaries. However, the then ruler Chugphui Namgyal being a fugitive ruler and a minor could not come forward to protect the interest of his kingdom. At that juncture, the Chinese gave the region of Teesta to Nepal, with the Chola-Jelap range being made the northern and eastern boundaries of Sikkim. The Chumbi Valley was then given away to Tibet (ibid, 346).

Therefore, looking back at the history of Sikkim, one can blindly presume that the monarchy in Sikkim was relatively a feeble one, who were quite often unsuccessful in defending the boundaries of Sikkim from external threats. The Sikkimese Chogyals lost various parts of their region to their neighbours, like the Ha Valley to Bhutan, Limbuana in the eastern part of Tibet to Nepal, the Chumbi Valley to China and finally the Darjeeling hills to the British. Eventually what did remain of Sikkim was also given to India, when the country was integrated with the Indian Union in 1975.

It was during the Nepal conquest of Sikkim that the British colonialists first acted following the expansion of the Gurkhas, as this development acted as a pretext for launching a policy that brought Sikkim effectively under British power. The 'Anglo-Gurkha War' of 1814-16 and the decisive defeat of the Gurkhas by a strong British force brought British India and China's Tibet into much closer physical contact. The war ended with the signing of the Treaty of Segauly on December 2<sup>nd</sup>, 1815, between the British and Nepal.

### **The Impact of British Intrusion and its Hegemonic Influence**

The building of relations with Sikkim was also backed by strategic importance for the British. Amidst such a time when Calcutta was emerging as a commercial capital of India, the British in turn were in search of opening up trade routes to Tibet (Sinha, 2009: 52). After being rebuffed by the Bhutanese rulers in 1773 for the same, they finally discovered the most strategic and economic trade route from Calcutta to Lhasa via the Chumbi Valley (ibid: 52). It was then that they decided to court Sikkim's favour for the same. Sikkim then shared close ties with Tibet geographically as well as through matrimonial and religious ties. Therefore, it was a ready region for constructing a road that could be built up to Lhasa. The British also wanted to prevent any further possible Nepalese-Bhutanese intrigues against the company.

Therefore, by establishing the company's relations with Sikkim on a firmer footing, Lord Moira, the Governor General of India, restored to Sikkim, from Nepalese colonization, the territory lying between the rivers Mechi and Teesta on February 10, 1817 (Sen, 1975: 347). They also further warned the Nepalese government not to carry out any further molestation and disturbances in Sikkim which was on the verge of being a protectorate of the British (ibid:347). In retaliation, Sikkim and the British signed the peace Treaty of Titalia 1817, which was an ominous thing to do as the political significance of it was tremendous. It brought Sikkim for the very first time directly under the influence of the British, where freedom of action for Sikkim was limited by the provision. The treaty was also successful in making Sikkim an easy trade route to Tibet (Singh, 1988). In addition, after two months of the signing of the treaty Lord Moria in order to strengthen Sikkim as a buffer between Nepal and British India, ceded to Sikkim an additional territory of the Morang, which was a low land lying between the river Mechi and the Mahanadi (ibid: 347). All land south of the Rangit River was thus ceded to the British Government of India.

### **The Episode of Annexation of Darjeeling**

Two British officials, namely J.W Grant and Captain GS Lloyd during a tour to Sikkim discovered a deserted Gorkha outpost called Dorjee Ling<sup>14</sup>. A land which seemed very favourable for a summer resort and for both military stationing and a sanatorium for convalescent Britisher officers. They decided in turn to ask the Sikkim Darbar of transferring the land to Company in lieu of compensation. The deed of Darjeeling was however signed under two conditions, firstly Kummo Pradhan was to be made accountable for embezzlement of Sikkim Durbar and Debgaon was to be ceded back to Sikkim (Singh, 1988). However, no such promises were fulfilled, with only Darjeeling in some way being forcefully annexed by the British Government for their convenience. This agreement further escalated the Kings tension as such a move, received hostile responses from Bhutan and Tibet (ibid). Tibet, which had so far considered Sikkim its vassal state, held the cession of Dorjee Ling an illegal act by the Sikkim ruler (Ram, 1974: 63). This upset the Tibetan authority who in turn expressed its displeasure by restricting grazing rights on the people of Sikkim along the Sikkim-

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<sup>14</sup> Dorjee Ling is a Tibetan Word with “Dorji” meaning thunderbolt and the suffix and “Ling” means a place or a land.

Tibet border. However, Darjeeling for the British went on to become an important observation post in the Himalayan region.

The already strained relationship between the King and the British due to the annexation of Darjeeling further escalated when the latter started undertaking programmes to develop Darjeeling. Solely taken away from Sikkim for stationing military sanatorium, Darjeeling was eventually filled by Newars, Bhutias and Lepchas from Nepal and the hills gave every encouragement to merchants from India or neighbouring hill state to settle there as it also provided, free trade (Ram, 1974: 63). Such free trade and free labour led to increased trade via Darjeeling. Therefore, such developments did not only threaten the privileges, in trade traditionally enjoyed by certain Bhutias of Sikkim in that part of the Himalayas but also disturbed the age-old population balance and inter-tribal relations in Sikkim. The hostility between the Tibetan-Bhutia aristocracy and the British led to several British military expeditions to Sikkim between 1850 and 1860 (ibid: 63).

By the early 1860s, tea industries flourished in Darjeeling under the British. This led to a growing interest in opening Tibet trade routes. It also ushered in Nepalese immigrants to Darjeeling.

### **The Treaty of Tumlong, 1861**

On 28<sup>th</sup> March 1861, Sikkim signed the treaty of Tumlong with British India through which it became an official *de-facto* protectorate of the British (Ram, 1974: 63). The Treaty was very significant for the British as Sikkim would henceforth officially be opened as a transit route to Tibet. In 1888, alleged Tibetan incursions into Sikkim served as another pretext to the British for a 'punitive expedition' against Sikkim (Ram, 1974: 63). The treaty had 23 articles with all the former treaties between British Government and Sikkim being cancelled. The sole aim of the treaty was to allow the British Government to intervene in the internal affairs of the country. The Raja's freedom was also restricted under Article XXII, which brought with it various difficulties (Singh, 1988). Under the treaty, the British had the freedom to build roads and to station its cantonments in any part of the country. Sikkim also could not "cede or lease any part of its territory to any other state without the permission of the British" (Sinha, 2009: 72). As under this treaty, the British Government also acquired the right to intervene in Sikkim's relation with neighbouring states particularly Tibet. At this

juncture, Sikkim was an apt high road for trade between India and Tibet. The British's way to Tibet was to be cleared through the Chumbi valley via Sikkim. As quoted by one of the British officials in "Himalayan Triangle: A Historical Survey of British India's Relations with Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan",

*The Tibetans will be too glad to exchange gold dust, musk, borax, wool and salt, for English clothes, tobacco, drills etc. The people of Sikkim will gain as carriers of this trade and their Government will raise a considerable revenue from the transit duties* (Singh, 1988).

Therefore, the 1861 treaty of Tumlong specifically dealt with Sikkim based on her de-facto status and chose to ignore her de-jure status.

The Treaty also checked Tibetan influence in Sikkim, given that the two states shared very close religious, economic, administrative, material and origin ties. In fact, the Chogyal's headquarter was located in Chumbi valley, then located in Tibet, but which previously belonged to Sikkim. This evergrowing proximity of Sikkim with Tibet was also something that the British feared. According to Sinha (2009) in his book 'Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic' he writes "that it was the time, in the Eastern Himalayan region, the British had identified the Lamaist Bhutias as impeding to their cherished goals of trans-human trade" (Sinha, 2009: 73). In retaliation, the British encouraged immigration from Nepal into the country, with the sole purpose of drawing Sikkim's allegiance from Tibet (Rustomji, 1990: 212). It was anticipated by the British that by doing so, the Nepalese who were mostly Hindus would find more solace with a Hindu state namely India rather than with its northern border Tibet, which then, in turn, would reduce the chances of Sikkim being absorbed by Tibet. This polity was aptly put to substitute the *khukuri*<sup>15</sup> for the Buddhist prayer wheel (ibid: 212).

The protectorate status was later established more by Chinese Convention of the 1890s, which directly made Britain responsible for internal and external affairs and disallowed Sikkim from keeping any contact with other countries (Ram, 1974: 64). Thereafter, the mountain passes became regular channels of imperialist trade with China's Tibet (ibid: 64). As mentioned earlier, Sikkim was now directly under the control of the British and almost all the demands of the Government of India were

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<sup>15</sup> Khukuri is a knife having a curved blade, which is specifically used by the Gurkhas and have over the years been used to symbolize them.



realized by the Treaty. The Government of India were then in a position to even annex Sikkim but did not contemplate such a step, keeping in view the British's disinclination to involve in any conflict with Tibet, which still had vague claims over Sikkim (Sen, 1975: 348).

It is also pivotal to note that Tibet had till then declined to take any action in matters relating to frontier politics, when applied to interference by its two quasi-feudatories, namely Sikkim and Bhutan, out of the fear of being in collision with British India. However, the treaty of 1861 changed the entire scenario as the building of a road via Sikkim to Tibet connecting Darjeeling could from then be envisaged.

### **Internal Affairs: Increased British Influence in Sikkim (1874-77)**

Eventually, in 1879 the British Government went on to build a cart road to Jelep La<sup>16</sup> Pass which would lead them to Chumbi valley (Singh A. K., 1988). In 1881, a narrow-gauge branch of the Great East Bengal Railway was brought from Darjeeling to Siliguri (a place now in West Bengal, also known as the chicken neck) as it separated the Himalayan regions from the plains (ibid). The railway from Siliguri was connected to Assam after which it took only a week to reach the Tibetan frontier from Calcutta. Therefore, Macaulay a British officer was envisaging of starting a successful trade with Tibet, where Tibet would welcome the British broadcloth and Indian tea replacing the Russian goods (Singh A. K., 1988). Tibet would, in turn, export musk, gold and wool. The only hurdle the British could foresee was the interference coming from the Chinese and the monistic oppositions. However, Macaulay during his tenure was able to establish friendly and diplomatic relations with China, to ensure a smooth flow of trade between Tibet and British India.

### **The Second Wave of Nepalese Influx to Sikkim**

After the establishment of Sikkim as a British protectorate, it also witnessed a wide-scale influx of Nepali migrants from Nepal. By restraining the pro-Tibetan Bhutias, the British encouraged the effort to reclaim wastelands in the sparsely populated kingdom by encouraging Nepalese to settle there, which in turn would also bring about economic growth and development (Singh, 1975:15). Due to such an influx, there was a dispute which broke out between the Nepalese settlers and the Lepchas-

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<sup>16</sup> Jelep La which means "the lovely level pass" is a high-altitude mountain pass linking Lhasa to India. It lies between the eastern part of Sikkim in India and Lhasa in Tibet.

Bhutias of Sikkim. Influenced by the Tibetan aristocracy in their anti-Nepali drive, the Bhutias could not, however, reconcile to the Nepalese settlement and the British paramount. The Kazis were openly divided where the pro-British faction of Phodong Lama and Khangsarpa Dewan who wanted to retain power with the support of the British, while the other section aligned with the Tibetan interests along with the ruler (ibid:15).

Tsugphud Namgyal, whose reign saw the migration of Nepalese on a large scale, advised his ministers and Kazis not to allow the settlement of people from Nepal and Bhutan. Despite such oppositions from the head of the state, the Nepalese immigration could not be stopped, as they managed to get permission for settlement in Sikkim from the British. "In 1875, in direct defiance of the Royal Order, Chebu Lama allowed the *paharas* (Gurkhas) to settle in the land of Chakong, Rishi and Raman River (Namgyal cited in Sinha, 1975: 17).

It was then that Sir Ashley Eden (Secretary of Government of India) and Lieutenant Governor of Bengal who stated that Sikkim was the land of 'Sikkimese' and even if a wasteland and an uninhabited land were to be given to the Nepalese, yet the headman would be a 'Sikkimese' meaning a Lepcha or a Bhutia (Singh, 1988). Such a move finally gave the Lepchas and the Bhutias the assurance that their lands would be secure.

### **The Anglo-Chinese Convention: The End of Tibetan Hegemony over Sikkim**

Sikkim had such deep ties with Chumbi, that after the death of Sidkeong Namgyal in 1874, his brother Thudop Namgyal was crowned the next Maharaja at Chumbi rather than at Tumlong (Singh, 1988). This occasion was attended by various monastic officials coming from Lhasa where even the Chinese became a part of it (ibid). Thudop Namgyal also ended up marrying a Tibetan girl in 1881, a woman who later went on to have a very strong say in the political affairs of the state. In 1886 Sikkim further promised to protect Tibet from the British interventions, as a means of showing his loyalty to Tibet and China (ibid). Though Thudob Namgyal had come to power with British support, he drifted away and succumbed to anti-British pressures. On July 1887, he overlooked the Tibetans occupation of Lingthu Frontier which was a Sikkimese territory. Thudop Namgyal received several invitations to go back to Sikkim, but the king refused to return and instead remained at Tibet (Sinha, 1975: 15). This coincided

with the Tibetans occupying Lingthu near Jelep La on the North Eastern border of Sikkim with Tibet and went on to establish a check post with armed guards (Sinha, 2009: 90). The Government of India then decided to create a new treaty with the King, which would remove his freedom to reside in the Tibetan territory (ibid: 90). Such a move was specifically carried out so, as to warn the Tibetans through the King, that they would be forcefully ejected from Lingthu if they persisted staying there. British at that point in time made a clear demarcation between the Sikkim-Tibet borders which was the root cause of all the problems. The British with the help of Brigadier General Graham attacked the Tibetans and drove them out of Lingthu. This led to the signing of the Anglo-Chinese Convention on 17<sup>th</sup> March 1890, which fixed the Sikkim-Tibet boundary (Sinha, 2009: 90). It also acknowledged the British Government's exclusively extending control over the internal and external affairs of Sikkim. The convention also saw Sikkim as a part of the Indian empire. According to A.C. Sinha, the status of Sikkim was defined under Article 2 of the Convention which stated that

*It is admitted that the British Government, whose protectorate over Sikkim State, it hereby recognised, has direct and exclusive control over the internal administration and foreign relations of the State, and except through and with the permission of the British Government, neither the role of the State nor anyone of its officers shall hereby have official relations of any kind, formal or informal, with any other country (Sinha, 2009:90).*

Paul and Hart who were two British officials also negotiated for allowing Phari a place under Tibet for trade (Singh, 1988). China instead offered Yatung in the Chumbi Valley for the same. Such a move was opposed by Tibet and Sikkim as the British did not consult on it with them and instead only made deals with China. However, it was always known that Sikkim was merely dependent on Tibet and Tibet, in turn, was controlled by China. China was aware of not offending the British Government post the victory of the latter in Lingthu. What China was also aware of was the increasing control of the colonial rule over Sikkim. Therefore, Sikkim, in turn, was advised to continue its relations with China by paying homage and presence during New Years to the Chinese and the Dalai Lama (ibid).

In 1888, the Government of India exclusively created a political agency with a political officer, for acting as an observer on the Tibetan frontier. The Tibetan hegemony over Sikkim was almost on the verge of coming to an end. The British by

doing so also wanted to free Sikkim from the influence of Tibet and China which as mentioned earlier considered Sikkim as their vassal state. The British further employed hard-working Nepalese migrants, as labourers, which would not only help the British in speedy development and collection of land revenues but would also weaken the influence of Tibet and China, by weakening the influence of Buddhist Sikkimese and their ties with Tibet (Balicki, 2008: 49). Therefore, the Nepalese were constantly encouraged to enter Sikkim, who in turn went on to clear the jungles and brought in larger tracts of land under irrigated terraced cultivation, just as the British had wanted it.

**Map 2- The Inroads of Chumbi Valley, Nathu La pass, Jelep La pass and the Haa Valley**



**Source- Tiwari, S (2017) China India relations – what is cooking on the Bhutan Sikkim border** URL. <http://www.socialchumbak.com/politics/china-india-relation-bhutan-sikkim-border/>

### **Colonial Feudalism (1888-1949)**

In the year 1888, J.C White was appointed as the first Political Officer, with an aim to check the Tibetan influence and to manage the administrative mess. He became the first de-facto ruler of Sikkim, whose appointment for next twenty years went on to add yet another turning point in the history of Sikkim, the impact of which can be felt even today. After having been appointed, the first few observations he made about Sikkim is worth mentioning. He stated that “Chaos reigned everywhere, there was no revenue system, no court justice, no police, no public works, and no education for the younger generation... (At the top of it) the coffers were empty” (White, 1971: 26).

To tackle these problems he encountered in Sikkim, White first appointed an Advisory Council to run the administration. He chose a body which consisted of four Kazis, two Lamas and two ex-Dewans (ministers). By doing so, he took away most of the executive power from the ruler, where the administrative structure was now being restructured by White on the advice of the Advisory Council. The then ruler Thudob Namgyal was removed from power for a period of three years starting from 1892 to 1895 (Sinha, 2009: 93). The arable land were further leased to the highest bidders and the whole of Sikkim was divided into revenue blocks or *illakas* (ibid: 93).

The taxation and revenue system were established after five years of arduous tasks. White also found the country sparsely populated, so to reclaim more land under cultivation it was necessary to encourage more migration from Nepal. As a political officer White visited every corner of Sikkim and therefore was familiar with most of the headmen and Chiefs of various areas in Sikkim. According to Singh (2009), White could also be called a great environmentalist at that point of time, as he classified forests and reserved few exclusively for purpose of cutting timber, cultivation and cattle grazing (Singh, 2009: 93).

However, the implementation of various forest policies had adverse repercussions on the life of pastoralists. The British wanted to transform all the grazing lands into cultivated farms, to increase their own revenue. Therefore, the Waste Land Rules were enacted according to which, the uncultivated land was given to selected individuals, most of whom were Nepalese immigrants. Various forest acts were implemented in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Through these acts, no pastoralists could access the forest which was declared as “reserved forest” or “Protected forest”. This lead to a

drastic decline of pastoral activities, and thereby created problems for the pastoralists, most of whom belonged to the Bhutia-Lepcha group.

As White had spent a year in Nepal, he knew the Nepalese, to whom he often referred to as being hardworking and witty in his book "Sikkim and Bhutan". The Nepalese immigration in Sikkim can be dated back in 1770-1815 during the Gorkha intrusion and in 1861 when Ashley Eden (Secretary of Government of India), allowed the settlement of Nepalese to lease out fallow land to them who in turn were expected to make it productive (Balikci, 2008). However, it was not until White, created the administrative structure that the policy of Eden actually came true. As the country was sparsely populated the only way to reclaim more land under cultivation was by encouraging more immigrants from Nepal. Therefore, "it was necessary to encourage immigration, which could be done by giving land on favourable terms to Nepalese" (White, 1948: 27). This phase also saw the influx of businessmen from the plains, who were mostly Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis and Banias who came there as traders and merchants and ultimately settled under the protection of British since 1888 (Balikci, 2008: 6).

### **The Lessee System**

To develop the state economy, White introduced a new land settlement programme known as the lessee system (Balikci, 2008: 48). He went on to survey the land and set apart the entire arable land, except for ruler's estate on contractual lease, for a specific period on a fixed annual rent. He further divided the land into parcels and offered them to the Nepalese from leading families to be managed under a well-codified land tenure system (Sinha, 2009: 95). According to Sinha (2009) in his book "Sikkim: Feudal and Democratic", he states that the arrival of "Nepalese developed agriculture on a large scale-primarily rice and cardamom using the technique of terrace farming, they mastered on Nepal's steep terrain" (ibid: 95). Therefore, the traditional land grants were collected from the monasteries and from the Kazis by J.C White for the same. These grants were, in turn, redistributed and leased to the lessee landlords. These landlords were further encouraged to bring in Nepalese labourers in large number. In addition to it, the landlords also had the responsibility of collecting taxes for extracting *jharlangi* (forced labour) from the villages and for the maintenance of law and order within the state, which fell under their jurisdiction (Balikci, 2008: 50). In addition to it all, White also went on to establish various charitable dispensaries, beautiful gardens,

Nepali and Bhutia medium schools with boarding houses, hospital, roads and various other welfare schemes. It is due to this that White's contribution towards Sikkim is in fact praiseworthy.

By the time Whites tenure came to an end, Sikkim was virtually submerged under the Nepalese immigrants. The 'indigenous' Bhutia-Lepchas started expressing their worries as according to them, they were becoming an ethnic minority in their own homeland. Therefore, to prevent them from being made 'fugitive' in their own land, Charles Bell who went on to succeed White as a Political Officer issued "Revenue Order on May 17th, 1917, informing Kazis, Tashildars and Mandals that 'no Lepcha and Bhutia would be allowed to sell, mortgage or sub-let any of their land to any person other than a Lepcha or a Bhutia'" (Sinha, 2009:77). It was further stated in 1931 that "no Nepali can purchase land belonging to a Bhutia or a Lepcha unless the special permission has been accorded by his Highness the Maharaja of Sikkim" (General Department, 1931). Due to this order, the Nepalese immigrant were not permitted to own or purchase land from them. However, this move was directly the result of insecurity over land and lack of control over resources, which culminated into frustration and revolt on the part of Lepchas and the Bhutias amidst the rampant influx of Nepalese.

After White, there were many political officers who came to Sikkim, however, the basic socio-economic structure, set by White remained the foundation for all administrative policies. In 1918 the reign of Tashi Namgyal under the tutelage of Charles Campbell was very autocratic which was characterised by absolute power being vested on the Raja which was limited only by the big local landlords (Sinha, 1975). Kazis were the people responsible for the revenue and judicial functions, whose powers and functions were vaguely mentioned, due to which it was most often not utilized correctly (Sinha, 2009: 96). They held unprecedented power in the country as they were the law-makers, judges as well as the administrators. Due to such unparalleled powers being vested on the Kazis, which hardly had any checks or balances, the peasants were most often helpless, exploited and were abused by the landlords for their gain. At that point, Tashi Tshering who was the first President of Sikkim State Congress wrote a letter to the ruler titled "A Few Facts about Sikkim", where he mentioned about the exploitative nature of unpaid labour that was functional in Sikkim. He wrote,

*There are various forms of forced labour to which the ryots are subjected to... Most of the influential landlords, who hold important posts in the administration, live at Gangtok. Their states may be a two or three days journey away. From there the ryots have to come all the way to Gangtok and serve their landlords in turn, in various menial capacities. The ryots get no wages or compensations for such services and they are lucky, if they escape cruelties (Sinha, 2009: 96).*

There were huge quantities of packages known as Kalo Bhari meaning the black load, which were transported to China via Tibet (Sinha, 2009: 97). As the political system of Sikkim had been shaped on the mould of the centralized feudal system of Tibet. The ministers and other important Governmental officials mostly consisted of members from aristocratic families, who resided in the capital region and were simultaneously also the feudal lords. Due to this reason the central administration was dominated by the Bhutias since the very inception.

The 130 years (1817 to 1947) of colonial intervention in Sikkim had long-term cultural and demographic implications on Sikkim. It turned Sikkim from being an Independent country to being one of the Indian states. Nepalese migration stipulated by the British most significantly had changed Sikkim from a Buddhist majoritarian state to a Hindu majoritarian one, so much so that the Nepali language went on to become the lingua-franca of Sikkim. It can also be stated that ethnicization or political ethnicization in Sikkim was the work of British. They played a significant role in the identity crystallization of ethnic groups. The impact of colonial construction of Sikkim and its repercussions are felt even today in its socio-economic and political scenarios.

### **Protectorate Sikkim and the Indian Union (1975)**

After India achieved its independence on August 15, 1947, the princely states were freed from the British hegemony. The Indian National Congress who came to power in New Delhi, went on to discuss the politics of the newly independent nation. The cruel feudal oppression and suffering of the people in Sikkim had cultivated hatred on the regime of King over the years. Amidst such situations when Sikkim was looking for a platform to voice their protests against the feudal system in Sikkim, the Sikkim State Congress was soon formed, which was also the result of influence coming from the Indian National Congress. Therefore, the establishment of such ethnic associations acted as an important bridge between the political and social realms and henceforth mobilized people from the grass root level. Therefore, the Sikkim State Congress was



a party that grew out of discontent on landlordism. By mobilizing people to join ethnic associations, it not only gave chances for representation but also formed a platform for the voices of minorities to be heard. These ethnic associations, with an unprecedented growth of it over the next 10 years, threw light on the cultural aspect of ethnicity while favouring one cultural aspect over another. The ethnic groups were thus engaged in the revivalism of ethnic language, religion and other tangible markers which was in turn used to negotiate with the State (Chettri, 2014:220).

The new Government of India was quick at signing the 'standstill' agreements with Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet (Rose, 1969: 33). According, to the agreement with Sikkim, it was further stipulated that all the existing agreements whether formal or informal in operation on August 15, 1947, was to be retained until a new treaty was further negotiated (Sinha A. C., 1975). The Indian authorities had first submitted the "Instrument of Accession" form signed by the rulers of the Indian princely states on their merger into the Indian Union. But when Sikkim objected to the format, New Delhi agreed to use the above terminology, which had been suggested by the people of Sikkim (Rose, 1969: 33-34). This constituted an implicit recognition by India of Sikkim's special status (Sinha, 2009: 100). It also provided an early indicator that India would not insist upon Sikkim's full accession. Sikkim, therefore, continued to be a Protectorate of India, where India agreed to support it financially. The unequal treaty made India entirely responsible for the conduct of Sikkim's military affairs. Except for a small decorative bodyguard for the King, Sikkim was not allowed to keep any forces or buy any weapons (Singh, 1988). The Government of India specifically had the sole right to station troops anywhere in Sikkim (Ram, 1974: 67). Further, the agreement also disallowed Sikkim from maintaining any official contact, be it formal or informal with any foreign powers. The agreement also banned the imposition by Sikkim of any levy on goods from India. India was therefore once again made solely responsible for the communication system of Sikkim.

The political front, from the year 1947 to 1974, saw series of a tussle between the traditionalists and the modernists. While the traditionalists propagated the preservation of the status quo of the monarchy and the feudal class, the modernists, on the other hand, encouraged the emergence of new educated elites. Amidst such a tussle the King went on to introduce certain democratic institutions like the state council at the state level and local bodies at the rural and urban level (Dhamala, 1990: 184).

However, as these institutions had to function under the monarchic institutions, it was not successful in providing any ornamental façade and hence failed to change the basic political structure of the state (ibid: 184). Ultimately, it had reached such a point of a tussle between the bureaucrats and the King that it was difficult to demarcate between the administrative and political institutions. However, Sikkim went on to become the victim of administrators and politicians, who indiscriminately tried to implement so-called development at the cost of the culture of the country. In addition to it, the massive pouring of development funds by the Indian Government further accelerated deterioration (Dhamala, 1990: 213).

The recruited Indian Dewan along with the King forced a twisted ethnic policy which discriminated against the Nepalese Sikkimese (Sinha, 2009: 100). The King had control over the functioning of most of the emerging new political parties in Sikkim. Consequently, the three political parties namely 'The Praja Sundharak Samaj' at Gangtok (East), the 'Praja Sammelan' at Temi Tarku (South) and the 'Praja Mandai' at Chakhung (West) were formed. "Elections were further conducted on the ethnic lines and the results were twisted to suit the fancy of the ruler" (ibid, 100). Therefore, in Sikkim, ethnicity was such an aspect which resulted between various political interactions and therefore was in no way pre-defined and 'natural' (Chettri, 2014:210).

Sikkim State Congress led by Tashi Tshering mostly had members from the Nepali community. However, it avoided being identified with any one particular community and worked solely with three demands in hand. First and foremost, they wanted to abolish landlordism, secondly they wanted the formation of a popular interim Government and lastly, they wanted the merger of Sikkim with the Indian Union (Basnet,1974:76). Thus, as stated by Chettri (2014), "ethnic politics have helped articulate inequality and differential power relations and offered a means of challenging them" (Chettri, 2014: 217). The ruling group in retaliation came up with a new political party known as the "Sikkim National Party" whose programme was the very antithesis of the policy of Sikkim State Congress (Sinha, 1975: 25). The sole purpose of the organization was to protect the rights and interests of Lepchas and Bhutias against the Nepali dominated political party. The party dominated by neo-Bhutias and aristocrats under the leadership of monks wanted Sikkim to remain independent. Therefore, ethnic identity became the only effective basis of collective political action" (Chettri, 2014: 217).

Series of law were passed, and landlordism was abolished in 1949, which necessitated a reorganization of the administrative system. Sikkim was now divided into four districts, with district headquarters at Mangan (north), Namchi (south), Gangtok (east) and Gyalshing (west), which was all placed under a district official. However, even post the abolition of landlordism, it was the landlords that occupied higher posts in the administration, as they had well-established contacts with the King and had economic advantages and modern education. It also further banned the settlement of Nepali Sikkimese in the north of Penlong La and north of Dikchu (Vandenhaksken, 2010: 174). They also restricted the settlement of Marwaris to mainly three towns in Sikkim namely Gangtok, Rangpo and Rhenock (ibid: 174). There was a further ban on the purchase and bequeathing of property to women married to a man outside Sikkim (ibid: 175). Tensions further escalated, with the coming up of qualified Nepalese, who were challenging the dominance of aristocrats and neo-Bhutias in public importance and Buddhism being recognised as the only state religion. The Lepcha-Bhutia communities were in danger of being engulfed by the inessential influx (Rustomji Cited in Vandenhakshen, 2010: 177).

Therefore, the state in retaliation to the evergrowing insecurities felt by the Lepcha-Bhutia population came up with the Sikkim Subject Regulation of 1961, which was the very first of its kind that conditioned and governed the 'subjecthood' of the 'Sikkimese' subjects (Basnet, 1974: 120). This granted statehood to "persons or ordinarily resident in the territory of Sikkim for a period not less than fifteen years immediately preceding the promulgation" (Moktan, 2004: 181). The cut off period for the Regulation was July 1946. This Regulation also referred to only the Bhutias, Lepchas and Tsongs leaving aside the Nepalese, which according to Thapa showed the King's lack of desire to "forge a common identity in Sikkim" (Thapa, 2002: 59). The main intent of the King of Sikkim was to withstand the hegemony of India by popularizing the 'us' feeling amongst the Bhutias and Lepchas. Thus, already having settled in Sikkim, before the advent of the Nepalese, the Bhutia and the Lepchas were classified as 'indigenous population'. According to Hiltz, the King also went on to propagate patriotism in terms of "Tibeto-Burman" which was understood as a "vague sub-tribal category" so as to bring together all the 'Mongoloid Tribes' and the Lepcha-Bhutias under one banner (Hiltz, 2003: 74-74). Therefore, we can see how ethnic belonging was defining the boundaries of the kingdom in the 1960s and it also provided

a base for the construction of nationalism (Vandenheksken, 2010: 178). We can also see how ethnic identity is being used for mobilization of ethnic politics, in a political system. Thus, both Sikkim and its ethnic communities had recognized the importance of ethnicity as a political resource which was further used as a negotiating tool.

### **The ‘Parity Formula’**

Amidst such atmosphere there emerged a rise of ethnic tension and confrontation, which centred around the rise of equivalent ethnic representation in political and administrative institutions. It was in retaliation to this emerging demand and tension amongst the ethnic groups that the King finally introduced a “parity formula” which sought to give equal and proportionate representations to three ethnic communities of Sikkim namely the Lepcha-Bhutia and Nepales in the sphere of appointment (Dhamala, 1990: 183). Therefore, according to the first electoral system, out of the total 12 seats “Nepalese and the Lepcha-Bhutia were allotted six seats each and the ruler nominated the remaining six” (Sinha, 2009: 106). The 1974 election, which was considered as the first democratic election saw a whole new constituted State Assemblies, now comprising of 15 representatives from the Bhutia-Lepcha, 15 from the Nepalese and one each from the Sangha (or the assembly of lamas, elected by the lamas of the state as their representative in the Government) and the Scheduled Caste (ibid:114). Here, the Limboos (Tsongs) were clubbed under the Nepalese. The pattern of the reservation was such that no community could dominate over the other. The former practice of communal voting on ethnic line was eventually replaced by the principle of one-man-one-vote. However, the parity between the two major stocks namely the Lepchas and Bhutias did persist to exist but in a very subtle manner. During the 1974 elections, Sikkim Congress for the very first time came out with a humongous victory in the elections, having 31 out of 32 seats in the Assembly. All the 15 seats that were reserved for the minority Bhutia-Lepcha had been captured by the Sikkim Congress with its own candidates. Even the *Sangha* seat had the Sikkim Congress candidate, emerging with a victory (Das, 1983:118). The formula of ‘one man-one vote’ had successfully thrown out the monopolistic control of Sikkim National Party heading by the King, aristocrats and neo-Bhutias, which had been sweeping the polls ever since the inception of the electoral system in Sikkim. Kazi Lhendup Dorjee, the President of Sikkim Congress Party emerged as the first Chief Minister of Sikkim in the 1974 democratic elections. After its victory, the Sikkim Congress further requested New

Delhi to send a constitutional expert for the drafting of a constitution for Sikkim (Sinha, 2009: 115). Thus, the 1974 elections were directly the result of a combination of external factors and existing internal grievances that facilitated the legitimization of ethnic identity as a political resource while at the same time ensured the further entrenchment of democratic practices (Chettri, 2014: 218).

The Government of Sikkim Bill 1974 which was introduced, aimed to envisage a three-tier system, where the ruler was reduced to a figurehead, the Chief executive was the head of the administration and the Chief Minister along with his cabinet was responsible to the Assembly for the non-reserved subjects (Sinha, 2009: 115). However, the Bill was vehemently opposed in the Assembly by pro-palace groups like Private Militia of the Chogyal, few Bhutias, Sherpas and Tibetan refugees and the pro-Raja bureaucrats (ibid: 117). The Chogyal was eventually forced to give his consent to the Bill amidst such developments and ethnic issues began at the front once again. Fearing that the Chogyal would lose all his powers, a section of people urged the Constitutional experts to provide certain 'special safeguards' for the ethnic minorities namely the Bhutia-Lepcha in the Constitution, so as to prevent them from being made 'fugitive' in their own homeland (Das, 1983: 28).

The Lepchas, having no trust either on the Bhutias or the Nepalese apprehended that if Sikkim remained a separate entity, the Nepalese would take over the government. Thus, the Lepchas amidst the fear of becoming a second citizen in their own country demanded integration with India, on conditions that they should be given the privileges enjoyed by the Scheduled Tribes status in India (ibid: 29).

### **Integration of Sikkim to the Indian Union**

By 1973, ethnic conflict in Sikkim had reached its epitome. Taking advantage of the situation, RAW agents were dispatched to Gangtok, Namchi, Mangan and Geyzing, by the Indian Government. They slowly gathered operational data that was required for planning operation in Sikkim, in case India was to take action (Sinha, 2009: 117). On 14th April 1975 Sikkim lost its protectorate status and was integrated with the Indian Union. However, the episode of integration of Sikkim to the India Union has always been very controversial. The citizens of Sikkim, as well as scholars who have written on the same, have debated on the integration of as being an act of annexation and not mergence. According to a few of them, Sikkim lost its protectorate status and

willingly merged with the Indian union, thus forming the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of India. The Government of India too went on to claim that the absorption of Sikkim, was directly the result of true aspiration of the people of Sikkim as expressed through the Assembly (Ram, 1977: 69). The other group debates that Sikkim was forcefully annexed by the Indian Union, which took advantage of its vulnerability, amidst the heightened ethnic conflict that prevailed during the time of its integration. Ram (1977) puts forth his perception on the integration of Sikkim to the Indian Union and states that,

*Certainly, this is a cruel joke played on the people of Sikkim. Like every regime that carries on its anti-democratic designs on another people, the Government of India does so in the name of 'protecting and extending democracy' (Ram, 1977: 69).*

Thus, in the name of meeting the aspirations of the people, the Government of India instead encouraged the feudal institutions of the Chogyal and the Kazis to give a fresh lease and went on to swallow Sikkim's national (ibid: 65-66).

After the integration of the state, Article 371 F was added to the Constitution which guaranteed special provisions for the newly formed state under the Indian Union. According to the Article “all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part there shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority” (Cited in Vandenhaksken, 2010: 179). Further, the citizenship of India was also allowed only to the people recognized under the Sikkim Subject Regulations of 1961.

## **Conclusion**

It may not be wrong to state that it was the mutual antagonism between the Bhutia-Lepcha and the Nepalese that led to Sikkim's integration with India. If the ordinance compensated the Bhutias-Lepchas for the loss of their kingdom, it also reduced the Nepalese to a political minority. Further, it ignored the claim of the Limboos, as a major, indigenous Sikkimese tribe. The Limboos who enjoyed the reserved seats in the Sikkim Assembly during the Chogyala era was later left with none under the Election Commission of India. Therefore, democracy and ethnic politics coexist without any seeming contradictions, specifically in a region where democracy which has just been introduced in place of monarchical, feudal or colonial systems (Chettri, 2014: 205). Ethnic identity in Sikkim has today penetrated everywhere be it in

democratic practices, political mobilization, the formation of political parties or vote banks. All these have also benefitted few ethnic groups who have simultaneously started taking advantage of the political situations which have become receptive towards ethnicity. Ethnic identity became even more attractive in Sikkim, post-1975, with the introduction of reservations on political, economic and social realms of the state. This resulted in the coming up of few groups, who besides having a good political standing also had respectable influence and a wide-ranging social capital. However, amidst such situations, one may also find groups who still remain misrepresented in the political, economic and social realms, in spite of being few among the earliest inhabitants of Sikkim. Thus, one such community is the Sherpas of Sikkim who has occupied a very insignificant place in the ethnic composition of the state, which is evident from the scanty references on the Sherpas in Sikkim's history or in the ethnic politics of the state. Amidst such a scenario the Sherpa community of Sikkim has over the years faced insecurity over land, lack of control over resources, and the frustration at the general apathy of the state administration. They do not find acceptance among any of the ethnic groups of Sikkim namely the Bhutias, Lepchas and Nepalese. Due to these reasons, this ethnic minority community lacks any sense of belongingness to any one group or groups. They have all along failed to find an honourable or note-worthy place not only in the politics of Sikkim but even amidst the political scenario of India. All this has therefore fostered in serious questions on the identity of the Sherpas in Sikkim. The next chapter will, thus, theorise the evolving nature of ethnicity and ethnic politics in Sikkim post the integration, and will thereby try to evaluate the current identity of the Sherpas. It will also discuss on how the ethnic politics in the state has further led to misrepresentation and 'othering' of the Sherpas and how this phenomenon has led to the identity formation amongst the Sherpas of Sikkim.

## CHAPTER III

### ETHNIC POLITICS AND IDENTITY FORMATION OF THE SHERPAS IN SIKKIM POST 1975

#### Introduction

Sikkim, being multi-ethnic in nature, witnesses diverse politics of identity and has a rampant predominance of ethnic politics, ever since the monarchy in the state. We find the politics of identifying one's group and differentiating themselves from the 'others', that is the creation of one exclusive group and manifestly separating from the rest. We also find an overwhelming dominance and distancing one's ethnic community from historical affiliations as well, which have in turn led to complete submergence, alienation and rampant ethnic competition between various ethnic groups in the state. The phenomenon of ethnicity is a pivotal component of the socio-economic realities of most of the multi-ethnic states today and Sikkim comes under the same prevue. However, the issue of how to cope with the complexities of these multi-ethnic state and ethnicity still always remains a predominantly pertinent question. Therefore, there is an urgent need of looking at all the possible available and suitable accommodations within a multi-ethnic state.

The complexities in these multi-ethnic states usually arise due to constant ethnic group competition and rivalry for scarce resources, demand for reservation in government jobs and in educational institutions and preferential opportunities in development and welfare schemes brought about by the modern nation-state. The symbolic identity, livelihood and ethnicity as mentioned earlier cannot be ignored in a multi-ethnic context. The identity politics and conflict over resource-entitlements established the contours of fault-lines in the Himalayan borderland (Arora, 2006: 4065). It is also pertinent to note, however, that the ethnic relations in Sikkim are neither harmonious nor are there political tensions like in the other North Eastern regions like Manipur and Assam (ibid: 4065). The state only witnesses frequent but subtle political tensions, which arises due to ethnic competition specifically over few of the demands mentioned above.

This present chapter will specifically theorise the evolving nature of ethnicity and ethnic politics in a multi-ethnic state like Sikkim after its integration with the Indian Union in 1975. The chapter will give an overview on the representation of various



ethnic groups namely the Bhutias-Lepchas and the Nepalese, which comprises of a cluster of other communities namely the Newar, Bahun, Chettri, Jogi, Sanyasi, Limboos, Rais and Thami, and the Scheduled Caste communities like Kami, Damai, Sarki and Maji (Chakraborty, 2000: 3806). It will thereby delineate their position in the politics of the state. The chapter will specifically be taking the case of the Sherpas who along with Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo, have been included under the Bhutia category since 1978. It is a well-known truth that the Sherpas have since the period of monarchy acquired a very marginalized and an insignificant position both in the administrative and political set-up of the state. Even today one may find a very minimal representation of the Sherpas in the politics of the state. Therefore, I will now try to analyse the position of Sherpas over the years in the politics of Sikkim and how it has led to their identity formation. As identity or identity formation is backed by both psychological and political factors (Allahar, 2001: 197). The identity of an individual speaks subjectively based on how they feel or how they interpret their position in the social context (ibid: 197). While, on the other hand, the political dimension of identity is fostered by the definition of 'self' as put forth by 'others' (ibid: 197). According to Visvanathan (1993), the question of identity itself is problematic, as it brings in more demarcation between groups and fosters and demands a sense of long-term loyalty towards their groups (Visvanathan, 1993: 43). Thus, keeping such arguments in the background, the chapter will analyse few significant state elections that went on to change the representation of various ethnic groups including the Sherpas, in the political realm of the state. As the Sherpas have all along been facing misrepresentation and 'othering' from other ethnic groups, and thus they are bound to have undergone what Narang (1995) termed as 'cultural deprivation'. Amidst such circumstance, the role of Denzong Sherpa Association that gave the Sherpas a central platform to voice in their grievances and demand has also been dealt with. I have lastly tried to analyse the role of language in the identity formation of the Sherpas, as language is a true marker of identity. Language and culture are often referred to as ethnicity, which mattered the most and is always deemed the most pronounced marker of distinctiveness (Xaxa, 2005:1365).

### **Locating and Identifying the Sherpas in Sikkim**

As mentioned in the first Chapter the migration of Sherpas in Sikkim can be tracked back in different waves. Rabden Sherpa was the first Sherpa to have come to

Sikkim as a regent in the 1750s during the time of the fourth Chogyal, Gurmye Namgyal” (Singh, 2009: 66). This was later on followed by the marriage of his granddaughter with Phuntsog Namgyal, the then Chogyal of Sikkim, which took place in the early half of 18<sup>th</sup> century (Subba, 2011: 280). The Sherpas were further believed to have come to Sikkim during the two waves of Nepalese migration that took place during the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century. They also entered parts of West Sikkim while undertaking mountaineering expeditions from Darjeeling and later settled there permanently. It may be due to this reason that we today find a higher number of Sherpas in the West district. There are also some groups who believe that the Sherpas are hunters who have descended from the Bhutia-Lepcha cross group (Sukla cited in Nepal, 2009).

Sherpas today are, however, scattered in all the four districts of Sikkim namely East, West, North and South. Majority of them are found in parts of West district like Ribdi, Okharey, Bharang, Upper Thambong, and higher elevated regions of the Tashiding constituency, Upper Bermiok, Begha, Singling, Siribadam and Buriakhop. While in the South District they are found in Ranlang, Wok, Nayabusty, Damthang. In the East district, they are however just confined to few regions like Regu, Khamdong and Pathing. The least number of Sherpa settlements are in the North district, with just two areas namely, Tingda area and Kabi having Sherpa population (Subba, 2011: 281).

As the Sherpas are represented under the Bhutia census their appropriate share of the population cannot be determined. According to a report by the Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) in 2017, there are at present around 50,000 Sherpas in Sikkim. Thus, going by the report, the Sherpas in Sikkim comprises 8.18 per cent of the total population. However, such a population percentage is far from being an accurate one. Therefore, the need of having a distinct census representation of one’s community or ethnic group becomes of utmost importance. The Sherpas have over the years been demanding for the same.

In the earlier periods, the Sherpas were normally grouped under the Kirati tribes, which today comprises of the Limboos, Mangars, Rais and sometimes even the Lepchas being clubbed within the Kirate stock (Nepal, 2009: 94). However, the Sherpas are Buddhists by religion, sharing a very close cultural proximity with the Bhutias. At one point in time, they were even represented as Nepalese in a broader context. Nevertheless, over the years they have managed to maintain their own separate Sherpa

identity, in spite of being clubbed together and represented under different groups at different point of time. They have their own dialects, written scripts and religiously follows Lamaistic-Buddhist, which manages to retain their unique identity amidst other ethnic groups. However, the Sherpas like the Bhutias celebrates the Tibetan Losar<sup>17</sup> as one of their important festivals.

Ending the age-old monarchy which lasted from 1642 to 1975, Sikkim went on to become a new democratic polity. After its integration with the Indian Union as the 22<sup>nd</sup> State of India, Sikkim was accorded Article 371F to meet its demands and special circumstances. The Article guaranteed that “all existing laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority” (Vandenhaksken,2010: 179). The Parliament also made Provisions for the number of seats in the legislative assembly, specifically for protecting the rights and interests of the different sections of people in the state.

However, the people who were in the political forefront before the integration of the state persisted to determine the political issues and inter-ethnic relations in the state. After the integration, the Bhutias and Lepchas were given the ‘political minority’ position, which was considered as a discriminatory provision by a few Nepalese politicians (Arora, 2006: 4065). The Nepalese conferred that the Scheduled Tribe status given to the Bhutias was unjustifiable, given their background of monarchical rule in Sikkim for over 300 years. However, Bhutia-Lepchas contended that they were educationally, socially, politically and economically backwards. They (Lepchas and the Bhutias) were recognized as the Scheduled Tribes in 1978. The ST order of 1978 went on to expand the category of Bhutias to further include ‘Tibetan groups’ like the Sherpa, with Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo (Arora, 2007: 199). As a virtue of this new identity, the Sherpas were now qualified to contest any of the assembly seats, reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha. This platform gave the Sherpas a new identity. However, such a move was met by a series of protests from the Bhutias who opposed arguing that such an order would threaten their ‘unique indigenous ethnic identity’. In retaliation to the order, groups like the Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee and the Sikkim Bhutia Committees were formed to exclusively

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<sup>17</sup> Losar is the Tibetan New Year which bings on the first day of the first month of tTibetan Calendar, which usually falls during winter.

safeguard their mutual interests and to redefine their identity. The Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) maintained that the inclusion of Sherpas and eight other groups to tribes within the definition of the Bhutias in the constitution under the Sikkim Scheduled Tribe Order, has distorted the distinctive identity of the “Bhutias.” According to an article in ‘The Hindustan Times’ dated November 12, 2002 titled “Bhutias Cry out against Tribals’ Inclusion’ by Archita Bhatta stated that “The Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Apex Committee has said that the inclusion of Sherpas and eight other groups to tribes within the definition of the Bhutias in the constitution under the Sikkim Scheduled Tribe Order, distorts their pristine indigeneity and identity.” The Denzong Sherpa Action Committee had earlier in a letter to the President of India dated July 7, 1995, demanded that “the Sikkim Scheduled Tribe Order 1978 and People’s Representation (Amendment) Act 1980 be upheld and the attacks on the rights of Sherpa Community by some tribal organisations of Sikkim be stopped”. There were demands from many other tribal organisations to exclude the Sherpas and other eight tribal communities from being included under the Bhutia category. The simmering discontent among the Sherpas stirred the hornet’s nest, when the Association submitted a memorandum on May 1999 to the President of India, demanding 4 of the 12 reserved seats of Bhutia-Lepcha in State Assembly, to be allotted to the Sherpas.

In 2002 the Bhutias accepted the inclusion of the ‘Tibetan groups’ into the Bhutia category. There were 12 out of 32 seats in the Sikkim Legislative Assembly reserved exclusively for the Bhutia-Lepchas, to safeguard their political interest and reservation in government employment and educational sectors (Arora, 2006: 4065). It was further debated in the Supreme Court, with the landmark judgement on it being passed in 1993, which went on to uphold the seats for the Bhutias and the Lepchas and 1 Sangha (or the assembly of lamas, elected by the lamas of the state as their representative in the Government) seat in Sikkim Legislative Assembly (ibid: 4065). The Supreme Court judgement also acknowledged the Sangha to be a historically, politically and also socially a significant institution and not just a religious stature (Arora cited in Kazi: 2006).

It becomes crucial to note that despite the Bhutias claiming that the Sherpas are distinct from them, and their inclusion into the Bhutia community further hampers their ‘unique indigenous identity’, one cannot ignore that they share cultural, linguistic, geographical and religious similarities. These two groups also share a common past,

culture, customs, and traditions, given the fact that they have both migrated from Eastern Tibet at different times and thus belong to the Tibeto-Mongoloid stock. Their cultural roots are those primordial raw materials that bind groups together (Gellner, 1983, Kapferr 1988). This was one of the reasons why the Sherpas along with the other seven groups were included under the category of Bhutias. However, according to Barth and his collaborators, the boundaries between two ethnic groups are maintained, even though their culture might be indistinguishable and even though individual and groups might switch from one side of the boundary to the other. As post the integration of the state, what we now witness in Sikkim is a mixture of primordial identity along with the construction of new ethnic identities. One can also find a feeling of strong ethnocentrism, which can have disastrous consequences in the future politics of the state.

### **The Second Assembly Elections**

The second assembly elections in Sikkim under the Indian Constitution was held on October 12, 1979, which witnessed a huge political upheaval. This state election remains pivotal as it was for the very first time that the various ethnic groups were being represented in the political sphere of the state. The “Representation of People (Amendment) Ordinance” 1979, which laid down the new formula for the distribution of seats on ethnic lines were laid down by the President of India. Out of the 32 State Assembly seats, 12 seats were reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha community (BL), 1 for the Sangha (monasteries) 2 for the Scheduled Castes, and the remaining 17 were considered as ‘general’ seats, in which any group could contest including the business community from the plain regions of India namely the Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis and Banias. The votes of the Sangha seat were then reserved for the lamas belonging to from Bhutia-Lepcha origin, thereby making 13 seats at the disposal of Bhutia-Lepcha group. The Bhutias now included the Chumbipa, Dophapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo, who were considered as Scheduled Tribes by Sikkim Scheduled Caste and Scheduled Tribe Order, 1978. The Scheduled Caste groups namely the Kami, Damai and Sarki were all of the Nepalese origins and hence they could contest from the ‘general’ seat. The larger approach of the above mentioned 17 ‘general’ seats were to reduce the majority community that is the Nepalese in the state to a minority in the assembly. This, in turn, would elevate the minority community namely the Bhutia-Lepcha into an effective majority. Each society

can by definition have only one dominant group alongside a number of subordinate groups. The subordinate group usually has far more multitude of ethnic groups or a cluster of ethnic groups within its domain. Thus, when an ethnic group forms an actual majority of the population but are in the status of subordination, they are known as 'mass ethnics'. In a similar manner, the Nepalese in Sikkim can be considered as 'mass ethnic'. It was evident that the chances of Nepalese bagging all the 'general' seats were remote, amidst the business community from the plains namely the Marwaris, Biharis, Bengalis and Banias, contesting under the same seat in the elections. Therefore, the issue of plainsmen vs. the Sikkimese Nepalese also surfaced for the very first time in the politics of Sikkim. As one could envisage, the elections witnessed a huge political upheaval.

There were 105 candidates in fray for the 32 assembly seats. (Chakraborty, 2000: 3805). The electoral rolls which were published by the Election Commission of Sikkim also had names of castes or sub-castes mentioned against the elections. The National Information Centre (NIC) had also produced a caste-wise distribution of the voters in Sikkim's constituency (ibid: 3806).

Under the leadership of Narbahadur Bhandari, the newly emerged Sikkim Janata Parishad came out as a strong political force winning 17 seats out of the 32-member assembly (Chakraborty, 2000: 3805). Bhandari went on to become the Chief Minister of Sikkim for the next 14 years, winning three consecutive State Assembly elections from 1979, 1984 and 1989, the first one from Sikkim Janata Parishad (SJP) and later two from Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP). He projected himself as a pro-Nepali leader and went on to demand seats for Sikkimese Nepalese at par with the numerical strength of the population. However, he also continued to keep intact the reserved seats for the Bhutia-Lepcha (ibid: 3805). Therefore, due to such a tactic used by him, in the third general elections in 1984, Bhandari won all 32 seats through SSP, as he then had control not only over the Bhutia-Lepcha but also over the Nepali population. He had in a very crafty manner declared fifty per cent share of seats out of 12 to the Lepchas and the other remaining fifty per cent to the Bhutias and Sherpas (ibid: 3806).

The second assembly elections saw Mr Bhandari's entire focus and preference shift to high caste Nepalese who due to their witty and clever moves, went on to capture all the political and administrative units of the Government. While the Pradhan's went

on to capture higher echelons of administration the Bahuns and Chetters were found in the political sphere (Chakraborty, 2000: 3805). These upper castes were referred to as the NBC meaning the Newar, Bahun and Chettri or the non-backwards classes. The larger population of Nepalese specifically the OBCs like Rai, Magar, Gurung, Bhujel Sunwar and the then OBC Tamangs and Limboos remained unrepresented from the Nepali seats and were thus neglected. The OBCs comprised the largest section of the electorate (Chakraborty, 2000: 3806). Therefore, any political party that would revive support from OBCs and the STs were destined to dominate the politics in Sikkim. It was the negligence of the OBCs and the STs by Bhandari which led to his defeat in 1994. Thereafter, the NBCs too lost their stronghold in the administrative and political spheres of the state.

Pawan Kumar Chamling who broke away from Bhandari's party went on to form a party known as Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) which won the elections of 1994. As one may guess, most of the votes for Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), came from the Bhutia-Lepcha and the OBCs Nepalese who were deserted and neglected by Bhandari Government and hence were looking for a change of Government. Thus, we can see how increasing ethnic calculations had characterised the assembly elections ever since its inception. Since their victory in the 1994 elections, the political party SDF is still in power till date under Chief Minister Pawan Kumar Chamling, creating the record of being the first Chief Minister of a state in India to complete 25 years of Chief Ministership.

Further, the SDF under Pawan Kumar Chamling decided to include the non-backward class (NBC) or the Newar, Bahun and Chettri community of Sikkim under the OBC list along with other Nepali communities like Khambu Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sunwar, Thami, Dewan and Bhujel, despite continuous rejections from the Centre on the same. According to an article in the Hindustan Times dated August 26, 2003, "Despite the Central Government rejecting the demand of Sikkim government for inclusion of the left out communities in the OBC list the Chief Minister went ahead and used his own capabilities to fulfil this long-pending aspiration of the OBCs." According to Chamling, he wanted the "reconstruction of Sikkimese society". Such an act was also envisaged to play the role of unifying different communities of Sikkim under one single umbrella which would grant them a common identity.

The victory of SDF in Sikkim is a classic example of ethnic vote bank of Nepalese like Newer, Bahun, Chettri, Jogi, Sanyasi, and Thami who were promised OBC status after the success of SDF (Chettri, 2014: 225).

### **The Sherpa Representation in the State Legislative Assembly**

The 1994 state elections remain a significant milestone for various communities, including the Sherpas, who for the very first time saw the fielding of their Sherpas representative from the Bhutia-Lepcha seats. It is a known fact that the Sherpas in Sikkim have acquired a very marginalized and an underrepresented status in the administrative and the political realm of Sikkim. Ever since the Chogyal era, the Sherpa's representation in politics of the state remains very minimal, and their names can hardly be found in the early histories of Sikkim with the exception to that of Rabden Sherpa's, who came as a regent from Tibet in 1750s.

The state saw for the very first time in the history of Sikkim electorate, two Sherpa candidates being fielded from Rakdong-Tintek from the Bhutia-Lepcha seat under Bhandari's Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) (Chakraborty, 2000: 3806). Such a move by Bhandari, however, met with objections from the Bhutias who saw it as a conspiracy to put them down, as they were now left with just 5 seats for themselves that is one from the Sangha and 4 from the Bhutias-Lepcha seat. Bhandari's move was carefully crafted to bring in a subtle divide between the tribes specifically between the Bhutia-Lepcha, as they were sensitive towards the rights of the Lepchas and ignored that of the Bhutias. Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) fielding a Sherpa candidate was also specifically to draw the sympathy of the Sherpas who then constituted 10.95 per cent of the voters which could be a strong deciding factor for a constituency like Temi-Tarku from where Bhandari's wife contested. In retaliation to the same the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF), which was the opposition party also went on to field a Sherpa candidate (ibid: 3806). Such move by the SDF was taken to neutralise the gain of the SSP (ibid: 3806).

Such moves were propagated by the political motives of both the parties. However, it was a landmark event in the history of Sherpas in Sikkim. The Sherpa Association which is known as the Denzong Sherpa Association also then went on to express their gratitude to both the parties, considering it both 'historic' and 'bold' (Sikkim Observer, September 1-3, 1999). As a Sherpa candidate being fielded from



both the parties had succeeded for the very first time, this would go on to be of utmost significance towards creating an identity of the Sherpas in the politics of the state.

The victory of Mingma Sherpa as the Sikkim Sangram Parishad (SSP) candidate from Raktong-Tinket with a large majority also indicated that the Bhutia-Lepcha in the constituency had a very little role to play. This set yet another milestone for the Sherpas of Sikkim in the political realm. It was during the same time that the Congress (I) president Sonia Gandhi, looking at the situation in Sikkim, went on to demand reservation of seats for the Sherpas as well, during one of her visits to Gangtok (The Telegraph, July 12, 1999). However, the selection of a Sherpa from the Bhutia-Lepcha category led to a statewide protest from the Bhutia-Lepcha candidates (Chakraborty, 2000: 3807). This indicates the non-acceptance of the Sherpas to the Bhutia-Lepcha category in spite of being a part of the same category. Such results further led to strengthening the unity of Sikkim Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC) so as to check the gradual erosion if any, in the cultural identity and the political rights of the Bhutia-Lepcha minorities in Sikkim (ibid: 3807). The two committees also went on to the extent of taking up hunger strike and poll boycott. The committee could however not influence the elections.

Amidst such protests from the Bhutia-Lepchas, the next crucial question that arises is, would a Sherpa candidate be fielded again, in the State Assembly elections? Overall, what would be the further stand of the political parties regarding a Sherpa candidate? The reservation of seats in Sikkim Legislative Assembly has always been a very contentious political issue. The indigenous Lepchas were demanding 50 per cent of reserved seats for tribals. The Bhutia-Lepchas, in turn, believed that Article 371 (F) of the Indian Constitution provided an exclusive safeguard to the indigenous Bhutia-Lepchas of Sikkim and claimed that the seats provided in the assembly were not the tribal seats but the seats for Bhutia-Lepchas. Amidst such a political scenario the demand of Sherpas for reservation of 4 seats from the 12 Bhutia-Lepcha seats in the State Assembly, evoked mixed reactions from the Bhutia-Lepchas who were against further dilution of their identity and political privileges. Thus, the ethnic conflict over 12 reserved seats for candidates under the Bhutia-Lepcha category had become very crucial, which needed to be sorted out to avoid further rifts between the ethnic groups.

**Table 1: Ethnic Composition of the Legislators**

Ethnic group		1974	1979	1985	1989	1994	1999	
Lepcha	Schedu- led	09 (28.1)	04 (12.5)	03 (9.4)	04 (12.5)	05 (15.6)	04 (12.5)	40.6
Bhutia	Tribes	07 (21.9)	09 (28.1)	10 (31.2)	09 (28.1)	07 (21.9)	08 (25.00)	
Sherpa	(ST)	-	-	-	-	01 (3.1)	0.1 (3.1)	
Nepalese including Scheduled Castes		12 (50.00)	12+2 (59.4)	16+2 (56.2)	17.2 (59.4)	17+2 (59.4)	17+2 (59.4)	
Plainsman		-	-	01 (3.1)	-	-	-	
Total		32 (100)	32 (100)	32 (100)	32 (100)	32 (100)	32 (100)	

**Source:**

Report on the Elections to Sikkim Legislative Assembly General Election, 1979-80, 1984-85, 1989, 1994.

The above table clearly reveals the representation of the ethnic groups in the Sikkim State Legislature, after the integration of state with the Indian Union. It clearly reflects the relatively less representation of the Sherpas from the Bhutia-Lepcha seat, over the years.

**Identification of Limboos and Tamangs as Tribes**

The Limboos and the Tamangs both of whom were integrated into the Nepalese community had all long been fighting for a tribal status ever since the Bhutia-Lepchas were granted the same in 1978. Their culture and tradition were also similar to the other tribes. These two groups were eventually granted the required status in 2002. Politics of survival explains transformations and divorces and makes identity affiliations shift and thus identity is temporary, not permanent. Tribalism is both an ontological formation as well as a subjective ideology (Arora and Kinpgen, 2012: 441). However, this move evoked bitter resentment from the Bhutias and the Lepchas once again, who saw it as a threat to their indigeneity and were not willing to share it with any other ethnic group. According to an article in 'The Statesmen' dated January 20, 2003 "with the passing of a Bill to include Tamang and Limboo in the Schedule Tribe list in the Parliament, the Bhutia-Lepcha community have been feeling insecure". However, in spite of the Limboo and Tamang community being enlisted as the STs in the state, they

are still not entitled to claim or stand for elections from the 12 reserved seats for the Bhutia-Lepchas, who were in the ST category since 1978. Sarika Atreya in 'The Statesmen' dated February 2, 2003, stated that "though the Limboo and Tamang communities were now entitled to enjoy all other benefits under Article 342 of the Constitution still they are not entitled to enjoy the electoral rights conferred on the Bhutia-Lepchas under Article 371 (f) of the Constitution. At this juncture, the Sikkim Limboo Tamang Joint Action Committee (SLTJAC) raised their demands further for the reservation of seats in the Sikkim Assembly, as the failure to do the same would amount to depriving the two communities of their fundamental rights. The ST status would also be meaningless if they were not granted seat reservation in the State Assembly. However, till today the Limboos and the Tamangs are fighting and demanding for reservation of seats in the State Assembly. The Limboos who are one of the major, "indigenous tribe" previously enjoyed one reserved seat in the Sikkim Assembly during the monarchy. However, today they do not hold any post and are instead clubbed with the Nepali community, which comprises a heterogeneous group of several other communities, who vary linguistically, religiously and culturally. Therefore, "what these contestations clearly suggest is that indigeneity is intrinsically neither a sign of subalternity nor resistance but an assertive political statement (Arora, 2006: 4066).

Post the British intervention and specifically after the integration of the state to the Indian Union in 1975, there have been boundaries reinforced further between the three ethnic groups in Sikkim. While the Bhutia-Lepchas are feeling neglected due to the rising significance of the Nepalese in the administrative and political realm of the state and are suffering from a feeling of deprivation amidst rising power and number of the Nepalese. The Nepalese, on the other hand, feels that preferential treatments are still being implemented on the Bhutias-Lepchas, with the Nepalese still suffering from a step-motherly treatment in the affairs of the state.

### **Ethnic Boundaries between the Ethnic Groups: The Bhutia-Lepcha and Nepalese**

Looking at the ethnic profile and political history of Sikkim, it is but obvious that there are competitions between the various ethnic groups of the state. In addition to it the primordial features like cultural, religious and linguistic differences between the Bhutia-Lepcha and the Nepalese, further provides the objective basis for the ethnic

boundaries between them (Arora, 2006: 4046). Therefore, it is actually these boundaries between the three groups that transform them into distinct ethnic groups altogether. The majority ethnic boundary can be found between the Bhutia-Lepcha on one side and the Nepalese on the other side, with the latter still being considered immigrants by the former two groups, who consider themselves as 'the sons of the soil' or the 'indigenous groups'. "Barth also points to the fact that apart from dominant ethnic groups who created the appearance of cultural discontinuities to construct boundaries between 'us' and 'them', centrally valued institutions and activities also contribute to the boundary maintenance" (Barths Cited in Nepal, 2009). As rightly pointed out by Cohen (1969) that the instrumental role of ethnic identity is perpetuating socio-economic and political interests, the Bhutia-Lepcha have over the years instrumentally used the idiom of worshipping the sacred landscapes like mountains, lakes and land so as to contest the claim of being the actual 'sons of soil' as against the Nepalese. In contemporary Sikkim, sacred landscapes reflect and materially represents the politicisation of culture and ethnic identity which indicates the process of conflict and integration between groups and constitute the locus of ethnic-competition over resource-use in the context of state-directed development (Arora, 2006: 4068). These symbolic cultural dimensions of identity also further accentuate the politico-economic foundation of their identity and indigeneity (Arora, 2007: 199). The Nepalese, on the other hand, cite their contributions towards building up of present Sikkim and their economy so as to ascertain their claims over land and the landscapes. However, the ethnic boundaries that exist between the Bhutia-Lepchas and the Nepalese are, historically rooted ever since the invasion of Sikkim by the rulers of Nepal during the 18th and the 19th century.

These linguistic, political and cultural boundaries between the various groups play a role in differentiating various ethnic groups. "The situational selectivity of ethnic identity plays a crucial role in inter-ethnic relations (Arora, 2007: 197). An important characteristic of these boundaries is that stable, persisting and often vitally important social relations are maintained across such boundaries which are based on the dichotomized ethnic status. (Barths, 1969: 9).

However, the instrumental use of ethnicity is not just confined to the Bhutia-Lepchas, alone but to all the three groups including Nepalese who are taking up politics to further and fulfil their interests, in terms of affirmative action, job opportunities and educational opportunities. Ethnicity is a sense of ethnic identity which unites and also

simultaneously differentiates between the groups (Brass cited in Arora and Kinpogen, 2012).

### **The Denzong Sherpa Association and the Three Major demand of the Sherpas**

Identity, as a discourse of rights, is intimately connected to livelihood, entitlements and wellbeing. These discourses articulate political consciousness, encourage social action in order to challenge and submerge the dominant ideology (Gramsci Cited in Arora, 2007).

The existence of grievances among the heterogeneous ethnic groups led to the politicization and eventual mobilization of ethnicity. This mobilisation usually lead to the formation of ethnic organizations (political or non-political), where the socio-economic grievances of the minority groups could be accelerated. “The state plays a centra

l role in the determination of an identity as well as the extent to which a particular ethnic group is successful in achieving its goal” (Chettri, 2014, pg.215). Thus, the state is the supreme distributor of resource, which uses ethnicity as a political resource to partake in distributive measures. Therefore, ethnic associations, political parties and interest groups shape their agendas and activities around the state. Here, ethnic associations become an important instrument in the political system. It promotes inclusivity and political empowerment to the ones who have till then had not been traditionally political participants. As today, democracy has been growing in most of the politically set up states, the ethnic groups also do not hesitate to mobilize themselves against the state and to raise their voices against oppression, if they sense a feeling of discrimination and oppression in their state. Thus, there has been a cultural resurgence among ethnic or linguistic groups who conveys a loss of identity due to increased social pressure from dominant modern society (Narang, 1995: 36).

The Sherpas’ associations in Sikkim have also played an instrumental role over the years in voicing the demand of the Sherpas. The Denzong Sherpa Association established in 1984, being the most active one among them, has instrumentally brought forth various demands of the Sherpas over the years. In spite of these organizations claiming to be a ‘non-political’ one, the demands that it usually brings forth blurs the boundary between social and political, as they engage in activities that are both political and non-political. This provides an evidence of how their demands are seen as a natural

component of economic and political rights. The redress of ethnic interests and the fulfilment of demands also requires an organizational form of interest groups and unions to perpetuate stability (Arora and Kinngen, 2012: 431). The Sherpas in Sikkim over the years persistently have had three demands. The first demand is the demand for protection of land under the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917. The second demand is for the reservation of 4 seats in the State Assemblies out of the 12 seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas. The third demand is for a separate census representation of the Sherpas, who are till date included under the census of the Bhutias (Sikkim Herald, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017).

### **1. The Demand over Protection of Land under Revenue Order No.1 1917**

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, issued by Charles Bell, prevented the Bhutias and the Lepchas from selling, mortgaging or sub-letting of their lands to any person from outside the Bhutias-Lepchas, without the express sanction of the Durbar. Therefore, according to the Order, the Nepalese along with the eight other sub-groups of Bhutia like Chumbipa, Tromopa, Dophthapa, Yolmo, Kagate, Sherpa, Drukpa and Tibetan are not permitted to own or purchase land from Bhutias and Lepchas. This was the first law which dealt directly with the ethnic groups of Sikkim

The order was based on yet another order, known as Order No 1 of 1897, called upon by the then political officer John Claud White, at a time when the King of Sikkim was dispossessed of his powers. (Vandenhaksken, 2010: 174). It was also a period when conflicts between the ruling elite and the Nepalese settlement in Sikkim was on the rise. However, the latter paid taxes and were allowed to reside in Sikkim. The Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917 was directly the resulting fear among the people that the ‘indigenous tribes’ and castes would be endangered once it would come in contact with the Nepalese Hindu, whose population was steadily increasing. The order in Administrative Report for Sikkim 1933-34, used hereditary as a criterion for differentiating the Bhutias and the Lepchas from the outsiders, and it positioned them ‘naturally’ as subject to being endangered (ibid, 174).

The Sherpas of Sikkim over the years have demanded protection of their land under the Order. According to them, the Sherpa community of Sikkim is also defined under the Bhutia-Lepcha category but the Land Revenue Order No.1 does not include them (Sikkim Express, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017). According, to them, it is their legal right to be

included under the Order No.1. The Denzong Sherpa Association has even gone further to take up the matter with the Union Ministers. The association put forth the view that, in spite of the Sherpas' being declared as the Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978, the rights and privileges regarding the transfer of lands, enjoyed upon by Bhutia-Lepchas being ST has not been provided to the Sherpas. It is, however, pertinent to be noted that post-integration, Article 371 (F) was added to the Constitution which guaranteed special provisions for the newly formed state under the Indian Union. According to the Article "all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority" (Cited in Vandenhaksken,2010: 179). Going by the same provisions, the Sherpas' demand for protection of land under Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, would not be feasible, as it mentions that the Bhutia-Lepcha land can be purchased or sold only amongst the Bhutia and Lepcha communities in Sikkim. There is no mention of the Sherpas in this provision which dates back to 1917. However, on the contrary, according to the Sherpas spearheaded by the Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA), the inclusion of the Sherpa community within the definition of BL was, in fact, a historical fact dating back to 1891 when the first ever population Census was conducted in Sikkim. Since then the Sherpas have officially always been a part of the Bhutias (Sikkim Express, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017). Such claims are further strengthened by Sarkar (2017) in her book "The Sherpas Across Eastern Himalayas" where she stated that the Sherpas, were found in the region known as Dorji Ling (which is today famously known as Darjeeling) in 1800. They were then clubbed under the 'Bhotia' meaning the Bhutias who had come from Tibet (Sarkar, 2017: 122). Darjeeling was back then under the territoriality of Sikkim before being taken over by the British in 1835. Therefore, the Sherpa community was indeed included within the definition of Bhutias even before the introduction of the Land Act in 1917. Thus, the Land Revenue Order No.1 was something that came into existence much later in the year 1917. The DSA spokesperson, in his interview with the Sikkim Herald, stated that,

*If the CM is of the opinion that only Bhutia and Lepcha are covered by the Land Revenue Order No.1 then it is a threat to the other communities falling under the BL category as they too are not defined under the 1917 order. Thus, the demand for protection of the land belonging to the Sherpa community under Land Revenue Order*

*No, 1 is a legitimate demand which was pending for the last 40 years, he said (Sikkim Herald, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017).*

According to the Sikkim Express dated 18<sup>th</sup> August 2018, “the Union Government has taken up the demands of the Sherpa community and has further assured them protection and restoration of illegally transferred lands back to the Sherpa community.” The Denzong Sherpa Association also added that,

*The Centre has already issued notice to the State Government regarding the demand pursued by the Sherpa community of Sikkim. The inability of the state Government to reply to the centre is reflected in the speeches by the Chief Minister at Mangan said the association (Sikkim Herald, 16<sup>th</sup> July 2017).*

It is important to provide land protection to the Sherpa community under Land Revenue Order No.1, the failure to do so will amount to injustices being implemented on the Sherpa community which may lead to aggravating the ethnic divide and ethnic ventures within the Bhutia-Lepcha category.

The Revenue Order No. 1 is also a source of discontent between the Bhutia and Lepcha themselves. It is considered being biased towards the affluent Bhutia community. It may also be criticized on the grounds that, whereas the insiders cannot have claim over the land of Bhutia-Lepchas, big projects and people from outside Sikkim were graciously being welcomed to buy land belonging to any of the communities. A typical example can be given in case of a protected area of North Sikkim, which was opened for construction of hydropower projects, proposed by people from outside Sikkim. Such a move received severe criticism not only from the locals but from people all over Sikkim. Therefore, looking at the prevalence of such anomalous cases, we may assume that the Land Order No.1 of 1917 itself have proved to be a big façade, which is there in the name of protecting the ‘rights’ of the ‘indigenous communities’ of Sikkim namely the Bhutias and Lepchas. Such an Order further aggravates the already neglected and insignificant position of the Nepalese and other ethnic groups within the STs, amidst the dominant Bhutia-Lepcha. It also further distinguishes the boundaries between who is the real ‘son of the soil’ and the who is an ‘immigrant’.



## **2. Demand For Four Seats In The State Legislative Assembly**

The Sherpas over the years have been feeling aggrieved due to persistent non-representation of their community in the State Assembly. The Denzong Sherpa Association have been demanding for the reservation of 4 seats for the Sherpas from the 12 Bhutia-Lepcha and 1 Sangha seat, in the Legislative Assembly. However, the demand has continuously been turned down by the ruling Sikkim Democratic Government (SDF) Government headed by Pawan Chamling.

## **3. The Demand for Separate Census Representation**

In spite of the Sherpa being a negligible minority among the oldest inhabitants of the state, they do not have a separate census representation for themselves. They are till today still being included under the census representation of the Bhutias. Therefore, they have been demanding a separate census representation for themselves. However, having a distinct census representation of one's own community or ethnic group becomes very vital. As having a separate census ascertains the ethnic community's exact numerical strength and thereby legitimizes their demand for a proportionate share of reserved seats for political representatives, jobs in government employment, and seats in educational institutions (Arora, 2007: 215). A collection of reliable data of their population in the state becomes pivotal for groups in Sikkim. According to Anthony D. Smith in his article 'The Ethnic Source of Nationalism' he states that names are important, for not only self and self-identification but also for an expressive emblem of the collective personality. Until a collective cultural identity receives a proper recognition or name, it lacks in an important sense, a recognizable sense of community (both by members or outsiders). The Denzong Sherpa Association has hence requested the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring & Evaluation (DESMI) for a separate census of Sherpa population in Sikkim. According to a news in the Sikkim Express dated July 21, 2017, a delegation of Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) had even gone to the extent of calling on the National Commission of Scheduled Tribe Chairperson Nand Kumar Sai, demanding protection of the land and separate census for the tribal Sherpa community of Sikkim. It was further learnt that the commission issued the notice following a representation made by the association before the chairperson of the National Commission of Scheduled Tribe.

Looking at the above three cases and the ongoing demands for the same, one may assume that the very existence of the Sherpa community in Sikkim is in danger, as there are serious attempts on the suppression of the Sherpa community.

Insecurity over land, lack of control over resources, and the frustration over lack of ethnic representation in the census is something that the Sherpas in Sikkim have been facing for years. This has, in turn, led to a feeling of insecurity among the Sherpas of Sikkim. This ethnic minority community also lacks any sense of belongingness to any one group in Sikkim. While the group Sherpas have been included under the category of Bhutias, the Bhutias have all along condemned such an act, seeing it as a threat to their 'indigeneity' and a distortion of their distinct identities. The Sherpas always find themselves struggling amidst the identification of 'self' in the context of 'other'. The Bhutias put forth the argument that the Sherpas cannot be included under the Bhutias, as the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917, prevents the purchase or sale of Bhutia-Lepcha land by any other community including the Sherpas, who were even labelled as Nepalese at one point of time. While such policies protected and transformed the Bhutias and Lepchas into indigenous groups of Sikkim is a sheer discrimination for groups other than the Bhutia-Lepchas.

Contrary to the views of the Bhutias, the Sherpas were within the Bhutia category ever since the first 1891 census of Sikkim, when the population of Sikkim was divided into 13 groups (Risley cited in Arora, 2007). There were then four categories that were then recognized, namely the Bhutia-Lepcha, Limboo, Nepali and others while the others like Chumbipa, Dophthapa, Dukpa, Kagatey, Sherpa, Tibetan, Tromopo and Yolmo were included under the Bhutia category even then. However, in 1931 all the other groups who were not Bhutia-Lepchas were given the tag of a Nepali (Arora, 2007: 203). Such a tag was a gross injustice not only to the Sherpas but also to groups like the Chumbipa, Tromopa, Dophthapa, Yolmo, Kagate, Drukpa, Tibetan, Limboos and Tamangs who shared no cultural, religious or linguistic proximity with the Nepalese. It was, even more, glaring injustice to the Limboo community, who were tagged as one among the Nepalese immigrant. However, as stated by Narang (2005), in most of the cases the state even refuses to recognize the limited traditional rights of the minority group.

### **The Sherpas in Search of Identity**

This long-term negligence, lack of acceptance and injustices to the Sherpas led to what Narang (1995) termed 'cultural deprivation' amongst the Sherpas. According to the Cultural Deprivation theory, one of the significant inducements to ethnicity comes from the feeling of insecurity felt among the ethnic minorities. These ethnic minorities fear that they would be lost amidst the sea of majority or the dominant groups. The insecurity may be felt due to various reasons. Firstly, they may feel insecure due to the discrimination and oppression by the majority. Secondly, the state may also identify itself with the majority or the dominant groups and thirdly there may arise homogenization process due to modernization leading to the creation of synthetic state culture (Narang, 1995: 35). The first two types are attitudinal and the last two are behavioural discriminations (Narang, 1995: 35). In the case of Sherpas of Sikkim, the first two types of insecurities are felt among them, as the several years of Bhutia hegemony over the political and administrative realms of the state has led to the rising spiral of competitive mobilization between different ethnic groups and social organizations. This dominant minority, namely the Lepchas and specifically the Bhutias, have been sharpening their identity, with most of the state-makers in their favour. This has been further escalated with the support of leading political parties and other social and cultural organizations of the state, who in a way are further contributing towards making Sikkim a mono-artefact state of Bhutias. Ethnic identification has become a decisive variable among groups in their relationship and more in their quest for the political privilege (Kom, 2011: 162). However, in today's scenario, the ethnic group discrimination or oppression are found in varying degrees and are constantly changing. As per the changing time and scenario, Leo Driedgere pointed out four types of discrimination implemented by the majority or the dominant groups against the minority. The four types of discriminations were on the grounds of prejudicial treatment, differential treatment, disadvantaging treatment and denial of desire. The Sherpas of Sikkim are at present facing all four kinds of discriminations.

The Sherpas are bound to feel inferior and endangered and are also bound to cultivate fear and a loss of their identity amidst such prevailing situations in Sikkim. The dominant minority namely the Bhutias who are at the political forefront and have an upper hand in politics have always been questioning the so-called privileges or rights of Sherpas. They also have a tendency of going to the extent of imposing their own

hegemony and opinions in the socio-economic and political realms of society. Such measures naturally arouse a strong pressure on the Sherpas to assimilate into a united whole to fight against the dominance of the Bhutias over them. “Unfortunately in the inter-and intra-ethnic rivalry or conflicts with the state, rather than acting as an impartial arbiter, to the state assumes the role of sword arm of the prominent ethnic group” (Narang, 1995: 35).

### **Language and the Question of Identity**

Language and culture are often referred to as ethnicity, which mattered the most and was hence the most pronounced marker of distinctiveness (Xaxa, 2005:1365). Language has thus played a pivotal role in the ethnicity of Sikkim, especially amidst a scenario where distinct language, culture, script and music plays a role in circulating a trope of economic backwardness to claim rights and entitlements in the state. Till the 1850s the language of Lapche and Tibetan were used in the administrative affairs of Sikkim (Arora, 2007: 206). As mentioned in the previous chapter, even the British political officers had to undergo a language proficiency test in Tibetan. In 1911, Charles Bell, the then Political officer of Sikkim, went on to declare that as 75 per cent of the Sikkim’s population were Nepali, there were efficient administrative requirements for competent Nepali speaking citizens. This agreement went on to signal that the language for the administrative purpose was to be the Nepali language in the 20<sup>th</sup> century (ibid: 206). With the passage of time, there was an increase in Nepali nomenclatures being given to places in Sikkim, which were till then known by Bhutia-Lepcha names (ibid: 206). The Nepali language narrowed the boundaries that existed between various ethnic groups and in turn turned out to be a means of bonding for the ethnic groups. It served as a source of inter-ethnic relations (Arora, 2007: 206). It also brought about an identity of the Nepali community in the Indian diaspora. However, the late 1980s witnessed a cultural revival of the tribe in Sikkim, with the Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus (and some other groups) establishing their tribal associations further and re-establishing their languages, resuming their forgotten rituals and practices.

The four initially recognized languages in Sikkim were Bhutia, Lepcha, Limboo and Nepali which were taught today in various schools of the state from the time of the monarchy. The Sikkim Official Languages (Amendment) Act 1995 further recognised Newari, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Sherpa and Tamang as the official languages of the State

(Thapa, 2000: 100). We today find 13 languages in which the Sikkim daily 'The Sikkim Herald' is issued, the Sherpa language being one of them.

While language is certainly a key component for the formation of identity, it is but sad to mention that the Sherpas in Sikkim struggled to assert their individuality in terms of language. Sikkim being a multi-ethnic society has deep influence coming from languages like Nepali, Bhutia, Limboo and Lepcha languages that form the four major dominant language used in the state, with Nepali being the lingua franca. These languages have a direct influence on the people of Sikkim. The Sherpas' have therefore fought to affirm their separate identity amidst constant interactions with other ethnic groups. Although language is often considered just a part of a culture, and not the very core of an identity especially in a multi-ethnic state, it still is considered of paramount importance for the formation of an identity for the upcoming generation of the Sherpas.

The Sherpa language belonging to the larger Sino-Tibetan language family is a pre-literate language. It is marginally a tonal language which is best written and represented in *Sambota* (Tibetan script) Script. The language has been evolved over thousands of years in its own span and space resulting in a considerable size of vocabulary (4000+ content words), and unique phrasal or and clausal structures (Sherpa, 2010). The Denzong Sherpa Association and its members have even gone so far as to produce a Sherpa Multilingual Dictionary. In Sikkim, especially in formal domains like education, administration, judiciary and mass media, the role of Sherpa language is evident. In the educational sphere, the Sherpa language is taught as a subject in the Upper Primary School level, that is till the VIIIth standard. One may also find verbal interactions in the language between the teachers and students. The state Government also imparts training to the officials in the language for smooth running of Administration and building up of a cordial relation with the Sherpa people. The local channels also telecast Sherpa folk music. The Government of Sikkim further encourages the Sherpas to sustain their unique cultural identity, through cultural programmes and celebration of festivals (Baskaran n.d: 152). The Sikkim Government patronises preparation of glossaries in the language and extends necessary financial aids to the welfare association of Sherpa for the purpose. In the legislative Assemblies too, the members of the legislature are allowed to converse in Sherpa and their versions simultaneously are translated into Nepali and also in English to reach out to the non-Sherpa speakers by the translator (ibid: 152-153).

Language has been playing a pivotal role in unifying diverse forces, especially in situations where the communities have been fragmented and divided by religion and occupation (Arora, 2006: 206). Language also plays the role of acquiring an identity and uniqueness as it assumes a mark of cultural uniqueness, as without a language of one's own, there can be no distinct culture or people/nation (Karlsson cited in Arora, 2007). However, the irony of Sikkim lies in the fact that despite such ethnic-linguistic consciousness, a very few in Sikkim use their mother language in daily discourse, few even do not manage to read or write their own scripts. Thus, Nepali has become a lingua franca of Sikkim surpassing all other 'indigenous' languages. Therefore, Sikkim clearly reflects a linguistic symbolism rather than a linguistic proficiency.

### **Conclusion**

We can see how culture is instrumentally being used as a political tool to affirm 'indigeneity' and to challenge the domination of others by reconstructing the identities in history so as to claim a historicity (Arora, 2007: 216). We can also see how the 'politically marginalised groups', namely the Sherpas, in order to reconstruct their identity discourses have galvanised Governmental and organizational support for their resource-related struggles, revolving not just merely over land, forests and fields, but also over seats in legislatures, jobs in the administrative services including the police and the judiciary and demand for separate census representation. Thus, identity is such an entity that can be understood only as a process. Therefore, one's social identity is never a final or settled matter; instead, it is a contestable construction of ethnic groups (Jenkins cited in Arora and Kinpgen, 2012). It is such an aspect which can be internalised, shaped, re-constructed and transformed over time and hence is very dynamic in nature. The asserting of politics and identifying the self and differentiating from the others and distancing from historical affiliations has become an endless quest in Sikkim, which has led to continuous ethnic differences among ethnic groups within Sikkim. Identity politics, or the politics of identity, is also something that is self-defeating, and it also stimulates an endless process of deconstruction. The Sherpas have been successful in creating their own unique identity, in spite of finding themselves amidst being clubbed with the Bhutia and Nepalese at different times. They also have been able to gain recognition in the political and administrative realm of the state, even though the path towards achieving the same was not an easy job.

## CONCLUSION

In India, in spite of a liberal democratic polity, communities and ethnic groups still remain powerful as well as assertive in the state for want of self-governance (Balikci, 2008: 309). The assertion of the ethnic interests and identity has constantly gained momentum and is seen entering the discourse of electoral politics of the state. Sikkim after being integrated as the 22<sup>nd</sup> state of India in 1975, is no exception to it. We have over the past seen how ethnic aspirations and collective identifications have further enhanced the ethnic politics of the state and have further culminated in the conflict of interest among ethnic groups. Sikkim's politics over the years have been marred by communalism which dominated the political scenes ever since the emergence of political parties in the state from the 1940s. Most of these political parties were driven by ethnic groups, which further escalated the already existing ethnic divide between the ethnic communities. Thus, the ethnic divide or tensions between ethnic groups is not a new phenomenon but is something that finds its roots ever since the pre-theocratic era, as brought forth in the chapters.

With such a backdrop, the study has critically tried to analyse the evolving nature of ethnicity and ethnic politics in a multi-ethnic state like Sikkim. It has thereby analysed the position of ethnic groups in the politics of the state and how it has led to their identity formation, specifically taking the case of the Sherpa of Sikkim, on whom the study has been centred. As can be inferred from the third chapter that the Sherpas in Sikkim over the years have faced marginalization, misrepresentation and acquired a very insignificant position in the state. This study has critically analysed the position of Sherpas over the years in the politics of Sikkim and how it has led to their identity formation. However, as put forth by Allahar (2001) the identity of an individual speaks subjectively based on how they feel or how they interpret their position in the social context, thus the political dimension of identity is fostered by the definition of 'self' as put forth by 'others' (ibid: 197). Therefore, the study has thrown light on the Sherpas as well as other groups namely the Bhutia-Lepchas who are considered the 'indigenous' groups of Sikkim and the Nepalese who are considered as the 'immigrants'.

In the first chapter, one can see a shift in the Sherpa identity from being agriculturists and pastoralists in North Eastern Nepal to becoming 'high altitude potters' and moving on to become professionals in mountaineering specifically highlighting the case in Darjeeling. This was possible after the successful expedition of

Tenzing Norgay Sherpa in 1953, after which the Sherpas received worldwide recognition. However, there has been a tendency over the years of associating and recognizing the Sherpas with the profession that they have carried out, that is being ‘high altitude porters’, in which they gained immense popularity. Therefore, they have over the years been stereotyped by their profession, where their profession has come to define their profession.

The Sherpas of Darjeeling today are also wanting a shift in their profession from being ‘high altitude porters’ due to the dangers associated with it. During the course of the expedition, many of them have undergone physical and mental faculties, with others even losing their lives. These Sherpas undergoing physical and mental faculties are not provided with any financial support (Chakraborty, 2017) Therefore, during the Gorkhaland Movement<sup>18</sup>, of the 1980s under the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), the Sherpas also formed communities in order to voice their demands for being entitled to equal opportunity in the socioeconomic aspects of the state (ibid). As stated by Jamling Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, who is the son of the legendary Tenzing Norgay Sherpa, “so, if you manage to come after 100 years, you will find someone of the community is still working as a guide for mountaineers” (Chakraborty, 2017)

The Sherpas in Sikkim comprises the ethnic minorities and thus occupies an invisible position in the ethnic composition of the state. Before understanding the political position of Sherpas in Sikkim, the dissertation has critically analysed the political development of the region over the years, which plays an equally vital role in the formation of identity of any community or an ethnic group. For a wider understanding of the context, the work throws light on the pre-theocratic era starting as early as 1200, when one could find the prevalence of the three aboriginal communities namely the Lepchas, the Magars and the Limboos. The Bhutias who came from Kham in Tibet, along with the Lepchas were the two groups who were later considered the ‘indigenous’ groups. This period was marked by ethnic tensions between the aboriginal

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<sup>18</sup> Gorkhaland movement is a linguistic movement which has been going on for decades in the northern region of West Bengal. Its supporters demand for a separate Nepalese-speaking region and autonomy from West Bengal. The movement is also backed by issue of ethnic politics and a quest for their own separate identity amidst the Bengali speaking majority in the state. The movement can be dated back to several decades which continues till today. (15/7/2018)

<https://www.firstpost.com/india/watch-darjeeling-and-gjims-separate-statehood-demands-all-you-need-to-know-about-history-of-gorkhaland-movement-3543935.html>



communities and the then newly migrated Bhutias who taking advantage of the docile nature of these aboriginal communities went on to rule over Sikkim for the next 300 years starting from 1642 to 1975. Ethnic tensions in the state further escalated when the British came to the scene and when they made Sikkim a protectorate state under them. The influx of Nepalese into Sikkim was further encouraged by the British during the 18<sup>th</sup> and the 19<sup>th</sup> century, which led to complete change in the demography of the state and made the two 'indigenous' groups namely the Bhutia-Lepchas the minority group in their homeland. It was then that the Revenue Order No.1 of 1917 was introduced by the then British Political Officer Charles Bell to protect the 'indigenous' status of the Bhutia-Lepchas amidst the growing number of influx of Nepalese from Nepal. Therefore, the British played a pivotal role in the crystallization of identity of the ethnic groups in the state.

Sikkim and its ethnic groups namely the Bhutias, Lepchas and the Nepalese had recognized the significance of ethnicity as a political resource which was further used as a negotiating tool. Eventually, it was the result of such ethnic divide in the state, that led to the integration of Sikkim with the Indian Union. This was the result of a large and a prolonged ethnic divide and dissatisfaction between the Bhutia-Lepcha on the one side and the Nepalese on the other. Thus, it was the Nepalese under the leadership of Kazi Lhendup Dorjee that went on to demand the integration of Sikkim with the Indian Union. This was directly the result of discontent and dissatisfaction due to the marginalization and misrepresentation they faced under the rule of the Bhutia monarch.

The introduction of reservation on political, economic and social forums of the state, made ethnic identity a more attractive tool. There was the emergence of new groups, coming in the forefront of politics. However, there were few groups who were still in search of their identity, one among which were the Sherpas of Sikkim. The extent of their influence in the state is evident from the scanty reference on the Sherpas in the political history of Sikkim, as they were hardly given the opportunity of representation in the political and administrative realms of the state. They have, therefore, acquired a very insignificant position in the state and have continuously faced marginalization and misrepresentation not only from the state but also from other ethnic groups in Sikkim. Such factors foster a serious question on the identity of the Sherpas in Sikkim over the years.

The Scheduled Tribe order of 1978, expanded the category of Bhutias to further include groups like the Sherpa, the Yolmo, Dukpa, Dophapa, the Kagatry and the Chumbiapa (Arora, 2007: 199), all of whom tracks their origin to Tibet. Discourses indicate that tribal identities depended on exclusions and inclusions, expressions of territoriality, indigeneity and belongingness to the landscape, and their recognition by the state. (ibid: 216). This platform gave the Sherpas a new identity, as they could now represent themselves through their seats in the ST group, which was later met by protests from the Bhutias. The Representation of People (Amendment) Ordinance” 1979 which laid down the seat distribution on ethnic lines, made 32 State Assembly seats of which 12 seats were reserved for the Bhutia-Lepcha community (BL), 1 for the Sangha (monasteries) 2 for the Scheduled Castes, and the remaining 17 were considered as ‘general’ seats, in which any group could contest including the business community from the plain regions of Indian. Thus, the Sherpas being included under the Bhutias could henceforth field from among the 12 seats reserved for the Bhutia-Lepchas exclusively.

Due to such reforms, the Sherpas for the very first time had their representatives fielded from the Bhutia-Lepcha seat in 1994 state elections. This proved to be a landmark event in the political representation of Sherpas in Sikkim. Such acts were, however, met with further protests from the Bhutia-Lepcha specifically after the victory of one of the Sherpa candidates during the election. Such continuous protests from the Bhutias indicated the unacceptance of the Sherpas in the Bhutia-Lepcha category, to the extent that it led to the coming up of and further strengthening of the Sikkim Bhutia-Lepcha Apex Committee (SIBLAC), to check the gradual erosion if any, in the cultural identity and the political rights of the Bhutia-Lepcha minorities in Sikkim (ibid: 3807). There were a few crucial questions that arose due to such reaction from the Bhutias. Firstly, would a Sherpa candidate be fielded again, in the State Assembly elections from the Bhutia-Lepcha seat? Overall, what would be a further stand of the political parties regarding a Sherpa candidate? Such dissatisfactions amongst the ethnic groups led to the politicization and mobilization of ethnicity, which in turn led to the formation of ethnic organizations (political or non-political). In the case of Sherpas the, Denzong Sherpa Association (DSA) established in 1984, united the Sherpas and provided a platform for voicing their demands. Therefore, the ethnic association became an important instrument in the political system.

In addition to the demand for representation of Sherpas in the State Assemblies, they have over the years also been demanding for protection of land under the Revenue Order No. 1 of 1917. According to the Order no other community except the Bhutia-Lepchas, could buy, sell or mortgage land amongst themselves. Therefore, all other communities including the Sherpas were barred from acquiring the land belonging to a Bhutia or a Lepcha. The Sherpas according to the Land Order No.1 were at one point of time even clubbed under the Nepalese as anyone besides a Bhutia-Lepcha were considered an 'outsider' or an 'immigrant' which is usually used to address the Nepalese. The Denzong Sherpa Association put forth the arguments, against the regressive Land Order No.1 stating that the Sherpas were declared the Scheduled Tribes under the Constitution of (Sikkim) Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978, but were clubbed under the Bhutia community as early as in 1891. Such remarks were further strengthened by Sarkar (2017), when she mentioned about the inclusion of Sherpas in the Bhutia category since the 1800s. Through such claims, the rights and privileges regarding the protection, ownership and purchase of lands, should also be enjoyed upon equally by Sherpas. As even if one follows the Article 371 (F) according to which "all laws in force immediately before the appointed day in the territories comprised in the State of Sikkim or any part thereof shall continue to be in force therein until amended or replaced by a competent legislature or competent authority" (Cited in Vandenhaksken,2010: 179), the Sherpas were still included under the Bhutia category as early as in the 1800s.

The Sherpas have also been demanding for a separate census representation, as they have all along been included under the census of Bhutias. As today having a separate census representation becomes the foremost marker of identity for any group as it helps determine factors such as population, literacy rate, occupation and so on. According to Smith (1981), until a collective cultural identity receives a proper recognition or name, it lacks an important and a recognizable sense of community (both by members or outsiders).

The misrepresentation, marginalization and 'othering' meted by the Sherpas over the year have led to what Narang (1995) would call 'cultural deprivation' among them. They have all along undergone a feeling of insecurity and misrepresentation. They constantly fear that they would be lost in the sea of majority or the dominant group, due to the experience of discrimination and oppression meted to them. Thus, the

Sherpa are bound to feel inferior and endangered, which led them to further cultivate fear and loss of their identity

Further, as we have seen that the political history and ethnic profile of Sikkim witnessed a high level of competition and dissatisfaction among the ethnic groups in the state. Such competition has also given way to ethnic conflict with a cold war like situation that persists to exist within the ethnic groups over the years. In addition to it the primordial features like cultural, religious and linguistic differences between the Bhutia-Lepcha and the Nepalese, all the more escalates the objective basis for the ethnic boundaries between them (Arora, 2006: 4046).

Amidst such ethnic tensions in the state over the years, the Nepali language emerged as the figure which brought the different ethnic groups much closer to each other. After Nepali become the lingua franca of the state it played the role of narrowing the boundaries that exist between various ethnic groups. However, the Nepali language went on to surpass all other languages as it was used in daily interactions by almost all the ethnic groups namely the Bhutias-Lepchas and Nepalese. Such a case of Sikkim reflects a linguistic symbolism rather than a linguistic proficiency. Language comprises the very core of an identity, especially in a multi-ethnic state. It also plays a pivotal role in the ethnicity of the state, especially amidst a scenario where distinct language, culture, script and music play a role in circulating a troupe of economic backwardness, to claim rights and entitlements in the state. Till the 1850s the language Lapche of Lepchas and Tibetan of Bhutias were used in the administrative affairs of Sikkim (Arora, 2007: 206). The four initially recognized languages thereafter were Bhutia, Lepcha, Limoo and Nepali, that were taught in various schools of the state since the time of the monarchy. The Sikkim Official Languages (Amendment) Act 1995 further recognised Newari, Rai, Gurung, Magar, Sherpa and Tamang as the other official languages of the State (Thapa, 2000: 100). Therefore, we today find 13 official languages with the Sherpa language being one of them. The Sherpa language belongs to the larger Sino-Tibetan language family and is hence a preliterate one. It is marginally tonal and is best written and represented in *Sambota* (Tibetan script) Script. The language has been evolved over thousand years in its own span and space resulting in a considerable size of vocabulary (4000+ content words), and unique phrasal or and clausal structures (Sherpa, 2010). The Sherpa over the years struggled to assert their individuality in language, amidst a multi-ethnic society specifically dominated by

Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha and the Limboo language. The The Denzong Sherpa Association and its members, however, went as far as to produce a Sherpa Multilingual Dictionary. In Sikkim, especially in formal domains like education, administration, judiciary and mass media, the role of Sherpa language is evident today.

However, while discussing on language as an important aspect of identity, it also becomes important to bring to notice that very few ethnic groups in Sikkim use their mother language in their daily discourse, with the majority not knowing how to read or write in their scripts. Such phenomenon became prevalent in Sikkim after Nepali became its lingua franca. While on the other hand, the Nepali language played the role of blurring the existing boundaries between the ethnic groups, it also at the same time surpassed all other languages, hence creating no space for any other language. Few people who can read, write and converse in their language also prefers to instead use Nepali in their day to day lives and often opts to learn Nepali in school. Such a phenomenon in Sikkim directs towards the various complexities and problems that may lead to identity crises in the future. As language and culture are often referred to as ethnicity, which matters the most and is hence is the most pronounced marker of distinctiveness for people (Xaxa, 2005:1365). Therefore, language is certainly a key component for the formation of identity. So, the prevalence of disappearing significance of other languages and the trend of giving preference to the usage of Nepali over their own language are specifically prevalent among the youth population of Sikkim. Such trends further open up serious avenues for academic enquiry.

Considering the significance of ethnic politics in Sikkim, there is a need on the part of Sherpas to elaborately and adequately understand their socio-economic and political rights in the state. There is also a need on the part of Sherpas to come in unity and form more organizations and associations to cater to their needs and demands. Only then can they bare the capacity of defining and promoting a distinct 'Sherpa' identity for themselves in the politics of the state. Once, this is ensured the Sherpas will also not lose their hold in the political and administrative realms of Sikkim. They would in turn also overcome the misrepresentation, marginalization and the 'othering' they have been facing over the years in the state and in turn would be able to overcome the feeling of cultural deprivation.

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