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**Ethnic Politics in the Nepali Public Sphere: Three Cases  
from the Eastern Himalaya**

**Thesis Submitted for the Degree of  
Doctor of Philosophy**

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2013**

## **Thesis Abstract**

Ethnic identity plays a fundamental role in the political processes, development strategies and functioning of the state in the Himalayan areas of Sikkim, Darjeeling and eastern Nepal, which are geographically contiguous but politically separate. The eastern Himalayan borderland is a geographical continuum interconnected by the history of migration from Nepal, colonisation, settlement and in recent times by the political upheaval on the basis of ethnicity. Each of these areas has experienced different facets of Nepali identity politics, a trans-border phenomenon which has not only had political repercussions on a regional level but also contributed to the history and identity formation of the entire region.

The Nepali ethnic group is an ethno-linguistic category, a meta-identity which subsumes numerous ethnic groups under it. It is organized around the Hindu caste system and unified by the Nepali language. Controversial in its origins, this ethnic group is now undergoing an intense re-definition leading to a variation in the political articulation of ethnicity. Based on qualitative data gathered in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal the present research is a comparative analysis of the nexus between ethnicity and politics in South Asia. This thesis contests the narrow, parochial and limited frameworks that have been used to study the region and highlights the enactment of politics in an area of high geo-political importance which is located at the periphery of the nation-state of both Nepal and India. The thesis narrates, discusses and analyses how Nepalis in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal use their ethnicity as a political resource, albeit in very different ways. The variety in political outcomes within a single ethnic group reveals the complex nature of ethnicity and the symbiotic relationship between ethnicity and politics.

The case of the Nepalis of the eastern Himalayas is a study of the processes and manifestations of ethnic politics, the various structures and institutions that facilitate identity based politics but most importantly, the resurgence of ethnic politics in rapidly globalizing countries of South Asia.

## Acknowledgments

Writing this thesis required more than just the ability to analyse data and make coherent arguments. The most important element was to have faith in myself and my work. In the past three years I have learnt to believe in myself and it would not have been possible without the help of all those who believed in me even before I did myself.

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## **List of Abbreviations**

ABGL	Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League
AKRS	Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh
BGP	Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh
DGHC	Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council
GJM	Gorkha Janmukti Morcha
GNLF	Gorkha National Liberation Front
ILO	International Labour Organization
KYC	Kirat Yakthung Chumlung
MBC	Most Backward Classes
MNO	Mongol National Organization
NEFIN	Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities
NFDIN	Nepal Federation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities
OBC	Other Backward Classes
SC	Scheduled Caste
SDF	Sikkim Democratic Front
SSEC	State Socio-Economic Census
ST	Scheduled Tribe
VDC	Village Development Committee

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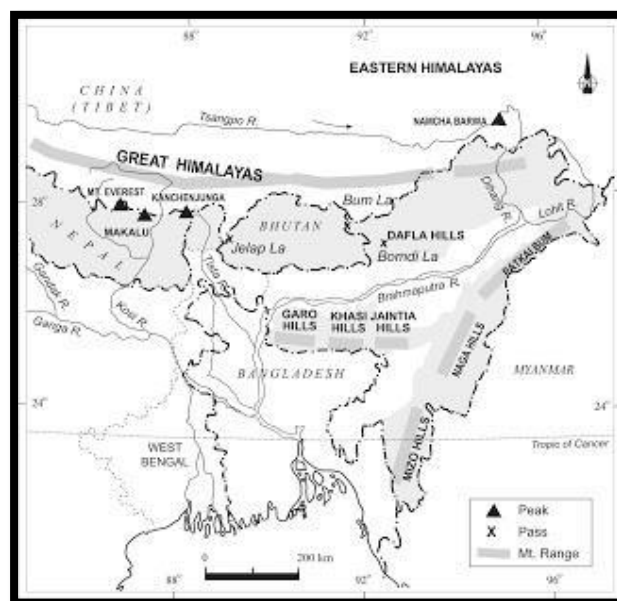
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# LOCATING THE EASTERN HIMALAYA

## Eastern Himalaya in South Asia



Source: Administrative Atlas of India

## Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal





## *Introduction*

This thesis is a critical examination of the politics of a region whose analysis by outsiders has, more often than not, been mired in myths, stereotypes and generalizations. It is a study of the enactment of ethnic politics, its use and impact on the different groups and individuals who are located in the region. Whilst answering larger analytical questions regarding ethnic politics, this thesis engages in a comparative study of the Nepalis<sup>1</sup> living in three different political units – Sikkim and Darjeeling District both in India and Ilam District in eastern Nepal. It aims to demonstrate the interaction between structures, processes and ethnic groups that promote the ethnic framework in the articulation of socio-economic grievances leading to variation in the manifestation of politics within a single ethnic group.

The thesis focuses on the relationship between the state and ethnic groups in order to make two important points. Firstly; that the state and ethnic groups are interconnected through their mutual use of ethnic identity in politics and secondly, that there exists a broad structure for the re-distribution of economic and political goods, usually accessed through systems of patronage, which acts as the ultimate driving force behind ethnic politics. Taken together, these points suggest that ethnic politics is a culmination of interaction between the state and ethnic groups, primarily over control and access to economic and political resources. This has led to the emergence of new forms of political capital and to a change in the bases of political contention in the rapidly globalizing countries of South Asia.

The case of the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya establishes that ethnic politics is increasingly becoming a political norm in South Asia. This development has led to a change in the modes of self-representation of groups which is conceptualised and formed around essentialised markers established by the state. Through the study of the Nepalis of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal, this thesis contributes to existing literature on ethnic politics that focuses on the socially constructed and instrumental nature of ethnic groups and furthers the discussion by showing how the state and its incentive structures can bring about a variation in the articulation of ethnic politics. Emphasizing the Constructivist argument concerning the socially constructed nature of ethnicity the thesis shows that ethnic politics is dependent on the

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<sup>1</sup>The citizens of the country Nepal are also known as Nepalis but in order to avoid confusion over the usage of the term, I will refer to the citizens of Nepal as Nepalese while Nepali will be used to denote a belonging to an ethno-linguistic group, the membership of which originates in but is not limited to Nepal.

social construction and ethnic framing of powerful sentiments and grievances which have legitimacy and potency only during a particular period and in the presence of certain catalysts. Whilst acknowledging the impact of geographical factors on the development and enactment of identity, this thesis contends that the variation in ethnic articulation is a result of different political, economic and social factors that make one identity more beneficial as well as viable in particular contexts. This thesis uses a multi-dimensional approach to the study of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya and thus takes into account social, political, economic and cultural factors that affect identity choices and concomitantly identity politics.

This thesis originated from my experiences as a student at Delhi University, India. It began with being viewed differently. My social identity was attached to my physical attributes with my Mongoloid face somehow not conforming to the idea of an 'Indian'. Since unity in diversity is a national trope the problem did not lie in looking different. Despite the stereotypes of being a morally corrupt, dog-eating, tribal quota student, being labelled a 'chinky' was relatively tolerable compared to being asked if I was from Nepal. For me and millions of Indians with Nepali heritage, in spite of having been born and raised in India, the question, 'are you from Nepal?' had a particular sting to it. Not only did it question my nationality, my belonging to the Indian nation but it also raised questions about myself. Who was I? I was an Indian but not considered as one. I was not a citizen of Nepal but I could also not deny my cultural connections to it. It was at Delhi University that I started using the term 'Sikkimese' to answer questions about my identity and avoid lengthy, frustrating answers.

I am from Sikkim, a tiny state bordering China, Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal. Previously an independent Himalayan kingdom, it became a part of India on the 16<sup>th</sup> May, 1975. In Sikkim there are three primary ethnic groups- the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis and the label 'Sikkimese' has been appropriated by the Bhutia community who use it primarily to distinguish themselves from the Tibetans who settled in Sikkim after the Chinese takeover of Tibet in the 1950s. Therefore, in Sikkim I belonged to the upper caste Nepali group, descendent of a migrant community who for generations have been held responsible for the abrogation of the monarchy and the loss of Sikkimese independence, a point of contention which will be discussed in the later chapters. Belonging to the larger group of Indian-Nepalis, I also had the option of identifying myself as a Gorkha. Although fluctuating between Sikkimese and Nepali, at no point have I ever identified myself as a 'Gorkha', despite the 'identity crisis' and confusion with the Nepalese citizens which this term is supposed to remedy. With no military



background or any sense of attachment to the term, I instead chose to oscillate between ‘Sikkimese’ and ‘Nepali’ rather than use a term which would open me up to more curiosity and questions that I cannot satisfy.

An undeniable fact, albeit one often considered politically inconvenient, is that the history of the Nepalis living in Sikkim and Darjeeling is obviously linked to Nepal. While an Indian passport might solve the existential and administrative queries in regard to my official, national identity, the diversity within the group I belonged to (Nepali) complicated these questions further. My personal identity flux and further experiences of ‘identity switching’ in Bhutan and Nepal have all finally become crystallised in this thesis which aims to understand ethnic politics in three geographically interconnected yet different political units. This thesis is based on my refusal to identify with a certain bounded category, thereby challenging the notion of ethnicity itself. I myself am a gamut of identities. This led me to question what the factors were that led me to choose one identity over another and even if there were no social or political repercussions, in what environments did I claim a particular identity and why did I feel it was important to do so?

The geographical continuum of the eastern Himalaya hosts an intricate mosaic of peoples who, despite international and other political boundaries, share more similarities than differences. This thesis focuses on Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal, three small but geographically and historically interconnected areas. Not only do they share borders and histories with each other but, as the thesis will reveal, they also share some elements of contemporary politics, especially the use of ethnic identity in negotiations with the state. As a trans-border phenomenon, the Nepalis have contributed to the history of state formation in the entire Himalayan region, especially the eastern half which stretches from central Nepal to north-eastern India. By adopting an approach that focuses on the political economy of the region, alongside its historical, geographical and anthropological aspects, this research aims to study how identity (especially ethnicity) underpins local, regional as well as national politics, governance and development.

The research focuses on the use of ethnic identity as a political resource by the Nepalis of Sikkim, Darjeeling and eastern Nepal. Nepalis in each of these areas have encountered different adversaries, socio-political conditions and finally, political realities on the basis of

their ethnicity. The thesis does not take Nepali ethnic identity as a static given and rather than focus on the various modes of identity construction, it studies the usage of this identity for political negotiation with the state. In doing so, it concentrates on the processes and expressions of ethnic politics.

One of the main themes of the thesis is to break the stereotypical frameworks of pre-defined group boundaries, loyalties and simplistic understandings of the Nepalis and their relation with the wider socio-political structures. These perspectives abound in the literature, through which the Nepalis as well as the politics of the region have been constructed and reproduced- a process of historical reification. This thesis aims to elaborate the argument that the manner in which the Nepalis position themselves in relation to other ethnic groups or even within the same group, the state and other external structures is not monolithic but rather dynamic and that the socio-political evolution of the Nepalis has been influenced both by material as well as cultural elements in their surroundings.

As will be discussed in the proceeding chapters, the creation of the Nepali ethnic group began as a project of political consolidation in the Kingdom of Gorkha through ritualistic incorporation of different ethnic groups within the Hindu caste system. Once this ritual and economic incorporation was institutionalised, the resulting political construction had a massive impact on determining the social life and economic status of the people incorporated within it. Ethnic solidarity was also accelerated by the production of a range of cultural symbols, such as clothes and religious practices mostly related to upper caste Hindu practices, first by the Gorkha rulers and more vehemently by the Rana Prime Ministers who sought to eliminate cultural diversity. This led to the promotion of a set of markers that were distinct from other ethnic groups like the Bhutia, Sherpa and Lepcha living in the region.

While cultural consolidation was essential for the continued hegemony of the ruling upper caste groups, the onset of migration out of Nepal and into *Muglan*<sup>2</sup> led to the interaction of these migrants with other indigenous and migrant Himalayan groups and classes (as in the case of Darjeeling). From amongst this migrating group, some were able to integrate relatively easily (for instance in Darjeeling and Sikkim), while those migrating to the north-eastern frontiers of the British Empire were less able to do so. Migration and inter-ethnic interaction

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<sup>2</sup> The Mughal sub-continent was known as Muglan.

necessitated further ethno-linguistic consolidation as political safeguards owing to the lower position of the migrating groups in the socio-economic hierarchy under the colonial and monarchichal administration in Darjeeling and Sikkim, respectively. Migration was thus a crucial historical factor in the creation of the Nepali identity and has been narrativised in novels like *Basai* (Chettri, 1989), *Muluk Bahira* (Bangdel, 1947) and *Muglan* (Bhattarai, 1988). Development of a single unifying language-Nepali, led to linguistic consolidation of the diverse ethnic groups, who then finally came to be known as Nepalis. The Nepali ethnic group is therefore an amalgamation of the numerous ethnic groups<sup>3</sup>, that had been incorporated into the Hindu ritual hierarchy and a certain set of ‘recognizable’ cultural attributes like language, clothes and cultural practices can be associated with this group. Nepalis live most predominantly across the western and eastern Himalayan region and are recognized as a separate ethnic group by those outside the group (like the Bhutias, Lepchas etc). This is a factor which is crucial in the recognition of this group in a multi-ethnic and diverse geographical space. ‘Nepali’ can therefore be deemed as a *meta-identity*, which is constructed and is made meaningful by the presence of other ethnic groups. While political imperatives of the Shah kings and Rana Prime Ministers had laid the foundations of the cultural attributes of the Nepali ethnic group, these sets of material markers are undergoing a process of change, renewal and revival in accordance to the changing economic and political demands of the people who comprise the Nepali ethnic group.

Ethnic identity is one of the primary forms of identity that determine life chances of groups and individuals in the eastern Himalaya. One of the key functions of Nepali ethnic identity, historically, has been to ensure a better, social, economic and political position for at least a substantial section of this group. It is this function and aspect of ethnic identity in the contemporary context that the three case studies examine in detail. Always dynamic and responsive to changing political situations, contemporary politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal highlight how the persistence or disintegration of this category is influenced by politics, thereby reinforcing the inherent political nature of the Nepali ethnic group. Thus, this thesis shows how being Nepali (understood as sharing a distinct and common heritage despite political locations) has contributed to a certain political status within the political field in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. This in turn has proved either advantageous or

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<sup>3</sup> Major caste and ethnic groups subsumed under the Nepali category are :

*Parbatiyas* (Nepali speaking): Brahmans, Thakuris, Chettris (formerly Khasas), Kami, Damai, Sarki  
Other hill or mountain ethnic groups: Magar, Tamang, Newar, Rai, Gurung, Limbu, Sherpa, Sunuwar, Thakali, Thami.

disadvantageous for the Nepalis thereby leading to the exploitation of this identity in different ways in a bid to secure material as well as cultural prosperity.

Re-distribution of economic and political goods has firmly been etched as the guiding framework, motivation and necessary end of all political activity in the Himalayan region and Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal are no exceptions to the trend. In this model of politics, the state has complete access to and control over these goods which are then re-distributed on the basis of certain (often subjective and politically influenced) criteria. In the eastern Himalaya, this re-distribution is affected by ethnic considerations leading to inequitable distribution or complete denial of these goods. The three cases from the eastern Himalaya represent the different ways in which sections of the Nepali ethnic group negotiate with their respective states. Modes of negotiation with the state differ on the basis of political and geographical location, as well as the various regional, national and international structures around them. However, political negotiation has taken a distinct ethnic character i.e. arguments over access and the right to public goods are presented as cases of denial of ethnic rights, thereby linking ethnicity to politics that is based on exploitation of socio-economic grievances. Thus, when denial, access and rights are articulated as being dependent on ethnic identity, political agency by the people is also expressed in ethnic terms.

The three cases collectively highlight the immense transition that the Nepali ethnic group has undergone, as reflected in three different ways of political mobilization and articulation of ethnic identity. The three cases show that ethnic politics has completely altered the image and cultural attributes of the Nepali identity, but then again, this re-definition of the attributes and parameters of the Nepali identity are essential in the negotiation with the state that directly or indirectly supports ethnic politics. Ethnicity has thus become a political resource which is easily accessible to a collective. It has also come to be seen as a valid form of politics and one that is accepted, tolerated or courted by the state.

As will be discussed, primarily in Section One of the thesis, the Nepali ethnic group emerges first as a product of the conscious political thought and action of the literati in Darjeeling whilst the notion of the Nepali nation-state arose at a later stage. Thus, the Nepali ethnic group can be considered as being socially constructed in an attempt to negotiate the ongoing social, economic and political exigencies at a given period in time. This also highlights the function and utility of this ethnic group as a political resource. This socially constructed nature of the Nepali ethnic group remains the premise on which this thesis is based and enables

a thorough investigation of the different manifestations of ethnic politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal.

Flexible intra-ethnic boundaries and a plethora of tangible cultural markers enable re-construction of the Nepali identity as per the demands of the political situation, thereby permitting a variation in the ways ethnic identity can be used as a political resource. Acknowledging the Constructivist argument that actors are shaped by the social milieu in which they live, identities and interests cannot be taken for granted and the processes by which they originate and change is important (Finnemore and Skink, 2001:394), the thesis examines in detail the different ways in which ethnic identity and its markers have been used as a resource in a variety of ways in order to achieve political goals.

Regional, national and international external institutions like the United Nations and International Non-governmental Organizations have legitimised the use of ethnicity as a political resource and provide the requisite channels through which to use them. Thus, it is not only the presence of grievances, ethnic activism, flexible intra-ethnic boundaries or tangible cultural markers that facilitate ethnic politics. It is the presence of 'enabling structures' that present an opportunity for the use of ethnic identity as a lucrative political resource. These structures provide the framework within which ethnic politics is played out.

The case studies analyse the relationship between the structures that facilitate ethnic politics and the ethnic groups who use their identity instrumentally. Each case is a discussion of the use of ethnic identity in political negotiation with the state and what connects the three cases together is the use of Nepali identity, its symbols and markers, myth and history as a resource as well as a tool to negotiate with the state. The Nepali ethnic identity is a powerful idea with material consequences that are fundamental to the politics of who gets what when and how. Thus Nepali ethnic identity can be seen as a partly heuristic device with material consequences which can be used to understand how cultural items, myths and histories associated with a particular ethnic group can be used differently in order to facilitate the best outcome for that group. The thesis therefore places emphasis on the events, actors and mechanisms that either facilitate or hinder ethnic mobilization in politics and the use of tangible ethnic markers as a political resource for the attainment of goals set out by ethnic actors.

The existence of weak and porous boundaries between the different Nepali sub-groups have made this ethnic group highly susceptible to politicization<sup>4</sup> as ethnic histories, symbolism and meaning can be easily used to fit different contexts. For most ethnic groups, the tradition of oral history or the lack of documented history has only accentuated this process further. Politicisation of ethnicity has become a recurrent phenomenon which, as this thesis will discuss, has taken numerous forms in the past as well as the present. The eastern Himalayan region has a rich history both of intense, mostly religious, cultural activity and of political activity, making each an inseparable part of the other. The relationship between culture and politics is made evident through a range of activities ranging from the celebration of non-Hindu festivals on a national scale to strategic ethnic voting. Thus, contemporary politics in the eastern Himalaya is marked by ethnic revivalism which is loaded with political meaning and intention.

Apart from the celebration of cultural diversity, ethnic revivalism can also be deemed as a form of contention against the dominant political hegemony either of the state or an ethnic group (both usually tend to overlap). This is evident in Darjeeling and Nepal but as the Sikkim case study will reveal, ethnic politics has now increasingly become a reliable means to access the state. The Nepalis living in three geographically interconnected areas display diversity in the negotiation with their respective states, thereby qualifying as an interesting as well as important case in the study of ethnic politics. Whilst contributing to the study of ethnicity in general, identity politics in the eastern Himalaya also allows a general deduction about the nature of the Nepali ethnic group- that there is a shedding of the old, *homogenous*, assimilative Nepali identity and the adoption of a new identity which now has to make room for cultural *heterogeneity* in light of the political circumstances surrounding this group. This thesis focuses on this metamorphosis and asks the following questions- what are the visible forms of these changes? What is the impact on the Nepalis living in those areas and ultimately, what are the factors that have made the political assertion of one identity more viable than the other?

This research also aims to expand our understanding of ethnicity by going beyond simplistic approaches which use cultural categories to homogenize groups into monolithic socio-political entities with limited internal diversity. The thesis contends that ethnic identity is one of the primary factors that influence the life chances of individuals and collective

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<sup>4</sup> Politicisation is an attempt to define the ethnic group and the markers of membership to it, which can then be used for the mobilisation of peoples in support of deliberately cultivated values and of representing them to the world according to a consciously created image (Dasgupta, 1999).

decisions of groups and that these identities are, at the same time in the process of construction by the state, its policies and the wider socio-economic environment.

Thus, ethnic politics in the three areas varies in accordance to ways in which these identities are constructed and used by different groups, at different periods of time. Another contributing factor to this variation is the changing form of the state from monarchy to democracy (in Sikkim and Nepal) and in the case of Darjeeling, from colonial administration to a neo-colonial arrangement, which has a far reaching impact on the bases and forms of political articulation. The different perceptions of different groups of people, their political use of ethnic identity and the variety in the outcomes for different ethnic groups reveal the complexity as well as the symbiotic nature of the relationship between ethnicity and politics.

Identity construction is a local process and thus, in spite of sharing cultural and historical similarities, one of the important factors that have led to a variation in political articulation amongst the Nepalis is their embeddedness in a distinct social, political, and economic system. Their reactions, actions, and representations of the self and of the other are bound to be different. Thus the political identity of a Nepali from east Nepal is not transferrable to a Nepali living in Darjeeling. Likewise the idea of a Gorkha, although familiar to all Nepalis, will not have the same political resonance amongst the Nepalis of Sikkim and the Nepalis of Nepal. Issues of nationality and citizenship aside, their grievances, meaning and resolution are derived from their economic, social and political surroundings. Consequently, a general observation of the politics of the region also raises some fundamental queries- why and how has ethnicity become such an important political resource, how has the state responded (e.g. by co-opting, challenging or resisting it) and who are the beneficiaries of this identity based politics? This thesis will attempt to answer these questions in order to uncover the rationale behind multiple identities that are available to and used by Nepalis that lead to multiple manifestations of ethnic politics.

## **Organization of the thesis**

The thesis is primarily divided into three parts:

### **Part One-Contextualising ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayas**

The first chapter in Part One is a general introduction which discusses the research questions and the conceptual, theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the thesis. This introductory chapter will engage with the conceptual, theoretical and methodological underpinnings of the thesis. It is broadly divided into three sections. **Section One** analyses the fundamental concept of ethnicity, the multiplicity of approaches to it and its inherent potency to facilitate politics. This section also discusses the literature on ethnicity, the relation between state and ethnicity as well as a diverse body of related literature including that emerging from the focus region. **Section Two** is a discussion on the influence of theoretical paradigms introduced by Pierre Bourdieu and Joel Migdal on the framework of the thesis. Finally **Section Three** focuses on the methods employed in data collection in the three areas.

The second chapter, '**Locating the Nepali**', traces the genesis of the Nepali ethnic group, starting with the formation of the Kingdom of Gorkha and ending with the important contribution of the cultural elites of Darjeeling and Benares. This chapter discusses the formation of the Nepali ethnic group outside of Nepal, its impact on Nepalese nationalism and the present situation of the Nepalis living in India. The chapter concludes with a brief historical introduction to the three areas- Sikkim, Nepal and Darjeeling district in order to further contextualise the case studies.

### **Part Two: Ethnic Politics in east Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim**

Part Two is a discussion of the empirical evidence presented in this thesis. Each of the three chapters herein focuses on the politics of ethnic identity in one area: east Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling District. These case studies highlight the primacy of a particular factor that has contributed to the assertion of a particular identity, other than that of a Nepali. Each case study first analyses the social, economic and political situation that has promoted ethnic assertion in the first place and then focuses on the type of identity chosen. Despite their uniqueness the three case studies aim at answering the primary research question regarding the variation in articulation of Nepali ethnicity.

### **Part Three: Understanding and analysing ethnicity**

Part Three begins with the analysis of the case studies. While the case studies establish the relevance and use of ethnicity, it is also imperative to bring the cases together to answer



why groups and individuals choose the identities that they do. This chapter recognizes four different factors as having an impact on the variation of ethnic identity and discusses each in reference to the case studies. Finally, Part Three and the thesis concludes with a final chapter which discusses the broader implications of studying ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayas. This chapter discusses how the case studies further the understanding of ethnic politics, the contribution it makes to Area Studies, the limitations of the study and finally the potential for further research

Part Three is followed by an **Annexe** and **Bibliography**

## **Part One**

### **1. Contextualising ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya**

#### ***(i) Conceptual and theoretical framework***

Ethnicity and related concepts like ethnic groups, ethnic identities take their form and content from symbiotic relationships of human behaviour, from shaping action and being acted upon (Royce, 1982:17). This has lent ethnicity a sense of inherent dynamism and instability which make defining ethnicity and related concepts difficult. For example, Cohen (1993) describes ethnic identity as a mode of action which represents a certain cultural identity, thereby making ethnicity basically a politicised version of culture. Eriksen (1991), on the other hand, analyses ethnicity at an interpersonal level and refers to it as the social reproduction of basic classificatory differences between categories of people and to aspects of gains and losses in social interaction. In a highly fluid and mobile world, the meaning of ethnicity is largely formulated by its presence in everyday interaction, experiences and exposure through the media. Thus this fluidity and adaptation of ethnicity in highly heterogeneous societies makes the definition of ethnicity even more ambivalent and as Comaroff and Comaroff (2009: 22) summarize ‘ethnicity = culture + identity, adjective and noun locked in indissoluble embrace, a taken for granted usage in the argot of everyday life’.

Ethnicity (like gender, class and sexuality) is but one of the forms of identity that is accessible to an individual as well as collective. As Weeks (1990:88) writes, ‘Each of us live with a variety of contradictions. The list is infinite and so are our belongings. Which of them we focus on, bring to the fore, “identify” with depends on a host of factors. At the centre however are values we share or wish to share with others.’ Thus not only is there a range of belongings that one can identify with but there is also an element of choice and subjectivity over which belongings are made prominent, utilised or concealed. Identities cannot be constructed or understood in a vacuum. This also implies that identities derive their meaning in relation to the social, political and economic contexts making a specific identity relevant only under specific circumstances or in a particular environment (Campbell and Rew, 1999: 10).

An individual is a gamut of identities and no single identity may fully represent an individual. In this context, ethnicity can be considered as a cultural segment of society that may also intersect with other identities (like class) which may overlap and reinforce each other (Rudolph, 2006: 8). Thus making sense of people’s ethnic identities entails a broader understanding of identity per se as they are informed not only by race and ethnicity, but also by other axes of identification, such as gender, class, sexuality, age and religion (Song, 2003:1).

Identities are always in production, in a process which is never complete (Hall, 1990: 222) and therefore constantly evolving. This is evident in the constant evolution in the meaning and form of ethnic identity itself as a result of the change in the socio-political environment.<sup>5</sup>

From a theoretical perspective, definitions of ethnicity have usually oscillated between the primordial school of thought, social constructivism and lately instrumentalism. Ethnicity, although an ambiguous term becomes easy to see and define by what it does, through its function in the facilitation of human interaction. The Primordial school of thought propounds that the function of ethnicity is that of satisfying the primordial socio-psychological need for security and survival (Harvey, 2000:40).<sup>6</sup> Primordial perspectives assert that people are naturally ethnocentric, exhibiting trust and preference for those of their own cultural group while feeling more distant from, and distrustful of, those of other cultural groups (Brown, 1994: xiii). Harold Isaacs (1975:30, 35) in his attempt to ‘sketch a portrait of basic group identity’ suggests that it is composed of primordial affinities and attachments. It is the identity made up of what a person is born with or acquires at birth. It is distinct from all other multiple and secondary identities people acquire and ‘an individual belongs to his basic group in the deepest and the most literal sense that he is not alone.’ However, Primordial understandings of ethnicity cannot explain the variation in political salience across different countries as well as communities and within countries. Also problematic for primordialist argument is the lack of explanation as to how people may redefine or choose different formulations of ethnicity for instrumental purposes (Fearon, 1999:3).

Adding further complexity to the definition and understanding of ethnicity is the element of instrumentality in ethnic politics. An instrumental approach links ethnicity to motivation making ethnicity fluid, manipulable, variable, situationally expressed, subjectively

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<sup>5</sup> David Mosse (1999) presents an interesting example of the evolution of the socio-political usage of the identity of the Untouchable caste in South India. Beginning from the colonial times when these caste groups took on a religious identity (as Christians, Buddhists) Mosse traces how the changed political attitude and commitment of the state towards this group led to their metamorphosis into a bureaucratic and welfare category. This change in the form and function of ethnic identity is also evident in the three cases discussed in the thesis. Like the case of South Indian Untouchable castes that Mosse discusses, the ethnic identity of the Nepalis is also undergoing a serious change. It is slowly evolving from an ethno-linguistic group to a ‘bureaucratic and welfare category’ with homogenizes cultural diversity into features that conform either to the national or international discourse on ethnic groups.

<sup>6</sup> Collier and Hoeffler (2000, cited in Sambanis, 2001:10) in their study of ethnic conflicts argue that ethnic kin groups facilitate within-group co-ordination and hinder cross-group co-ordination, thereby implying that groups based on kinship selections have a greater chance of survival or success compared to groups organized on other criteria.

defined and one possible type of affiliation among many that individuals and groups can identify themselves with. According to Joireman (2003) the individual will consciously or unconsciously calculate and negotiate all levels of encounters and make an identity choice which will offer maximum utility. Although the instrumental approach restores agency to the people as political actors, the framing of choices and activities in purely practical terms and the assumption that all collective action is directed towards realizing mutual interest is a rather limited approach.

Combining elements of both approaches is Constructivism which recognizes ethnic identity as a synthesis of ascribed traits combined with social inputs like ancestral myths, subjective beliefs, religion, and language making ethnicity partly ascribed and partly volitional. The individual is free to choose his social context as well as the symbols which he chooses to make meaningful (Joireman, 2003). Following the Primordialists, Constructivism views ethnic identities as cultural endowments and in keeping with the Instrumentalists, it views ethnic identities as malleable. The distinguishing feature of the Constructivist position is the belief that while identities can be reshaped, they can only be altered at a significant cost (Bates, 2006: 5). Thus, whether it be an umbrella concept to include groups differentiated by color, religion, language, nationalities or other symbolic features (Horowitz, 1985:3) the essential characteristic feature of ethnicity is its existence and relevance in a social context.

The practical implications of ethnicity cannot be neatly compressed and compartmentalised as its political usage necessitates the blurring of these theoretical boundaries. Identity politics in the eastern Himalaya is based on the politicisation of ethnicity which in turn is based on revivalism and emphasis on essentialised notions of tangible aspects of ethnicity such as language, dress, food and religion. According to Wright (1998:7)<sup>7</sup> there is an older version of looking at and understanding culture and there are new meanings of culture but in an age which Stuart Hall (1993:356 in Wright, 1998:9) calls the age of ‘dislocated histories and hybridised ethnicities’ there is a return to essentialism which supports instrumental motives of ethnic groups.

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<sup>7</sup> Wright gives a very interesting example of the Kayapo (an ethnic group indigenous to Brazil) who also use culture, which had earlier seemed like an impediment, as a resource to negotiate their co-existence with the dominant society. This shows that expressing ethnic identity is getting increasingly associated with highlighting the ‘cultural aspects’ (1998:12-14).

In this context Max Weber provides an important framework within which to understand and use ethnicity as a variable that facilitates politics in the eastern Himalaya. According to the Weberian tradition, ethnicity is deemed to be a *subjectively felt sense of belonging* based on the belief in shared culture and common ancestry owing to similarities of physical type or of customs or both, or because of memories of colonization and migration. Further, this belief must be important for the *propagation of group formation especially in the political sphere*; conversely it does not matter whether or not an objective blood relationship exists. Ethnic subtypes of ethnicity can be further distinguished depending on the type of markers that are used to substantiate the belief in shared culture and ancestry, most importantly ethnoreligious, ethnoregional, and ethnolinguistic categories and groups (Weber, 1978: 389; Wimmer, 1973:2008 emphasis mine). This definition places equal emphasis on the subjective nature of ethnicity, consisting of immutable cultural elements, and the rationale or purpose of ethnic identity (albeit an instrumental one). It thereby provides great flexibility in our understanding of ethnicity in the eastern Himalaya which is at once a historical product as well as one that is undergoing constant reproduction. Despite following different political trajectories, ethnicity remains the dominant variable in almost all the political processes in the eastern Himalaya thereby leading to ethnic politics wherein issues concerning ethnicity take primacy over others and/or where generic socio-economic issues are framed and contested as ethnic grievances.

In agreement with Brubaker and Cooper (2000:10) this thesis contends that *groups come to think of themselves as ethnic groups because of how their members think they originated, not because of how they actually originated and not because of what their members might actually be held to share* (emphasis mine). Migration and lack of historically recorded data has rendered a major portion of the ethnic heritage and history of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal a modification if not entirely an ‘invention of tradition’<sup>8</sup> (Hobsbawm and Ranger, 1983). However, lack of authenticity does not lower its credibility or its potency as a political resource. As Glazer and Moynihan (1975: 19) remind us, even those groups, sentiments and belongings that we deem as primordial may have recent historical creation. Thus the case studies in this thesis show how primordial elements like kinship, history and religion have been re-packaged to fit the mould and expectations of not only the members of the group but also the wider (national as well as international) institutions. This emphasizes both the existence of ethnic groups and their grievances as well as the role played by ‘frames’- especially the

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<sup>8</sup> These aspects will be discussed in greater detail in the later chapters.

nationalistic and the ethnic, which have become easily available, powerfully resonant and widely understood through the various forms of media, internet. Through stereotyping, influencing perceptions, individuals and groups are created, categorised and seen in a certain sense that did not exist before (Hacking, 2006:23). For example the creation of the category of a Scheduled Tribe in India comes with its well defined criteria of tangible as well as spiritual characteristics that a group deemed as a tribe must possess (language and script, animistic beliefs, non-Hindu rituals). This not only influences how a group might understand itself but also how it is viewed by others. Categories therefore affect the worldview of those who have been classified as well as those who have not been. Given the trend of affirmative action in India and Nepal, the classification may well lead to sentiments of relative deprivation amongst those not categorized as tribes.

No group engaged in ethnic politics can maintain a viable identity without signs, symbols and underlying values that point towards a distinctive identity, but these are themselves products of interaction with other groups. Thus ethnic groups are located in a matrix of social relations and the viability of an identity is partly dependant upon the comprehensibility of the ethnic content by others in the social matrix and its effective manipulation (Royce, 1985: 5). It is this social, contested and constructed characteristic of ethnicity that provides the scope for effective political mobilization of ethnic sentiments, symbols and grievances by political leaders, cultural and political elites and other political agents in a bid to claim a stake in the wider political field of a region or country or what may be known as ethnic politics. As Brubaker and Cooper (2000:10) contend, concepts of ethnicity are not mere analytical categories but historically specific social descriptions. Thus the case studies and the general political environment in the eastern Himalaya bear similarity to what Hacking (2006: 23) calls the process of 'making up people' which requires enabling social conditions, resources on the part of those initiating the process and a corresponding lack of resources to resist from those who are the objects of this process. The analysis of ethnic politics requires an understanding and interrogation of the social and political structures in which an ethnic group is embedded.

Ethnic politics cannot be understood just by analysing the group in question; and thus, as Carter and Fenton (2009:5) suggest, strong material and social contexts have to be taken into consideration in order to arrive at the beginning of a causal account of how actors make their choices in relation to ethnicity. Instrumentality is an important and blatantly evident aspect of

ethnic politics (as visible in the nature of grievances and their suggested remedies) in the eastern Himalaya. For example, demands for the preservation and development of ethnic culture and tradition are usually interspersed with demands for economic and political benefits. Once again elements like myths of origin, kinship and most importantly tangible aspects like clothes, food, and language scripts play an important role in the instrumental operation of ethnicity.

While economic and political relief might form the primary component of the demands of ethnic groups, this does not mean that ethnic politics can be equated wholly with instrumental motives. As the following chapters will discuss, non-instrumental motives also play an important role in the construction, maintenance and mobilisation of ethnic identity. Thus, data collection and analysis in this thesis has been influenced by what Jenkins (1997: 169-70) calls a 're-thinking of ethnicity...which demands a balanced view of ethnic attachments, to appreciate that although it is imagined, it is not imaginary; to acknowledge its antiquity as well as its modernity.' Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya cannot be understood through a uni-dimensional approach and this thesis proceeds with a careful consideration of all the approaches discussed above, because all three-primordialism, constructivism and instrumentalism- make their own contributions to the understanding of ethnic politics.

While the Nepali group itself is a product of social construction, the recent changes within the group and the modes taken to facilitate those changes highlights the relation between culture and political mobilisation. The political and economic contexts in which an ethnic group is located cannot debar the instrumental motives that are explicable on the part of a group with experiences of poverty, discrimination and deprivation. This conflates economic problems with ethnicity thereby making ethnicity one of the most powerful bases for collective action. Royce (1985) elaborates this approach to emphasize that individuals within certain constraints will use ethnicity to their advantage, and this is contingent on their place in the larger inter-ethnic matrix. Weber (1978:39) turns the notion of ethnicity as the basis of collective action on its head by saying that it is the political community or sphere, no matter how artificially organized, that inspires belief in common ethnicity, thereby making ethnicity one of the bases of political action. This approach has influenced the framing of the arguments in this thesis. The enactment of politics in the eastern Himalaya has not only made ethnicity a viable political resource (mostly for access to economic and political resources) but it has also led to the political mobilisation of those groups and identities which had previously remained dormant. Thus political structures (like political parties) as well as practices of democracy have, to a

very large extent, facilitated ethnic group formation in the region and the eventual establishment of identity based politics as a regional norm. Following Shrestha and Adhikari (2011: 43), for an act to be recognized as 'political' it is not sufficient that its primary aim is to engage in a contestation with the state or challenge dominant forms of power. It must also demonstrate a certain host of characteristics at the level of performance. Whether or not actions are seen as 'political' depends upon an evaluation, by the wider public, of the suitability of the setting for the performance, the appropriateness of the script, and the choice of actors for the performance in question.

Like Weber, Brubaker and Cooper (2000:15) argue that it is politics which makes groups and a sociological account of group formation must necessarily precede discussions of why people choose to identify themselves in a particular way in particular circumstances. Understanding why members of a single ethnic group choose to emphasize a particular aspect of their identity over others in different locations is also a primary premise of the present thesis. Rather than simply studying ethnic movements in the eastern Himalayas, the thesis attempts to explain the political processes and institutional structures that influence how groups decide which identity to make politically relevant. This decision making process precedes and informs political action. The focus of the thesis is to compare and analyse ethnic politics ensuing from the interaction between ethnic identity, its related grievances and the institutional structures, represented largely by the state and international institutions like the UN.

Mere existence of ethnic groups or their grievances does not result in political mobilization of these groups or issues. Writing in the context of Indian politics Chandra (2005:239) highlights the role of the state in encouraging ethnic politics through its policies and practices of the re-distribution of public goods mainly through networks of patronage. According to Chandra (ibid), in such political systems individuals get ahead either by becoming a part of the state themselves and then obtaining control over the flow of patronage or by cultivating ties with someone who controls the state and thus becoming consumers, if not distributors of patronage benefits. Madsen et al (2011) make a succinct connection between democracy (or the act of voting) and the immediate expectation of development. The vote can be seen as a part of "an exchange relation trans-substantiating the act of voting into the delivery of benefits" (ibid: 4). Thus development (understood as construction of roads, bridges, schools, social welfare, subsidies etc) has become the most important component of all political discourse (Mitra, 1995: 396) leading to the aggrandization of state power as it is the state that controls all aspects of material development of a region.



Patronage politics is also inherently linked to the imaginings and structural construction of the state. Rudolph and Rudolph (1987, 400-4001 in Mitra, 1991:396) present a concise illustration of the state as perceived in India. They write, 'when in western Europe, the state behaves very much as the 'executive committee' of the bourgeoisie, the state In India, like the avatars of Vishnu, reserved for itself a multiplicity of roles of accommodation, extraction, production and repression, stepping in as the inevitable intermediary whenever the conflict between social forces became threatening to public order'. Thus it is this multiplicity of roles that the state enacts and the wide web of institutional mechanisms that is needed to support it, that enables the use of ethnicity as a reasonable political resource.

As an administrative apparatus, the state benefits from the mobilisation, formalisation and politicisation of the different ethnic segments but the desired outcome of this political investment is dependent on the nature and strength of the state. As Brown (1994) and Sambanis (2000) point out, if a state is unable to enforce its power or distribute resources amongst different ethnic groups equitably, it may only agitate and rupture the social order, thereby creating ethnic discord which was non-existent before. On the other hand, as a mediator and mobilizing mechanism of minority symbols and interests, the state, as a part of the larger political system, also relies on ethnic strategies to secure the most favourable outcome (Parenti, 1967). For example, the study conducted by Micheluti (2004) on the Yadav caste group of Uttar Pradesh, India, presents a classic example of the political mobilisation of lower castes. Through effective ethnic mobilisation (based on caste) and maximum utilisation of the affirmative action policies provided by the State, the traditionally low to middle ranking Yadavs have become the most important political community of Uttar Pradesh.

Kohli (1997: 327) makes an important link between the establishment of democracy and the re-generation of kinship ties in most developing countries where democracy comes as an imported idea. He reiterates that power devolution in most developing countries is fairly weak and lopsided leading to the development of 'two-track polities' with a democratic track in the sphere of electoral politics and a less democratic track in the state sphere, especially in the area of economic policy making thereby restricting the space and possibility of participation. This in turn widens the use of narrow frames of belonging (like ethnicity) and the articulation of grievances through an ethnic framework (ibid: 328). This highlights the increasing importance of what Kanchan Chandra (2000:30) calls the 'ethnic template' which is the principle guideline used by political parties to identify the population and to structure socio-economic grievances

or demands on an ethnic rationale as a result of which 'ethnic politking is moving from the margins of the political arena to fight for center stage' (ibid:26).

Politics of identity lies in the construction, articulation and achievement of the goals set out by two primary agents of politics- ethnic groups and the state, united by their use of ethnicity in their political agenda. While the state uses ethnicity as a device to re-distribute resources, in effect creating and manipulating insecurities and structures of the society, ethnic groups and their representatives use arguments based on an ethnic rationale to bargain with the state for various concessions. As will be highlighted by the cases, the aim of ethnic activism is not to change the various structures that promote social, political and economic discrepancies but to enable better access to the state and public goods. This dialectic relationship between ethnicity and politics is sustained by an overarching structure that promises material as well as cultural benefits and at the same time promotes the use of ethnic identity as a resource for political patronage. This has had important ramifications for the idea of a homogenous Nepali identity, thereby revealing the contested, malleable nature of ethnic identity which makes it an opportune breeding ground for political mobilization.

Ethnicity can thus be viewed as a focal point, facilitating the convergence of individual actions and demands, which is mutually consistent with that of the group thereby rendering the group ready for political mobilisation<sup>9</sup> (Varshney 2003; Nagel and Olzak, 1982). Therefore in a situation in which there are limited participation resources and in which clear competitive advantages are attached to ethnic identity (as opposed to class, occupation or some other identity) the basis of political choice is neither ideology nor policies but rather, ethnic preferences (Chandra, 2004; Nielsen, 1985; Olzak and Nagel, 1982).<sup>10</sup>

The political nature of ethnic groups can only be fully comprehended by taking into account external factors like resource competition, immigration policies, political access etc. which play an important role in shaping individual and group choices, furthering the exploitation of ethnicity as a resource for political action. Therefore, the theoretical framework

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<sup>9</sup> Ethnic mobilisation is the process by which groups organise along ethnic lines in pursuit of collective ends and in politics it is group action not only in favour of one's group but also against some other group (Varshney, 2003; Olzak and Nagel, 1982).

<sup>10</sup> In patronage democracies like India, voters make their choice on the basis of representation that has been given to their co-ethnics by a political party, as it ensures that they, as members of that ethnic group, have maximum access to the political and economic benefits (Chandra, 2004). Thus, ethnicity is a political resource, generated by the socio-political environment.

guiding this research emphasizes the socially constructed as well as flexible nature of ethnic identity. Concomitantly, the expansion and contraction of group boundaries, essentialisation as well as revivalism of ethnic culture can be contextualised and understood as an instrumental response to changed political circumstance which aims to better facilitate their access to or control over resources that are controlled by the state. Ethnic politics can be seen as an interplay between institutional structures (at the local, regional and national level) and the mobilization of ethnicity as a political resource by ethnic groups for effective negotiation with the state for economic and political benefits as well as cultural recognition. This is a process which is guided by over-arching dominant and well established mechanisms of patronage.

### ***1.1(ii) Framing ethnic politics: literature on the eastern Himalaya***

Having acknowledged the complexities of ethnicity and its definitions and understandings within the larger framework, it is now imperative to investigate how ethnic politics has been understood and reproduced in the literature on the region. This is important not only because of the role that academic literature plays in the legitimization of political agency of ethnic groups but also to confirm its prevalence as a pre-dominant regional feature. The literature reviewed in this section pertains specifically to that relating to ethnic politics, of the Nepali ethnic group, in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. The aim of this thesis is to contribute further to discussions on ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayas that have already been initiated by the literature discussed below.

In the context of Nepal, recent political transition has brought identity politics to the fore, where gender and caste have again been pushed to the sidelines by ethnic issues. Ethnic politics is usually analysed within the matrix of economic determinism and discrimination towards other ethnic groups in the hills and plains of Nepal by upper caste hill groups (see Lawoti, 2007; Bhattachan, 2008, 1995; Gurung, 1997). This is a viewpoint supported by most academic literature from the region. Ethnic based organisations (both state and non-state) have produced numerous books, maps and surveys (Gurung et al, 2006; Sharma, 2008) attempting to map and quantify the 'ethnic question'. In the context of eastern Nepal and the Limbu ethnic group which is the focus of this thesis, a thorough investigation of Limbu ethnic politics is restricted by limited literature on the region and on the Limbu ethnic group itself in English or Nepali. The most influential books based on research conducted in eastern Nepal are *Land and Social Change in Nepal* by Lionel Caplan (1970) and *The Dozing Shaman* by Phillippe Sagant (1996). Both are intensive anthropological accounts of the Limbu ethnic group and inter-ethnic social relations in the eastern hills. Although they remain highly relevant in familiarizing the

reader with the socio-historical setting of the eastern hills, they are set in a time which is markedly different to the present.

A recent contribution by Ian Fitzpatrick (2012) entitled *Cardamom and Class* studies the political economy of a Limbu village and not only takes into account the impact of the global economic shifts on migration and local economy but also analyses the oft forgotten dimension of class. Much of the discussion in the aforementioned literature assumes ethnic identity as an unproblematic feature of a group or individual's identity. This body of literature focuses on the usage of ethnic identity either in a social or in a political setting, thereby raising pertinent questions regarding the importance of identity construction itself, in terms of our understandings and perceptions of the social as well as the political world. More relevant to the themes of this thesis is the investigation on the inception of ethnic politics in the eastern hills by Susan Hangen. Her book *The Rise of Ethnic Politics in Nepal* (2010) and other subsequent papers (2007) on the topic is an analysis of the Mongol National Organisation (MNO), one of the earliest proponents of ethnic politics in eastern Nepal. Her work remains an important source for a detailed analysis of the factors that led to political mobilization on the basis of a broad Mongol identity. Although the MNO does not hold the same political relevance that it did in the early 1990s, Hangen charts their success and eventual decline to show the potential of ethnicity as a potent political resource that can be utilised at an opportune juncture in time, which is one of the primary contentions of this thesis. Gregoire Schlemmer's (2003/2004; 2010) interesting articles on the re-invention of Kirat tradition is also highly relevant in the understanding of ethnic politics which has come to be associated with preservation and even re-invention of ethnic culture. Schlemmer establishes an important link between culture and rights and paves the way for a critical understanding of cultural production in eastern Nepal which is at the heart of Limbu ethnic politics.

While excellent sources on ethnicity, religion, literature exist in English (generally, not specific to east Nepal), most of these are inaccessible to the majority of the local population outside of Kathmandu valley who are more adept at reading in the Nepali language than in English. A much larger section of the population have access to books and articles written in Nepali or those books that have been translated into Nepali.<sup>11</sup> Thus it is usually books, novels

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<sup>11</sup> Lionel Caplan's 'Land and Social Change in East Nepal' was translated into Nepali in 2010. However it was curiously titled as *Purbi Nepalma Limbu Jatiko Kipad ra Samajik Pherbadal* which when re-translated means 'The *kipad* of the Limbus of east Nepal and social change'. This prompted speculations whether this was done to increase sales in east Nepal by tapping into the heightened ethnic sentiment which is strongly related to land.

and articles written in or translated into Nepali (and now also in Limbu) and therefore accessible to the majority of people in east Nepal, which are also the prime sources of history for the masses. Despite the lack of scientific enquiry regarding historical data and the tradition of oral history, books and novels hold great social and political value. This makes it imperative that we are aware of the resources which people have access to that favour or contribute to the formation of particular identities.

The Limbu ethnic organization, *Kirat Yakthung Chumulung* (KYC), is at the forefront of the production of literature pertaining to Limbu history, culture and tradition. They publish books, newspapers and magazines that are related to Limbu history, culture and society. Amongst the easily available and popular books available in eastern Nepal was Iman Singh Chemjong's (1948) *Kirat Itihas* (History of the Kirat people), *Kirat Itihas ani Sanskriti* (History and Culture of the Kirat people) (2003) and the recently published *Limbuwanko Rajniti: Itihas, Bartaman ra Bhavishya* (The politics of Limbuwan: History, Present and the Future) by Bhawani Baral and Kamal Tigela (2008). While these literary sources play an important role in instilling a sense of ethnic history and pride, they also act as reminders of ethnic subjugation at the hands of the state represented by upper caste groups and thereby strengthening ethnic activism and politics further. The historical literature (Chemjong, 2003; Pradhan, 1991) on the Limbu kingdom in east Nepal provides a very general idea about the relationship between the Gorkha kingdom and the Limbus. Limbu history has been constructed on the basis of Limbu opposition to the incursions of the Gorkha monarchy. While Kumar Pradhan's (1991) *The Gorkha Conquests* provides a historical setting, other works discussed previously have more of an anthropological bent, focusing on the micro-level, everyday interaction of the Limbus with the state and other ethnic groups. On a macro level, the Limbu ethnic movement is also a key example of the ongoing contestation against the state-led discourse on ethnic and national identity. The movement for ethnic homeland or Limbuwan has therefore, been used as a source of statistics for violence and discrimination (Lawoti, 2007). However, this study of state-ethnic group relation at the macro level does not analyse sufficiently the role played by the state or its extensions (like the bureaucracy) in the process of ethnic politics, thereby leaving a vacuum that this thesis hopes to fill.

Moving further east, the Darjeeling hills have been subject to much academic scrutiny especially those aspects related to its flora, fauna and tea plantations (Khawas 2006, 2007; Sharma, 1997; Sarkar, 2008; Besky, 2008; Sarkar and Lama, 1986). Rhoderick Chalmer's (2007) doctoral thesis *We Nepalis: Language, Literature and the formation of a Nepali Public*

*Sphere in India, 1914-1940* is very pertinent to this research. Chalmers discusses the formation of the Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling. His thesis is a rich source of historical data on the development of Nepali language and literature which also traces the formation of the ethno-linguistic category which eventually came to be known as Nepali. Local authors like Bomjan (2008) have also engaged in writing the history of Darjeeling which corroborates the colonial historiography of colonial officers like O'Maley (1907) whose District Gazetteer is often referred to as one of the primary sources of history of the Darjeeling hills. Following the regional pattern, the social history of Darjeeling is reduced to a narration rather than a discussion of political and other significant events. In these books colonial history and the political movement for a separate homeland called Gorkhaland is usually intertwined, leading to the reification of a colonial construction of the martial race of the Gorkha and a homogenisation of other groups (Lepcha, Tibetans and Marwaris) who live in the Darjeeling hills.

Themes of Gorkha as a martial race, ethnic discrimination of the Nepalis and the violent Gorkhaland movement of 1986 have been the focus of Nepali scholars like T.B.Subba (1992, 1999), Rajendra Dhakal (2009) as well as many non-Nepali scholars (Samanta, 2003; Chakraborty, 2000; Chattopadhyay, 2008). The majority of these articles take a descriptive, non-analytical approach to the Gorkha or the Gorkhaland movement and disappointingly indulge in and promote homogenisation, reification and stereotypes. Almost all the writers on Darjeeling's history and politics see the Gorkha identity and its military origins as obvious and unproblematic, thereby promoting the image of the Gorkha as given, immutable and permanent. From an analytical perspective this link is not in conformity with the ground reality. Lexical problems and pejorative connotations aside, the number of people who joined the 'paltan'<sup>12</sup> or the army is far less compared to those who were/are engaged in the tea industry, employed in other sectors or unemployed. This leads to a large vacuum in the actual engagement with the Gorkha identity and its political dynamism as there are no attempts to unpack and understand the constituents of this identity.

Contributing to a more critical understanding of ethnic politics in Darjeeling are works by Bidhan Golay (2006) who discusses the ironies within the Gorkha identity and its concomitant ethnic politics and Chelsea Booth (2011) whose doctoral thesis discusses the finer nuances related to language and identity. Both of these works are instructive in the

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<sup>12</sup> Corrupt Nepali version of the English word platoon.

understanding of the Gorkha identity, the insecurities and rhetoric that supports this identity as well as the political movement that is dependent on this identity. This thesis continues on the same trajectory adopted by the two authors and attempts to present a critical, nuanced understanding of ethnic politics in Darjeeling that looks beyond the popular rhetoric of the Gorkha identity. Middleton (2011, 2013) and Shneiderman (2009) focus on different ethnic groups within the fold of the Gorkha category with work that concentrates more on the instrumental rationale of ethnic revivalism and interactions with the state which are also the core basis of the political movement around the Gorkha identity.

In neighbouring Sikkim, while literature on Buddhism, mountains, flora and fauna, the indigenous Lepcha and the Bhutia rulers abound (Arora, 2006; Fonning, 1987; Little, 2008; Balicki, 2008; Mullard, 2011) there has been very little research published on the study of the Nepalis or their politics in Sikkim. Identity politics is primarily woven around *inter-group* boundaries but of late, the focus has shifted to *intra-group* boundaries. In comparison to other ethnic groups in Sikkim (primarily the Bhutias and Lepchas), the intra-ethnic boundaries of the Nepali group are highly liminal thereby making it vulnerable to political exploitation. Ethnicity is intrinsically related to politics which has been recognised by scholars who have written on Sikkimese politics, before and after the ‘merger’ with India in 1975 (Das, 1983; Hiltz, 2003; O’Maley, 1907; Rose, 1978). While shedding some light on the political situation in Sikkim, these historical accounts present each ethnic group as a homogenous, pre-determined entity prone to and ready for political action. These accounts have also made inter-ethnic boundaries (especially between the historically dominant but minority Lepcha-Bhutia and the majority Nepali bloc) more real than they might be in practice because inter-ethnic marriages and other civic relations are in fact (fairly) common in Sikkim.

While McDuie-Ra (2009), Arora (2007) and Bentley (2007) discuss political negotiation between the state and the Lepcha ethnic group as well as the imperatives for cultural revivalism within this group, a small number of scholars like Shneiderman and Turin (2008), Vandenhelsken (2011), Gurung (2010), Phadnis (1980) and Sinha (2006, 2009) have engaged with contemporary Nepali ethnic politics from the perspective of development, anthropology, sociology and politics. These works contribute to a critical understanding of the, mostly cultural, mechanisms behind this resurgence of ethnic identity and point towards the different motivations that encourage this development. Mahendra P Lama’s (1994) edited text also tries to make a substantial contribution to research and analysis on topics pertaining to the political-economy of Sikkim but its chapters fail to satisfy as they come across as mere descriptions or statements of facts and figures with little critical analysis of the topics discussed. In summation,

there is an absence of a rigorous analysis of ethnic politics generally and Nepali ethnic politics specifically.

In Darjeeling and Sikkim, colonial records and accounts are regarded as important sources of history and although the state (whether it be the monarchy in Sikkim or the British administration in Darjeeling) is always mentioned, there is hardly any critical, analytical discussion of its role. Thus, it is not only the ethnic groups which are seen as monolithic but also the state. The importance of the state is acknowledged but the role it plays in the construction of identity is not discussed nor is the impact that perceptions of the state (negative or positive) have on framing grievances and strategies of action. For example- what are the policies implemented by the Sikkimese state that make it more favourable not only to its citizens but also to its neighbours in Nepal and Darjeeling where serious anti-state movements exist. In the eastern Himalaya ethnic politics is mostly based on emulation and shared notions of development, of what is good and right, thus a comparison of the attitudes and approaches towards the state can shed light on the generic nature of ethnic politics in the region. This comparison also reveals a general feature of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya that political mobilisation is not really a challenge to uproot the political system but rather to use ethnicity as a strategic base to access it.

However the dearth of literature focusing on this relationship means that different elements of the relationship between states and ethnic groups have to be sieved out of the existing literature. Also the fact that ethnic identity and the politics around it exploded into public imagination and politics fairly recently makes identity politics in the eastern Himalaya a contemporary issue that scholars have only very recently started exploring. For example, in Sikkim claims by different Nepali groups to be recognized within other socio-economic categories like Most Backward Class (MBC) and Other Backward Classes (OBC)<sup>13</sup> emerged less than two decades ago. The recent nature of this phenomenon combined with the limited research on the area, means that there is a serious dearth of critical academic literature. Till very recently, these identities have been studied only in their capacity as cultural entities and there has been no linking of these identities to the economic and political environment around them. Of similar importance in the area is the changing nature of the state from monarchies (Sikkim, Nepal) or a colony (Darjeeling) to political units participating in democracy and

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<sup>13</sup> Both are socio-economic categories that have been created in order to permit affirmative action for those sections of the society who have been socially as well as economically marginalized. However, the definition as well as the groups that are encompassed within this group is highly fluid, aspects which will be discussed in greater detail later in the thesis.



electing heads of state. Thus in order to gain a comprehensive account of ethnic politics, this thesis proposes to take into account the history of the state and specifically its relationship with ethnic groups.

Although different forms of ‘everyday politics’ (pro-ethnic government, election propaganda, reservation politics) have made ethnicity an inevitable part of politics and a valuable resource, there is no critical engagement with it. This leads to methodological as well as theoretical questions of how to engage with, analyse and articulate ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya.

## **2. Theoretical underpinnings**

One of the most important and influential factors in the articulation and expression of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya is the state<sup>14</sup> and its bureaucratic extensions. The state does not determine ethnicity but it influences ethnic politics by its recognition or non-recognition of ethnicity as a legitimate basis for political organisation. This renders prior ethnic divisions more permanent, promotes new mobilisations of formerly unrecognized groups and incites latent ethnic nationalism through increased social interactions (Nagel, 1995; Nagel, 1979, in Neilsen, 1985: 135; Brown, 1994), thereby supporting Weber’s definition of ethnic groups which are seen as having an inherent potential for collective political action.

Migdal (2001:16) proposes a definition of the state which has been instrumental to the positioning of the state in relation to ethnic groups in this thesis. He defines the state as a ‘field of power marked by the use and threat of violence and shaped by (i) the coherent, controlling organisation in a territory and (ii) the actual practices of its multiple parts. Migdal’s ‘state in society’ (ibid: 49) approach has been instructive in imagining as well as describing the activities of the state and the response to it in the eastern Himalaya. According to this concept, the society is depicted as a *mélange* of social organisations rather than a dichotomous structure of center and periphery. Society constrains the state and transforms it through internal forces but in the same process the society is also transformed by the state. Various formations,

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<sup>14</sup> According to Jessop (2007:7) the complexity of the state begins, like ethnicity, with its definition because there is no single theory or theoretical perspective that can encompass all its attributes. On the one hand the state is just one of the institutional emblems among others within a social formation and on the other hand it is peculiarly charged with the overall responsibility for maintaining the cohesion of the social formation of which it is merely a part.

including the idea of the state as well as many others singly or in tandem, offer individuals strategies of personal survival and for some strategies of upward mobility. An individual's choice of strategy is based on the material incentives and coercion that organisations can bring to bear on this as well as on the organisation's symbols and values concerning how social life should be ordered. This points towards the central theme of this thesis which is to establish a dialectic relation between the state and society. It also highlights the material aspect of the choices that groups and individuals make under the broad structure of incentives or disincentives that have been put forth by the state.

Migdal (2001:17) raises pertinent questions regarding the relationship between state and society. According to him (*ibid*: 50, emphasis mine) societies are not static formations but are constantly *becoming* as a result of these struggles over social control. Although this thesis does not analyse identity politics from a statist perspective, the role played by the state directly (as evident in Sikkim) and indirectly (in Nepal and Darjeeling) cannot be overlooked. The interaction between an ethnic group and the different extensions of the state is crucial because it has an impact on everything, from the aim and agenda to the strategies of action by members of different ethnic groups. Thus, different aspects of the relationship between the state and ethnic groups are one of the focal points of this thesis. However, instead of focussing on the generic relationship between the two, the thesis focuses on the role of the state in abetting ethnic politics.

Apart from an analysis of the politics of being Nepali in a multi-ethnic environment, this thesis also highlights an interesting development in the politics of South Asia, namely- the strengthening of ethnic affiliations (whether it be caste, religion, language) over other means of political mobilization (class, political ideology). It posits that ethnic politics has enabled different groups of people (ranging from ethnic associations and cultural elites to ethnic leaders) to assert or express their political agency more freely and effectively. This is well evidenced by the variety of political actors that emerge in the three sites. Apart from the diversity of political actors, the case studies also highlight a change in the resources which are now deemed valuable in the political domain. Although the cases confirm the control and authority of ethnic elites over the forms and articulation of ethnic culture, fluency in an ethnic language or traditional ritual is now considered an important asset in the claims to being recognized as an authentic group by the state. There is a seamless interchange of identities, people and resources between the cultural, political and the social realms thereby placing

groups and individuals in an intense matrix or ‘fields’, very much akin to that theorised by Pierre Bourdieu (1977).

While Migdal’s ‘state in society’ approach is useful in locating the state and its interaction with different variables in the thesis, Bourdieu’s concept of ‘fields’ helps in constructing a framework through which to understand the dynamic relationship between ethnic groups, the state and the political environment in which they are ensconced. The thesis analyses the politics of contention between groups located in different social and class structures in different political locations and thus, the concept of ‘fields’ helps in understanding the actors, the structures of which they are a product, and their actions, which are a response to those same structures.

As a conceptual tool, concepts of field<sup>15</sup> and habitus provide a framework within which to understand identity politics in the eastern Himalaya which is complicated both by the multiplicity of actors and the roles that they play. The concept of ‘fields’ helps isolate political actors within their respective fields (political, economic, social) and then analyse their roles within that field as well as outside it. As the three case studies will demonstrate, the agency of the political actors extends and cuts across numerous fields as a result of the highly transferrable ‘social capital’ that they hold within a particular area. The case studies will show that not only do the various ‘fields’ of politics, culture and community interact and overlap at certain points but ethnic politics also enables people from different backgrounds to move back and forth between these ‘fields’. Multiple actors hold different types of capital which might be valued across a range of fields rather than simply in one, thus an actor is no longer bound to a particular field. For example-ethnic politics has opened avenues for people ranging from civil servants to ethnic language teachers who now cross the liminal boundaries of politics and culture. This also shows that the boundaries of politics and culture have changed, thereby highlighting a dialectic relationship between the two as it is difficult to gauge regarding which of the two might have initiated these boundary changes.

According to Bourdieu, social life can only be understood by incorporating objective, material social and cultural structures into the practices and experiences of individuals and groups, thereby endorsing a reflexive science of society (Postone et al, 1993:3). Ethnic politics

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<sup>15</sup> According to Bourdieu (in Reed-Danahay, 2005: 30), a ‘field’ may be defined as a ‘field of forces within which agents occupy positions that statistically determine the positions they take with respect to the field, their position taking being aimed either at conserving or transforming the structure of relations of forces that is constitutive to the field...the concept of the ‘field’ is a research tool, the main aim of which is to enable the scientific construction of social objects’.

in the eastern Himalaya cannot be understood by neglecting the economic and political structures that surround and affect ethnic groups. While ethnic identity is important, it is nonetheless nested among other different identities, thereby necessitating the empirical analysis of the impact of exogenous factors on the ethnic politics. A comprehensive analysis requires a multi-dimensional approach that takes into account both the subjective as well the objective aspects of the socio-political structures around ethnic groups. The thesis aims to establish that the socio-political evolution of these groups has been influenced by both material as well as cultural elements in their surroundings and that ethnic identity is therefore dynamic, even though it may not be explicitly apparent. Bourdieu emphasizes equally all the aspects of the social environment that might have an impact not only on the construction of an identity but also the relationships between ethnic groups and the state. This caters well to the dominant themes of this thesis which are to challenge the notion of ethnic homogeneity, the stereotypical framework of pre-defined boundaries and loyalties and simplistic understandings of the relations between state and ethnic groups.

Ethnic politics relies, to a very large extent, on the use of culture- not only as a means towards a tangible reward but also as the reward itself. Thus, the primary idea theorised by Bourdieu which connects action to culture, structure and power presents a framework which is applicable in the thesis (Swartz, 1997:9). For example, in Sikkim the existence of an ethnic language and a script is vital for the official recognition of that particular group by the state. While this recognition might bring tangible rewards and benefits, the very process of revival and preservation of culture can also have equal, if not greater significance for the ethnic group which is on the verge of assimilation with the dominant group. Culture and culturally symbolic goods (like festivals, language, and cultural practices) are therefore very important.

This leads to further questions- what motivates human action? Are human beings simply *homo economicus* or is it just structures that dictate how groups and individuals act? As incentives for political action, Bourdieu's theory imparts the same importance and relevance to both symbolic goods and material goods, unlike Marxism which gives primacy to objective economic factors or structuralism which understands human action as a response to the overarching structures of a society and thereby compromises the agency of the individual in the various forms of everyday politics. Analysis of this present research in simple Marxian or Structuralist terms becomes complicated because it is not possible to identify separate classes with a certain degree of cohesive class consciousness in a region where there has never been

intense class movements.<sup>16</sup> It is also not possible to isolate simple structural relationships that influence life chances when groups and individuals are located in numerous cross-cutting social, economic, cultural and political relations.

Although specific socio-historical and economic surroundings do have an impact on the individual's choices and disposition, this thesis extends Bourdieu's 'habitus' to imagine a '*macro-habitus*'. This is made up of their position in the world economic system, international regimes and of course their position within the nation. These factors are all socially reproduced over generations and inform people's perception of their position and status in the political field. This thesis is a study of how groups and individuals have used their shared position in the field to stake political claims. It will show that rather than aiming to alter their position in the field, ethnic groups have used their position to alter the game itself, thereby changing the very nature of politics in the eastern Himalaya.

### **3: Methodology**

I used qualitative methods of data collection aimed at highlighting the socially constructed nature of reality (Gray, 2004). The research draws its epistemological orientations from interpretivism (which views the subject matter of social sciences as different from natural science and thus the subjective understanding of the social world) and poses both descriptive as well as explanatory questions. Interpretivism is guided by the view that social phenomena and their meanings are continually being achieved by social actors and are in a constant state of revision (Bryman, 2004:17) and thus, Constructivism forms the basis of its theoretical considerations.

Research triangulation provides a flexible approach which allows a combination of different research methods to obtain as well as cross-check data, thereby ensuring greater

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<sup>16</sup> This is however not to suggest that classes do not exist or do not impact the social and political choices of Nepalis but rather that despite the existence of some of the factors that could have facilitated class action (economic grievances, large demography) it failed to do so, even in Nepal where the Maoists had to equate class cleavages with ethnicity as a mobilization tactic. More specifically, eastern Nepal was one of the zones that emerged almost unscathed from the Maoist insurgency precisely because it is a relatively prosperous region without much grievance against the state or other ethnic groups. This therefore makes ethnic mobilization in eastern Nepal even more interesting. In Sikkim, the pro-democracy movement of 1975 can be deemed as a movement of disparate classes as it was not just the agriculturists or the working class that rose up against the monarchy. This movement was brought on by a very complicated mix of land owners, political opportunists, and the Indian administration. However, the democracy that this movement ushered brought with it politics that is dependent on ethnic sentiments and insecurities rather than class.

reliability of the data generated. Thus my primary methods were semi-structured individual as well as focus-group interviews. As opposed to questionnaire surveys or structured interviews, semi-structured interviews gave respondents greater flexibility whilst answering questions, especially those respondents who were not very articulate or those who felt it important to give extended background histories or personal opinions. This method permitted me to engage in dialogue and generate questions over topics which were not in the original interview schedule and to re-frame or investigate the question further without having to make drastic compromises with the research questions. The respondents for both semi-structured and focus group interviews were based on snowball (selecting a sample using networks) and convenience sampling (where the sample is selected from a location convenient to the researcher and whenever a person with relevant characteristics is seen).

The guiding hypotheses for the fieldwork were derived from questions generated after assessing the literature. I sought to establish that there was a variation in the articulation of ethnicity and political identity within the Nepali group as a response to the state as well as the wider political economy and the main themes for the interviews were:

1. What were the changes in the norms, attitudes and beliefs of the various ethnic groups, especially in the context of recent changes in the political structures?
2. How did the social, political and economic background affect and alter the perception of the state as well as the changes that were wanted and expected?
3. What were the motivations to either be a part of an ethnic group or political party or to abstain from active participation?

I chose preliminary fieldwork sites on the basis of their centrality in the study of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya. Choices were guided by personal experience and knowledge of Sikkim and Darjeeling, while Ilam in eastern Nepal was chosen after extended research and interaction with people with prior research experience in Nepal.

My field site was divided into three different areas and while I was able to spend over three months in east Nepal without travelling back to India, fieldwork in Darjeeling and Sikkim had to be flexible according to the political climate, especially in Darjeeling where the Gorkhaland movement was at its height. Fieldwork in Darjeeling was greatly hampered by strikes and road blocks that were called by leading political parties that curtailed my mobility to a great extent. However, strikes and demonstrations in Darjeeling as well as in east Nepal

presented an exciting opportunity to engage in participant observation. I was also able to conduct on the spot focus group interviews with leaders as well as other members of the protesting parties which allowed me to record the excitement and the spirit of the movement.

Fieldwork was further complicated by the multiplicity of sites as in each site I had to position myself differently. My own personal background of having being brought up with strict Hindu codes of purity and pollution has taught me all too well the impact of my caste on every aspect of social intercourse. Thus, in Nepal, in spite of my Indian citizenship, my ethnic background as a (high caste) Hindu Nepali made it easier to find accommodation with a Newar family, be allowed into cooking areas and prevented social awkwardness with member of other groups. While being Nepali and speaking the Nepali language facilitated my entry into the field in general, my *matwali* background<sup>17</sup> helped me integrate with members of other *matwali* communities (Rai, Limbu, Gurung) who were also my primary respondents.

Almost as if to prove the malleability of identity from the outset, my Sikkimese identity helped me initiate numerous conversations with the Limbus of east Nepal, especially of the northern villages who had previously crossed over to Sikkim to work in cardamom fields. Gender was neither an impediment nor an asset during my fieldwork, especially in Nepal. Women in the eastern hills of Nepal, whether they be activists or agriculturalists, are very proactive, unlike in other parts of Nepal where the role of high caste women in the public sphere is restricted. Thus, I was able to forge friendships and gain entry into social circles fairly easily. However, in Darjeeling district it was not my ethnic identity but my Sikkimese identity which was most prominent for my respondents. Darjeeling has always experienced more ethnic intermingling than Sikkim and thus despite being a Nepali, it was my territorial identity that was seen as a mark of distinction. Being Sikkimese was somehow presumed to make me unable to understand poverty or economic hardships. The local imaginations of Sikkim, where cars were believed to outnumber humans and where no one went hungry implied that I would be unable to grasp the ‘real situation’ of poverty and discrimination in Darjeeling.

Ironically, the most difficult field site was my own hometown of Gangtok, Sikkim, where not only was it difficult to meet respondents but I was also burdened with multiple social

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<sup>17</sup> In the caste hierarchy imposed by Jung Bahadur Rana, *matwali* was the alcohol drinking groups which were below the Brahmins and Kshatriyas but above the untouchable castes. In spite of being a Chettri, which is a high caste I have mixed ancestry with my paternal grandmother belonging to the Magar ethnic group and my mother belonging to the indigenous Lepcha ethnic group, thereby diluting any sharp ‘Aryan facial features’ (according to *matwali* friends in Nepal).

roles as a researcher, a Nepali and a representative of my family. Contacting civil servants, who were my primary respondents in Gangtok, was difficult not only because it involved a very formal, routinized process of knowing the ‘right people’ but also because of their sheer reluctance to impart any information. This was, however, understandable as their position as civil servants in a bureaucratic system which is controlled by political forces made their position precarious. Out of all the field sites it was only in Gangtok that my respondents either refused to give me interviews or did not want me to record interviews and asked me specifically to take notes. Instead of verbal interaction respondents in Gangtok provided me with secondary sources of data like books and other documents pertaining to their ethnic group. As frustrating as this was, I was able to conduct interviews with highly placed officers who were also executive members of most of the ethnic associations.

Moving out of Gangtok to west Sikkim however enabled me to enter a more relaxed atmosphere in which to conduct fieldwork. In West Sikkim I felt free as a researcher and the responses from my respondents, although still very measured in contrast to that in Darjeeling and Ilam, were more forthcoming and open.

### **Fieldwork**

I conducted the first phase of my fieldwork in Ilam district of East Nepal between July and October 2010. My primary aim was to collect data and analyse the ongoing Limbuwan movement which is a demand for a homeland for the Limbu ethnic group. Ilam is one of Nepal’s seventy-five districts and is further sub-divided into forty-eight Village Development Committees (VDC). Ilam town is the largest VDC and is the administrative centre of the District. The town itself is small and has a highly mixed ethnic population, the majority being Rai rather than Limbus, who are populous further north in Panchthar and Taplejung districts. However, Ilam being the largest town in the district with accessible roads and communication, all major events take place there and all organizations- social as well as political- have their head offices there. The power of *afno manchay* (one’s own people), a phenomenon which the thesis discusses in great detail was crucial in almost all aspects of my fieldwork, from finding accommodation to travelling to remote villages. The power of informal networks was vital in gaining access to people, their perspectives and interpretations of events. Although not a barrier, language was an impediment during the early days because the Nepali spoken in Sikkim and Darjeeling varies considerably from that of eastern Nepal in the usage of words and expressions. However, with time and practice my Nepali improved and I was fluent in the language and also comfortable with the social etiquette, which at first had left me feeling



awkward and uncomfortable. I was also able to observe, as well as participate, in numerous cultural and political events like strikes, party elections, Limbu student union elections and cultural programmes which highlighted the liminal boundaries and the interconnectedness of different fields- whether they be cultural or political. For example, members of political parties would also be members of ethnic associations, would work in an NGO and could also support gender issues. Thus, identities and corresponding roles varied and were often contextual. Weekly *haats* or markets, especially in predominantly Limbu villages, were very interesting and informative sites on Limbu culture, at least the material aspects, as well as the general economic condition of the people.

After spending over three months in Nepal and conducting more than sixty interviews, I started the second phase of my fieldwork in Gangtok in mid-October where the main aim of my work was to document and verify the growth of ethnic politics in the state after 1994, the year the present ruling government came to power. I wanted to analyze two important and inter-related issues (i) the role of the State in the *ethnicisation* of local politics and (ii) the cultural repercussions within the Nepali ethnic group as a direct result of political action. Dependency extends from the capital town to the districts and to the villages as even the average farmer is bound in a system where the state has become a supplier of free goods. Thus, in order to understand the nature and degree of dependency I chose to travel to the town of Soreng in West Sikkim. It is one of Sikkim's more important towns and is well connected by road to other villages. As a Limbu-Tamang stronghold it enabled me to analyse the connection between the ethnic associations in Gangtok and their rural counterparts. I conducted interviews with members of two ethnic groups (Rai and Tamang) in Soreng before going to the Limbu village of Hee Pechrek. Most of my respondents showed a general awareness of the political environment and their rights and benefits under one category or the other (the most popular being the Scheduled Tribe and the Other Backward Classes) and also acknowledged the role played by the state in supporting them.

General information about ethnic associations (in urban, semi-urban and rural areas) depended entirely upon people's interests and social networks. The further away they lived from town centers, the less they knew about the activities and the changes that were being introduced by the associations. They were not familiar with their ethnic dresses and festivals and relied completely upon their representatives in the towns and ultimately in Gangtok, to take decisions on their behalf. These latter in turn looked towards Nepal for support and collaboration. Again in Soreng, personal networks were of immense help to get access to the nearby villages and to the students of Soreng High School where I conducted a small survey

with school students (aged 15-18yrs). The aim of this survey was to examine the acceptance and use of ethnic languages amongst the younger generation. The result of the survey revealed that most spoke their respective ethnic languages at home, that they preferred English over all other languages and thought that after English, their ethnic languages would be most useful in the future, thereby eclipsing the popularity and utility of Nepali language. The data is thus a small example of a positive shift in the way ethnicity is viewed which can be attributed to governmental policies like introduction of regional languages, cultural events and the support which it lends to ethnic associations who work with their respective communities.

I also visited Namchi, South Sikkim to observe the Namchi Mahautsav, a three day ethnic gala sponsored by the Government of Sikkim as an exhibition of the cultures of different ethnic groups. I was also able to visit Tharpu, a small town close to Soreng which boasts the only Limbu ethnographic museum.

After gathering data in Sikkim (primary as well as secondary) I began my third and final fieldwork in Darjeeling in December 2010. Here the movement for a separate state had been revived and tripartite talks for an Interim Setup, a form of administrative arrangement in place of a State of Gorkhaland were going on between the Central government, the State government and the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJM)<sup>18</sup> a political party representing the Nepalis/Gorkhas of India. I divided my fieldwork between two different geographical locations- the hills (where the majority are Nepalis) and the Duars (where the Nepalis are a minority) - in order to understand their impact on identity formation and the process of ethnic politics.

My primary respondents in Darjeeling were intellectual elites, plantation workers, and members of ethnic associations and political parties. I prepared two sets of respondent questions keeping in mind the geographical and socio-economic variation of the two different areas and its impact on identity formation. As I was interested in collecting and comparing the different interpretations of the Gorkha identity, I relied on snowball and collective sampling to reach my respondents and conducted over thirty semi-structured interviews, engaged in informal conversations and was a participant observer in the strikes and rallies that took place. Research in Darjeeling was particularly challenging because it was easy to become subjective and side tracked by the ongoing movement instead of focusing on the manifestation and

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<sup>18</sup> Mobility during the fieldwork was considerably affected by the incessant strikes that were called by the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, the leading political party, and I was unable to visit some areas that could have enhanced my data further.

articulation of identity. One of the primary questions that emerged at the outset was the process of the creation and internalization of the Gorkha identity. I had to rely on familial as well as other social networks for introductions to potential respondents. Living close to Happy Valley Tea Estate was rewarding in many ways as I was able to observe the social environment and the lifestyle of not only those who worked in the gardens but also life in Darjeeling generally. A visit to Makaibari TE, one of the very few tea gardens with a resident owner and community based co-operatives was helpful in making comparisons between different tea estates. Interaction with the residents of Happy Valley TE highlighted the fact that most lived in perennial insecurity as they owned no land, were completely dependent on the factory and had no alternate sources of employment. Owing to their large numbers not only was this environment conducive for a mass movement (with typically violent overtones that stressed the martial identity of the Gorkha) but it also enabled local leaders to emerge on the political forefront. Interaction with the workers and residents of tea gardens also provided insights into the emergence of local leaders who frequently crossed and acted in both the political and social field.

I also conducted interviews in Mungpoo town, which was established by the British for the commercial production of Cinchona.<sup>19</sup> I chose Mungpoo for two specific reasons; first to interrogate the social and economic conditions in rural and semi-rural areas outside of Darjeeling and second, to gauge the internalization of the Gorkha identity as small towns like Mungpoo are the support bases of the Gorkhaland movement. Respondents ranged from the Cinchona factory foreman and its present Director to individuals who were heavily invested (ideologically) in the movement. Finally, I conducted interviews in the Duars tea belt (Bagrakot and Banarhat) and Siliguri in the plains of northern West Bengal which is home to a minority Nepali population. Interviews here were instrumental in comparing the varying perspectives on the Gorkha as well as the movement. I finally concluded my fieldwork in New Delhi where I was able to interview two Nepalis, one from Dehradun and the other from Darjeeling, who had different but interesting approaches to the Gorkha.

Fortunately, I was able to visit the field once again in August 2011 and conducted some new research on the history of Nepalis in Sikkim because the existing literature was insufficient to draw a comprehensive picture of what had happened to the Nepalis once they had migrated

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<sup>19</sup> The bark of the cinchona tree is utilised to make Quinine, an anti-malarial drug. Cinchona Plantation was first introduced in the Darjeeling hills in 1850 but it was not till 1874 that a Quinine factory was established in the Mungpoo hills which are 35 km east of Darjeeling. After India's Independence in 1947, it was transferred to the Ministry of Trade and Commerce of Government of West Bengal (Sharma, 1997:27-50).

to Sikkim. In Gangtok I conducted interviews with members of Sikkim Sahitya Akademi and lecturers from Sikkim Government College, the findings of which are discussed in later chapters.

## Part One: Contextualising ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya

### Chapter 2: Locating the Nepali

#### 2.1 Becoming Nepali

##### (i) Socio-Political History of Nepal

The ‘quasi-ethnic’ category (Hutt, 1997:102) ‘Nepali’ not only subsumes under it different ethnic groups but is also a cross border phenomenon because of the presence of Nepalis who migrated away from their *mul desa* (country of origin) to various parts of the eastern Himalayas.

In the Indian sub-continent, the 17<sup>th</sup> century was marked by the decline of the Mughal empire and contrasted by the gradual advent of the European colonisers, especially the British who were successful in the conquests and annexations of numerous princely states, giving form to what would later be known as British India. During the same period, the Himalayan region was also passing through a similar phase of disintegration of empires and the rise of new ones. The western Himalayan monarchical principalities of the Karnali basin ruled by the Malla kings had existed from the early 12<sup>th</sup> century. Known as *Khas*- the inhabitants of the region spoke an Indo-European language and the social system was organised on the basis of a caste system which was oriented around war- the priests at the top, followed by the soldiers belonging to the *Khas* and *Magar*<sup>20</sup> groups, the bell ringers (*damai*), blacksmith (*kami*) and cobblers (*sarki*) at the bottom. These groups maintained strict ritual hierarchy and came together only during war (Toffin, 2006: 226).<sup>21</sup> Efficient agriculturists, the culture and tradition of the people of this region was deeply embedded in Hinduism and in the divine rights of the king as he was considered to be a part of Vishnu, *Vishnu amsa*, the protector of the universe in Hindu mythology. The *Khas* considered themselves as higher, purer Hindus than those in who lived in the land defiled by the Mughals, India or *Muglan*.

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<sup>20</sup> A mongoloid ethnic group speaking a complex Tibeto-Burmese language, originally inhabiting central-western Nepal.

<sup>21</sup> The ritual services of the different castes were predominantly war related functions which focussed upon the king. This ensemble was called upon each year to assist in the bloody sacrifices on behalf of the sovereign during the annual celebration of war. This cosmological order which exists today only in rituals was in the past evoked in ritualised warfare. Warfare was the only activity that brought the entire society together (Lecomte-Tilouine and Gellner, 2004:14)

The Karnali state however disintegrated in the 14<sup>th</sup> century leading to the formation of numerous smaller states or principalities which came to be known as the *caubisye rajya* or the twenty four kingdoms and were constantly engaged in petty warfare and border raids. Amongst these states was the principality of Gorkha, led by Prithvi Narayan Shah, which by means of conquests, annexations and marriage was able to consolidate sixty principalities and with the final conquest of the Kathmandu valley in 1768, originally known as Nepal, gave a rudimentary shape to the present country of Nepal. The boundaries of this new kingdom of Gorkha were constantly shifting but between his ascension in 1743 and his death in 1775, the kingdom stretched to the Kangra valley in the west, all of east Nepal and a large portion of modern Sikkim (Whelpton: 2005:35). Burghart (1984) explains elaborately three indigenous territorial concepts of possession, realm and country and their respective sources of legitimation in proprietary, ritual and ancestral authority. The king maintained relationship with his subjects on numerous levels which transcended the level of the physical to that of the ritual and like the other rulers in the Ganges basin, claimed his sovereignty by exercising proprietary authority upon their possessions (*muluk*) and the ritual authority within their realm (*desa*). Included within the monarch's possessions and realm were various countries (*des*) in which the king's tenants or subjects were natives who claimed certain rights to their land and their way of life on the basis of certain ancestry.

Although, foreign to the prevailing notion of statecraft and territory, the concept of territorial demarcation had been introduced and imposed by the British in 1814 after the Treaty of Segauli. The boundaries of the Gorkha kingdom were finally drawn in the 19<sup>th</sup> century with its westward expansion being halted at the Sutlej by Ranjit Singh, the King of Punjab in 1809-10, while its eastern boundaries were defined by its defeat in the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-1816. Thus with the drawing up of the territorial boundaries these two realms finally coincided, giving a physical shape and form to all the realms ruled over by the King.

In administration, the king saw himself as the landlord of all in his possession (*muluk*) and his relation with his subjects was based on an extensive patrimonial relationship where the tracts of land were organised on the basis of tenurial categories and then assigned, bestowed or auctioned to his subjects. Various tenurial categories like *jagir* were for military officers, *nankirs* for civil administrators, *raikars* for tenant cultivators' defined different statuses of individuals in the society. The tenurial categories differed with respect to the specific rights and duties of the subjects' vis-à-vis the king's land as well as with respect to powers (inheritance, divisibility, transferability, and irrevocability) which were accorded by the king (Burghart, 1984: 103). Thus, there was an elaborate network of patron-client relationship that

revolved around land that made the very nature of the state extractive and exploitative (Riaz and Basu, 2007:8).

Lack of monetisation of economy meant that taxes from agricultural production formed the basis of the revenue of the Gorkha kingdom. The lack of hard currency and a centralized political bureaucracy led to the spread of the *jagir* system whereby the army and other government soldiers were allocated different lands from which they were allowed to collect taxes. This led to widespread absentee landlordism and a long hierarchical chain of command which gave rise to the growth of local elites as powerful middlemen thereby increasing the burden of the peasants who had to pay taxes to their actual landlords as well as placate the local elites with tributes (See Regmi, 1984). Payment of government officials in land also meant that, over time, agricultural land became scarce which put undue pressure on the peasants who had no tenurial security. This led Stiller (1976: 289) to call the time between 1816-1839 a period of the ‘silent cry...a cry of pain and a cry of protest against official indifference to the lot of village Nepal’.

The kingdom of Gorkha, so formed by Prithvi Narayan and his descendents was a conglomeration of the conquered territory, created by a political elite, whose prime interest and motivation lay in the control over resources in order to fund its military expansion. This made the state not only the prime mover of the material forces of production but also of social organisation (Regmi, 1984:9). The Shah rulers (1769-1846) were faced with a challenging task of integrating various groups and communities with different cultures, modes of production, social relationships and patterns of loyalty. The power of the Gorkha rulers depended on how their relationship was perceived by the various groups which in turn depended on how these groups had been subjugated (through defeat in war or through reconciliation)<sup>22</sup> and the level of difficulty in ruling these groups. Under the Shahs there was very little establishment of efficient administration or revenue collection owing not only to the topographical constraints which made it difficult but also because of lack of centralisation (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1991:234). Control was strongest near the seat of power in Kathmandu and in the central hills and became weaker towards the periphery of the kingdom, leading to situations where there was no identification with the Gorkha state in the Terai and in the eastern hills, which made Gorkhali rule almost colonial.

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<sup>22</sup> In the eastern hills, the Limbus had been incorporated into the Gorkha kingdom in 1772-4 after much war and a final reconciliation on the basis of which they were granted far reaching autonomy over their traditional lands. See Pradhan 1991.

Lack of centralization and expedient administration was compensated through religion. Hinduism provided the king with a rational basis and his popular legitimacy. As the head of the patrimonial state, the king's relationship with his subjects was hierarchically and ascriptively defined and Hinduism stood as the foundation from his divine sanctions flowed. It was the king's duty to maintain the moral order of his subjects and thus one of the fundamental objectives of the state was the creation of an *Asal Hindustan* (Land of Pure Hindus) in contrast to the Indian subcontinent which had been polluted by the Muslims as well as the British (Sharma, 1997: 476; Whelpton, 2007:56).

The political testament or the *Dibya Upadesh* given by Prithvi Narayan in 1774 forms the basis of the Hindu kingdom where *dharma* was the ordering principle with a ruler who is entitled to enforce the socio-cosmic order (Burghart, 1996:268). This ideology formed the basis of the construction of a Hindu kingdom and the eventual social stratification which was codified by the Prime Minister Jung Bahadur Rana in the *Muluki Ain* (National Legal Code) of 1854. The main significance of the *Muluki Ain* was that it encompassed all people under the Gorkhali rule. The *Ain* placed all the groups in a ritual hierarchy with the Brahmin and Chettri at the top of the moral order, a position which usually also coincided with the economic order. The state had a more active role in the maintenance and even alteration of caste statuses in order to accommodate politico-economic powers (Gurung, 1997:502).<sup>23</sup>

However as Pfaff-Czarnecka (1991: 255) says, 'even when talking of Nepal as a true Hindu kingdom...it was far too difficult to legitimize themselves (i.e. kingship) by way of cultural concepts alien to the conquered population, while maintaining and establishing cultural cleavages served their purpose'. Thus apart from the protection of cows the Shahs did not proselytize the non-Hindu population (Michaels, 1997:86).<sup>24</sup> What emerged as more important and powerful in the spread of Hinduism amongst the non-Hindu population was the preferential treatment in the division of labour where all the important positions in the central administration- dignitaries and army officers' were held by high caste Hindus leading to the

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<sup>23</sup> During the Rana regime the society was ordered according to orthodox Hindu notions. In the *Muluki Ain* all groups were equally called *jat* but the key distinctions, supported by law and the judicial system, were between the wearers of the sacred thread, the *Tagadhari* who were also the elite of the society and the rest who were known as *Matwali* or alcohol consuming class. The subordinate groups were themselves divided into enslaveable and non-enslaveable categories and into 'clean castes' and 'untouchable castes' (Gellner, 2007:1823).

<sup>24</sup> According to Michaels (1997:80, 82) in Hindu South Asia, the protection of the cow was often connected with Hinduism. As for the Shah dynasty, the very name of their ancestral seat Gorkha or *Goraksa* in Sanskrit literally meant the protector of cows and in a secondary meaning it meant the 'protector of the earth' which is believed to be as nourishing as the cow.



co-option of the local elites in the system, who found it beneficial to either imitate or accept Hindu rituals and traditions (especially the festival of Dasain)<sup>25</sup> in order to find favour with the Hindu overlords leading to an eventual *sanskritization*<sup>26</sup> of the entire group.

However after Prithvi Narayan's death in 1775, none of his descendants could command complete control over the kingdom and its administration owing to numerous factional politics in the court (see Rose, 1971; Whelpton, 2007). This unstable situation finally culminated in the Kot Massacre of 1846<sup>27</sup> which catapulted the influential political-elite family of Jung Bahadur Kunwar (who later adopted the title Rana and claimed Rajput ancestry) to power. In 1857, Jung Bahadur formalised an arrangement whereby the king acted as the head of the state but all powers were effectively in the hands of the Prime-Minister and the Rana family ruled over Nepal for over a hundred years till 1951.

During this period *Hinduization* became an important state agenda and was strictly enforced by Jung Bahadur Rana who, unlike Prithvi Narayan, did not want to achieve a real Hindusthan but sought to protect the only kingdom in the world which was ruled by Hindus. In doing so, the state became more involved and more aggressive in promoting as well as legitimising itself through religion (Burghart, 1996:271-72). Following the precedence of the Shah rulers, the Ranas kept the kingdom isolated from influences from the southern border. Despite the burgeoning power of the British imperialists in India and the eventual establishment of a Resident Officer in Kathmandu after the Anglo-Gurkha war (1814-16), a 'closed door' policy was maintained by Jung Bahadur who was aware of the political repercussions of British interference in domestic politics as exemplified by the colonisation of India (Whelpton, 2007: 43, 47; Gurung, 1997: 501).

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<sup>25</sup> Dasain is one of the most important Hindu festivals which after the conquest by Prithvi Narayan also became a cultural symbol of Hindu domination. The ritual involves accepting *tika* on the forehead (vermillion coloured rice mixed with curd) which came to be associated with a sign of inferiority to and dependency on the one giving the *tika*. Headmen throughout Nepal were required to travel to their district center to receive *tika* from the representative of the king thereby using cultural symbols for state consolidation (Forbes, 1999:114).

<sup>26</sup> A process by which the lower caste or non-Hindu groups adopt the ideology or parts of ideology of Hinduism in order to raise its economic, political or social status in the caste hierarchy of a given area. This term was made popular by M.N.Srinivas's (1952) seminal research amongst the Coorgs in South India.

<sup>27</sup> It was one of the most important royal intrigues in the Gorkha durbar which was orchestrated by the Queen regent Rajya Lakshmi Devi to oust the reigning King Rajendra and her step-sons in order to install her son Prince Ranendra as the heir to the throne. Almost all the ministers supporting the King were either killed or exiled (Panday, 1973: 50).

The *Muluki Ain* which was enforced in 1854 framed the caste hierarchy in such a way that ‘diversity was translated to inequality’ and positions were increasingly ascribed to different ranks that corresponded with caste/ethnic divisions (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1997: 425). The organization of the social structure on the basis of the Civil Code not only incorporated the tribal hill groups into a Hindu ritual hierarchy but was another measure of consolidating internal division and diversity and re-affirming the position of the Hindu ruler. However, the impact of the *Ain* on the local social structure, especially of the peripheral areas, cannot be measured or assessed as its effectiveness depended on its enforcement in a country which was spread across a vast geographical terrain with limited modes of communication (Onta, 1996).

One of the most potent forces that contributed to the gradual process of Hinduization was the migration of Hindu groups from the west and central Nepal to the eastern hills. These groups themselves might have been migrating to escape the oppressive central elites but their movement eastward had a great impact on the displacement of various *Kiranti* groups from the kingdom of Gorkha to British India, Sikkim and Bhutan.

(ii) *Going to Muglan: Emigration from the Kingdom of Gorkha to India*

The Gorkha kingdom had been created not only on the basis of conquest but also through compromise, especially in the east where Prithvi Narayan had met substantial resistance from the Limbu kings. Even though the Limbus had been incorporated into the kingdom in 1772 they had been given privileges regarding their communal land holding pattern or the *kipat* system and a degree of autonomy owing to their strategic position on the border with Sikkim. This status quo changed with the increasing demand by the Gorkhali rulers for land and resources in order to support their military expeditions and the migration of the upper caste Bahuns and Chettris into *Kirat* (hill tribes of the eastern hills) territory. The west to east movement of the *Parbatiya* groups disrupted one of the most fundamental aspects of the groups living in the eastern hills, their *kipat* system, where land could be used exclusively by an individual on the basis of his membership of the tribe that communally owned the land.

This system was in direct contrast to the *raikar* or state landlordism under which the rights of an individual to utilization and transfer of the land are recognised by the state as long as the taxes are paid (Regmi, 1963 in Caplan, 1970:3). In order to support their growing military conquests and administrative growth the Gorkhali rulers had to create an economic infrastructure for the extraction of raw material and labour needed to provision their armies. Despite granting corporate claims to the Limbus on lands based on membership the *Parbatiyas*

were allowed to settle within Kiranti holdings. Initially the local Rai or Limbu headmen profited from the new cultivation methods as well as the tribute (cash, agricultural produce, corvee services) paid by the *Parbatiya* migrants but in time they were able to dominate the indigenous population, politically as well as economically. They were able to achieve this through methods of exclusion embedded in the social relations of the indigenous groups and the discrimination perpetuated through the judicial relations imposed by the centralized Hindu monarchy from Kathmandu (English, 1982:39-40).

The socio-economic conditions of the *Kiratas* altered with the migration of the ritually superior *Parbatiyas* (upper caste hill Hindus) who were familiar with the legal system, rules of land ownership and monetised economy (Joshi and Rose, 1966: 6). The *kipat* system was not only considered as economically inadequate but the continuation of this cultural practice was seen as a resistance to national integration (Forbes, 1999: 116). Through numerous legislations,<sup>28</sup> the *kipat* lands were converted to *raikar* which prompted mass alienation of *kipat* land and an eastward migration towards Sikkim, Darjeeling and Bhutan.

Another important element that had a pervasive effect on the social identity of those groups living in the eastern hills was *sanskritization*. As a result of the promulgation of the *Muluki Ain*,<sup>29</sup> the non-Hindu groups were inducted from a horizontal clan and kinship system or *jati* to a hierarchical system of *jat* (caste) and associated norms (Gurung, 1997:502). The *Muluki Ain* placed various groups in different positions but at the same time provided some mobility and flexibility. *Sanskritization* was linked to change in the economic pattern that had been introduced by the Gorkha rulers. The new economic system imposed by the Gorkha rulers changed the economy from a communal to a tributary mode of production. Loss of *kipat* to the incoming *Parbatiyas* altered the social dynamics as Rais and Limbus turned towards the Hindu creditors for political leadership as well as patronage. This process was finally complete with the increasing influence and frequency in the usage of the *Parbatiya* language, dresses and

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<sup>28</sup> In 1886, the Nepalese government made it legal for non-Limbus (especially Bahuns and Chettris) to convert all *kipat* land that had been mortgaged to them, to *raikar*, which could not be reverted to *kipat* once the mortgage was paid off. After widespread dissent over this law, the state banned further transfers of *kipat* land to *raikar*, but those which had already been transferred were not reversed (Subba, 1999:40).

<sup>29</sup> At the same time the *Muluki Ain* or the Legal Code allowed for social mobility of certain groups who were more amenable to the economic as well as religious systems of the government (English, 1982:90). For example, Fournier (1974:63 in English, 1982:86) states that status of the Sunwar group was raised to the class occupied by the Magar and Gurung as a result of their petition to Jung Bahadur Rana to permit them to practice Hinduism and offer settlements to Brahmins and Chettris.

incorporation of Hindu rituals, most specifically amongst the economically better off Limbus (Jones, 1976; see Sagant, 1996 for an extended discussion).

In this dual process of land alienation and *sanskritization* the local elite played a highly important role. Taxes had been essential for the upkeep of the expansionary activities of the state. Once the boundaries were drawn, they were used for the consolidation of the territory annexed and then finally with the rise of the Ranas, taxes were raised to support the unproductive elites (Subba, 2002: 122-23). Thus, heavy taxation and mass alienation of land to the advantage of the incoming Hindu migrants led to the first wave of migration from Nepal in the 18<sup>th</sup> century (Gaenszle, 2002: 334; English, 1982: 36). Seasonal/ temporary migration and extended kinship networks through marriage have and till very recently long remained a regularized feature between ethnic groups, especially Limbus, living on either side of the border. However, migration owing to growing indebtedness and loss of land, was on a very large scale and most of the time, permanent. By the end of the Rana rule in 1951, only a third of the land in eastern Nepal remained under *kipat* (Caplan, 1970:58 in Subba, 1999:40) and it is estimated that between 1840-1860, 12-15 percent of Nepal's *Kiranti* population moved across the border (Pradhan, 1991:192).

Apart from the internal problems of economic suppression external factors were also important in the out-migration from eastern Nepal. Barring its northern borders, all the neighbouring regions around Nepal were under the influence of the British colonisers, whose commercial and military ventures created opportunities for those who had been alienated from their land or wanted to escape exploitation. Establishment of tea plantations (1856 onwards) in the hills of Darjeeling and Assam had proven to be a commercially successful venture for the British and thus with stories of '*chiyako botma paisa phalcha*' i.e. 'money grows on tea bushes', migrating further eastwards to Darjeeling projected itself as a better alternative to open revolt against the state, which would have been futile (Whelpton, 2007:57; Golay, 2006: 82).

Another important factor that prompted migration was the recruitment in the British army as Gurkhas,<sup>30</sup> which had started after the Anglo-Gorkha war of 1814-16. Although the recruitment of soldiers from the Kingdom of Gorkha into Ranjit Singh's army had begun in as early as 1824 (by 1830, his army had a special Gurkha Corp) (Hutt, 1997:113), recruitment in the British army was prohibited by Jung Bahadur and his successors. This prompted the British

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<sup>30</sup> Caplan (1990:132; 2006) attributes the labelling and recruitment of some ethnic groups, especially from the Gorkha district in central Nepal as 'martial tribes' or Gurkha to Brian Hodgson who was the British Resident in Kathmandu (1833-43).

to set up recruitment centres in the Indian border towns of Gorakhpur in 1886 and Darjeeling town in 1902, which was then moved to nearby Ghoom (Farwell, 1984:75, 76). One of the major incentives for joining the army was the payment which was made in cash rather than in kind. Thus began the exodus of migrants from Nepal into the hills and plains of British India as agriculturists, labourers and army recruits.

Migration to the neighbouring kingdom of Sikkim had begun during the period of Gorkhali expansion when the Gorkhas overran a large part of Sikkim in 1788-89 and annexed the Darjeeling tract for a period of over thirty years. This enabled the movement and settlement of people from both west Sikkim and eastern Nepal<sup>31</sup> which continued even after the territorial demarcation by the Treaty of Sigauli in 1816 (O'Maley, 1907:629). However, large scale migration began in 1871 encouraged by the British Political Officer in Sikkim, J.C.White, with the co-operation of the local Kazi elites and the rich Nepali merchant community, the Newars (Shrestha, 2005). Settling new tenants and labourers, in spite of the royal decree against it, was a lucrative investment and eventually established Nepalis as the majority ethnic group (Das, 1983:66; Rose, 1978).

Sporadic migration into Bhutan had also begun in the 18<sup>th</sup> century but mass migration towards southern Bhutan began after the Anglo-Bhutanese war of 1865. Nepalis were engaged in clearing forests, agriculture and eventually became Bhutan's main producers of food and source of cash income (Hutt, 2005: 45). Migrants from Nepal settled first in Samchi and Sibus in the south western corner of Bhutan and then in the east (further movement into Bhutan did not take place until the government of Bhutan implemented resettlement programs during the 1960s) (Joseph, 1999).

Migration to the north-eastern areas of British-India also began after the Anglo-Burmese war of 1824-25 brought the present day north eastern India (except Sikkim)<sup>32</sup> under British control. After the end of the Anglo-Gorkha war in 1816, the British formally started

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<sup>31</sup> During this period there were no political demarcations of territory and thus there was free movement of people, especially Limbus, between what would be demarcated as Sikkim and Nepal after the Treaty of Sigauli (1816).

<sup>32</sup> The eastern Himalaya and Brahmaputra valley of the Indo-Myanmar frontier comprising the states of Assam, Arunachal Pradesh, Manipur, Mizoram, Tripura, Nagaland, Meghalaya and now Sikkim is identified as a single geographic and socio-economic identity. However as Shimray (2004: 4637) points out the term 'north-east India' is of recent origin. The expansion of British colonies in the eastern frontier began with the conquest of Bengal in 1757. The eastward expansion of the East India Company brought the Brahmaputra Valley and the surrounding hills into the folds of the empire. This region was however also interspersed with princely states (viz. Manipur, Tripura, Khasi states) each of which had a discrete treaty relation with the East India Company (Lacina, 2009:1001). Thus, early Nepali migration was through British territories that were constantly being brought into the imperial political economy rather than just the passage through north-east India as we know it today.

recruiting Nepalis into their army and in 1817, the Gurkha regiment was first deployed in the Sylhet operation as a part of the Cuttack Legion (later known as the Assam Light Infantry) which eventually led to permanent Gurkha settlement in the northeast beginning in 1824 (Sinha, 2008). Recruitment as well as settlement in the north-east was actively encouraged by the British as the 'Gurkhas' were considered 'proverbially brave, active and capable of enduring fatigue both in the hills and jungles and free from the prejudices which the Hindus of the regular troops were invariably accustomed,' (Hussain, 2003:69). The first generation of migrants who came as members of the regiment and the police provided impetus for the others to follow. By the early 19<sup>th</sup> century service in the military was not the only attraction as migrants came as graziers and herders, to work in the tea and sugarcane plantations and in the construction of road and railway lines (Subba, 2003:61). They were also regularly hired as labour and a large number were periodically brought from Nepal to serve in transport or as carrier units in numerous frontier expeditions carried out by the British. However, another major reason that prompted migration was also what Enloe (1980:27) calls the 'Gurkha syndrome' where the characteristic features of the Gurkha (bravery and loyalty) were to be found only in certain ethnic groups, 'so embedded in its blood' and that those born in the cantonment areas were not of the same quality as those who came from the hills of Nepal. The 'line boys' born in the provinces did not have the required attributes to make a good soldier and thus, the procurement and the eventual settlement of first generation Gurkhas was actively pursued by the British (Caplan, 1991:585; Hussain, 2003: 71).

The most prominent migration however was to Darjeeling that had been directly settled and colonised by the British. While Darjeeling had been 'granted' to the British in 1835 by the Raja of Sikkim in return for some concessions and a yearly grant of Rs.3000, the Kalimpong subdivision had first been lost by the Raja of Sikkim to the Bhutanese after the war in 1706. This area was later annexed, along with the Duars (originally a part of Sikkim) by the British in 1865 and included in the present Darjeeling district in 1866. Till 1874 Darjeeling was a Non-Regulated Area, from 1874-1919 it was a Scheduled Area and from 1919-1935 it was a Backward Tract. Thereafter and until Indian Independence it was a Partially Excluded Area. Hence, till 1947, Darjeeling was administratively not fully integrated with West Bengal although it had been nominally a part of the state since 1866 itself (Subba, 1992:29-36; Dash, 1947: 37-47).

Darjeeling had been initially developed for the purpose of building a sanatorium for the British army but the success of tea and cinchona plantations and other industries played an important role in attracting migrants from the region, especially from eastern Nepal.

Establishment of Gurkha recruitment centre in Ghoom in 1902 also encouraged migration and settlement as there was a marked tendency for the retired Gurkha soldiers to settle in India after leaving military service (only about 1/3 of the 11, 000 Gurkhas discharged from the British army after the first world war chose to return to Nepal) (Blaike et al, 1980:37 in Hutt, 1997:113). However, these migrants moved from one form of oppression to the other, from the exploitative Gorkha state to either the colonial empire of the British or the highly feudalistic kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan, all of which were exploitative in their own ways. Thus, in these new lands, common exigencies arising out of migration and economic subservience dissolved differences of ethnicity or ritual hierarchy and facilitated the formation of a homogenous ethnic group. Most of the areas that they migrated to had already been settled by other groups and their reception in these areas was either hostile, like in Sikkim, or they were welcomed and quickly assimilated with the local population like in the north-east. Thus, in a true Barthian sense, the self-identification of this migrant group as ‘Nepali’ began when it came to be considered as the ‘Other’ by members of the pre-existing groups who had drawn their boundaries on the basis of language or religion.

*(iii) Formation of an Identity- Benares-Darjeeling-Nepal*

Different ethnic groups migrating to Darjeeling were not confronted by any other ethnic group as it was largely uninhabited except for a few Lepcha and Magar hamlets. However they were bound to another variety of servitude in the colonial empire as occupants of the lowest strata in the economic hierarchy. This led to the formation of an underpaid, impoverished working class majority subservient to the wealthy tea estate owners who were mostly British. In between these two classes was the administrative class, which usually comprised of the educated *babus* from mainland India, especially Bengal. The low price of land acted as an incentive to acquire estates in the hills and thus, there was a simultaneous migration from the plains to the hills also (Dhakal, 2009:53).

This migrant population of agriculturists was not confronted with just another ethnic community but with a technologically advanced and economically thriving class. Thus, while the migrants in other areas were confronted with other groups, ethnic identity formation in Darjeeling was a product of differentiation not on the basis of ethnicity but of economic class (which also coincided with ethnicity). Although the majority of the migrants spoke various Tibeto-Burman languages and shared Mongoloid features, there were also those groups which had been in the fold of the Hindu caste system (Bahun, Chettris, Kami, Damai, Sarkis) prior to

migration. Until the 1920s these were the only groups who identified themselves as ‘Nepalis’ while the rest maintained their own ethnic languages and customs, identifying themselves as Limbus, Magars, Tamangs etc. Thus while social interaction with different ethnic groups led to the formation of the identification of the Nepali, it was only with the development of an educated and culturally conscious elite that the Tibeto-Burmese speakers began to identify themselves as ‘Nepalis’ on the basis of the common denominator amongst all- language. This was used to identify and distinguish Others who did not belong to the ‘linguistic confederacy’ called Nepalis<sup>33</sup> (Subba, 1992:38).

British-India in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century was in the grip of a political and cultural revolution. Against this background, the construction of an ethnic identity by a coterie of educated men in Darjeeling was a result of a direct response to colonization. As Onta (1996:198) says, ‘this class experienced colonial modernity not so much as a direct consequence of colonization but because they felt that they were lagging behind their Indian colonized counterparts’. Thus, the making of the ethno-linguistic community called ‘Nepali’ was a result of a conscious effort by the growing literati represented by prominent literary figures like Parasmani Pradhan, Suryabikram Gyawali and Dharnidhar Koirala. This process first began in Benares and gradually shifted to Darjeeling which became and still remains the centre of Nepali literary movement in India.

As one of the most holy Hindu cities, Benares or Varanasi had long been a site of pilgrimage and patronage for Hindu rulers as well as one of the highest centres of Vedic learning. Attracting learned scholars and young minds, Benares also became an important centre for language and literature with the growth of secular education which had its roots in the post-Enlightenment Western rationalism and utilitarianism, invariably leading to the growth of printing and publishing houses (Chalmers, 2003:65). In stark contrast to Darjeeling, language and literature was strictly controlled by the Rana regime in Nepal which did not promote education, free expression or political education. Thus apart from government handbills, notices and books of religious nature printed from the *Giddhe* (vulture) press which had been established by Jung Bahadur after his *belayat yatra* (travel to the United Kingdom in 1850), nothing else was printed or published in Nepal. Autocratic in nature, the Rana regime vehemently opposed any form of mass education and cultivated illiteracy as a measure to

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<sup>33</sup> Gorkha, Gorkhali and Nepali were used interchangeably but since the word functions as a marker of distinction from the Nepalese, the term Gorkha has gained popularity in recent years.



prevent the growth of political consciousness, ‘lest they should be awakened and conscious of their rights’ (Shakya, 1977:19 in Caddell, 2007:4, Amatya, 2004:38).

Owing to the regime’s complete monopoly over publishing inside Nepal until the 1930s, poets and writers published from Banaras and later Darjeeling. A large number of students also made their way to Benares where they were exposed to the influences of Indian cultural and political activists, which itself was undergoing a period of cultural reawakening (Pradhan, 1984). In 1901 the *Gorkhapatra*, a periodical was published in Nepal under the direct supervision of the state (it remained the only periodical for the next thirty years) and in 1913 in an attempt to promote Nepali literature, the Rana administration established the *Gorkha Bhasa Prakashini Samiti* (Gorkha Language Publication Committee). This committee had a dual role acting as a publishing house for books which met its approval and as a censor on everything else that was produced. Consequently, for a long time Benares remained the centre of free literary activity and publications of books in the *Parbatiya* (later renamed as Nepali) language (Pradhan, 1984:45; Hutt, 1991:7).

The sixty years between 1880-1940 marked an important era when the Gorkhali/Nepali language forged ahead in a new direction in India which was witnessing a socio-religious regeneration and a political movement against British colonization. During this time the migrant Gorkha population had started seeing itself as a part of the larger Indian community. The formation of the All India Gorkha League in 1924 in Dehradun<sup>34</sup> was hailed as a ‘political party of the Indian Gorkhas, by the Indian Gorkhas’, so as to supplement and complement the struggle for India’s independence (Bomjan, 2008:86) and journals like *Gorkha Sathi* were published from Calcutta in 1907 with the aim of fostering patriotism amongst the Indian-Nepalis. One of the most prominent figures to emerge in Benares was Moti Ram Bhatta<sup>35</sup> (1866-1896) who pioneered the growth and development of the Gorkha language. Having spent most of his formative years in Benares, Bhatta was greatly influenced by the cultural

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<sup>34</sup> Settlement of the Gorkha armies in the western Himalayas dates back to 1793 where they conquered Kumaon in present day Uttarakhand. Dehradun, which is in the state of Uttarakhand as well as the Garhwal hills in the western Himalayas are well known cantonment area of the Gorkha Regiment. The oldest known Gorkha association was the Himachal Punjab Gorkha Association established in 1916 and the Gorkhali Sudhar Sabha established in 1928. These associations became the foundation for political mobilization and formation of the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League in 1943 by Damber Singh Gurung.  
Source: [http://www.gorkhaparisangh.com/pdf/Gorkhas\\_in\\_Paschimanchal.pdf](http://www.gorkhaparisangh.com/pdf/Gorkhas_in_Paschimanchal.pdf) (Accessed: 21/02/2012).

<sup>35</sup> Bhatta was one of the most prominent literary figures after Bhanu Bhakta. He also wrote the biography of Bhanubhakta and composed the first ghazals in Nepali (See Pradhan, 1984 for a discussion on the history of Nepali literature).

renaissance of the *Khariboli* movement.<sup>36</sup> He organized a group called the '*Rasik Samaj*' for the development of Nepali literature and established the Bharat Jivan Press, which printed a number of important Nepali works, including Bhanubhakta's *Ramayan* in 1887. He also founded the first Gorkha journal called the *Gorkha Bharat Jivan*, a monthly published from Benares in 1886 (Pradhan, 1984:46).

Along with *Upanyas Tarangini* (1902), *Sundari* (1906) and *Candra* (1914) *Gorkhali* (1916), the first Nepali weekly, was also published from Benaras. Owing to the lack of public readership the majority of these publications had a short life span. However, these publications emphasized the need for the standardization and development of language, eliminating the influence of Hindi. Apart from the poetry and prose that featured, they also carried articles that expressed frustration over illiteracy and lack of public interest in literature, as compared to other Indian communities and thus advocated social reforms and the spread of education amongst the Gorkha *jati*<sup>37</sup> (Pradhan, 1984). Once again, British colonialism had an important role to play in the construction of the Nepali identity. The second half of the nineteenth century was an important period in the definition and shaping of modern Indian languages through the increase in publication as well as the transformation of these languages as new usages were introduced through newspapers, pamphlets, fiction and poetry as well as political, philosophical and historical non-fiction (Metcalf and Metcalf, 2006:123).

According to Chalmers (2002:31), in spite of Benares' centrality to language, literature and political activism, the start of the 20<sup>th</sup> century saw an increase in the significance of Darjeeling where the community differed from that of Benares in its ethnic composition. Most of the working population in Darjeeling belonged to the Tibeto-Burman language group which was in contrast to the Nepali-speaking upper caste Hindus who travelled to Benares. Thus there

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<sup>36</sup>One of the earliest dialects of Hindi and the basis of Hindustani language, which evolved as a link language to facilitate interaction between the locals and the different Persian speaking groups that migrated after the establishment of the Mughal dynasty. Both Hindi and Urdu are believed to have derived their grammar from 'Khari Boli', which was widely spoken in north India with close affinities to such local variations as Dehalvi, Hayani and Hindavi. Formation of the two nations of India and Pakistan can be attributed to religious as well as linguistic divisions between Hindi and Urdu (Aneesh, 2010:94). The Khariboli movement was located within this period of nation-building, patronised by eminent literary figures like Bharatendu Harischandra who were involved in raising Hindi to its current prestigious position in India (Pradhan, 1984:46). For further discussion see Orsini, 1999 and Lelyveld, 1993.

<sup>37</sup> Nepali has no single term which conveys the meaning of the English term 'race'. *Jati* is commonly used in the same context as race but its basic meaning is species or type as distinct from *jat*, which is caste. In the Nepali context, therefore, caste is the same as ethnic group. However, these terms are almost interchangeably used (Hutt, 1997:116).

were few ancestral Nepali speakers in Darjeeling. While the writers in Benares managed to cater to popular tastes, there was no ‘democratisation of the literary world allowing self-expression of lower groups’ and nor was the Nepali population in Benares structured in the same way as the much larger Indian-Nepali community. Since many political activists from Nepal took refuge in Benares, most of their writing engaged with politics related to Nepal and were often removed from issues such as education, employment and administration which faced the settled Nepali community of Darjeeling.

Early 20<sup>th</sup> century brought important literary figures like Parasmani Pradhan, Suryabikram Gyawali and Dharnidhar Koirala to the forefront of the development of the Nepali language in Darjeeling. Language development was greatly influenced by the Benares literati whose access to the hills was increased by the arrival of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways and who eventually became the *buddhi jeevi* or intelligentsia of the hills. One of the key factors that propelled the advancement of language was the pervasiveness of the notion of backwardness of the Gorkha *jati* in comparison to the other communities in India (Onta, 1996:150). Since majority of the population were employed in the tea estates as daily wage laborers or as Gurkha soldiers, literacy was a privilege which they could not afford. Thus, for the Darjeeling literati, influenced and inspired by Benares, language development became the root of societal progress and a recurrent theme in most of the journals published during the early twentieth century (Chalmers, 2003).

Two other factors that advanced the development of the Nepali language were its necessity as a link language between the different ethnic groups who were recruited as Gurkhas as well as for the propagation of Christianity by the Scottish Mission Churches in Darjeeling. While J.A.Ayton published the first Nepali grammar in 1820 which contains an ‘elementary description of the language’, Reverend Turnbull published Nepali grammar with extensive vocabularies. Finally in 1923 An English- Nepali dictionary was published by Reverend H.C.Duncan with the assistance of Gangaprasad Pradhan (Turner, 1926:365-66). Participation in the early Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling was limited to a tiny literate circle, as exemplified in the relationship between Parasmani Pradhan<sup>38</sup> and Reverend Gangaprasad Pradhan, who published a monthly called the *Gorkhe Khabar Kagat* from 1901-1932, the second Gorkhali/Nepali journal to be published in India in Nepali but with what Parasmani

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<sup>38</sup> Parasmani Pradhan (1898-1986) played a very important role in the standardization and development of the Nepali language. He published *Chandrika* from 1918 to 1920 and *Bharati* from 1948 to 1957. See Chalmers, 2003 for an in-depth discussion on the development of a Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling.

called a ‘Darjeeling slant.’<sup>39</sup> Gangaprasad’s language reflected the way in which the *Parbatiya* language had been adopted by the masses. He was accused by Parasmani of writing in the way spoken by the Tibeto-Burman speakers and thus of being grammatically incorrect as opposed to the way it was spoken in Benares in its ‘pure’ form. Owing to this difference in lexicon as well as religion, Gangaprasad was not considered a part of the elites leading the language movement (Pradhan, 1984:48).

Nonetheless, the elites involved in the language development project continued to strive and one of their earliest achievements was the recognition of Nepali (or *Parbatiya*, *Khas Kura* or *Gorkha bhasa* as it was earlier called) as a vernacular medium of education by Calcutta University in 1918 (Bomjan, 2008:52). Although it was a joint effort by scholars from Benares, Kathmandu and Darjeeling, the renaming of *Khas Kura* as Nepali and its identification and association with a community of diverse tongues, was one of the first formal steps towards the creation of a homogenous Nepali identity (Chalmers, 2003).

According to Hutt (1997:113-14) the emergence of a cohesive ‘Nepali’ identity among Nepalis in India dates back no further than 1924 with the founding of the *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* (Nepali Literature Association). The Association formally adopted the name Nepali for the language over other different names which were used and as the chairperson of the inaugural meeting said,

‘...the word ‘Nepali’ has a broad meaning. It refers to all races (*jati*) of Nepal-Magar, Gurung, Kirati, Newar, Limbu and so on- and indicates that these and all the other races here are parts of a great Nepali nation (*rastra*)..Nepali nowadays is like a lingua franca in the Himalayan region (*prades*). Although the people living in this region speak different tongues (*boli*), there is no one who does not understand Nepali..and no race can claim that this language (*bhasa*) belongs to it alone’

(Pradhan, 1982:37-9 in Hutt, 1997:117).

Through the initiative of the Association the language also gained an orderliness in spelling and grammar in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century with publications of dictionaries and other books (Pradhan, 1984).

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<sup>39</sup> His vocabulary shows words derived from Sanskrit which are still spoken by common people. His spellings reflected colloquial pronunciation For example- ‘hirday’ for *hridaya* (heart), ‘sor’ for *svar* (voice). His contributions laid foundations for later work. He translated the Bible into Nepali as well Hans Christen Anderson stories for children (Pradhan, 1984:49).

The role of Suryabikram Gyawali in the construction of the Nepali *jati* cannot be overlooked as he gave the Nepali *jati* its first literary icon-Bhanubhakta Acharya, a brahmin poet from Nepal honoured as *adi-kavi* (first-poet) specifically for his ‘rendering of the Ramayana epic into simple, idiomatic, rhyming Nepali’ which had no known precedent in the language’. Bhanubhakta’s *Ramayana* was the first example of Hindu epic which had not merely been translated into the Nepali language but had been ‘Nepali-ised’ in every other aspect as well (Hutt, 1991:6).

Gyawali was successful in projecting Bhanubhakta as one of the *bir purush* (brave man) of the Nepali *jati*, who was placed alongside other brave figures (most of whom were Gorkha kings and warriors like Amar Singh Thapa and Bir Balbhadra from the Nepal unification era) in what Onta (1996:192) calls the *bir pantheon* (brave pantheon). These biographical accounts of ‘*bir*’ figures written by Gyawali in the 1930s and 1940s which were originally supposed to provide historical depth to the identity of the free Nepali *jati*, would later be used to recreate and portray the history of Nepalis as that of the *bir jati* and used as the basis of Nepalese nationalism. The cultural discourse which had been developed in Benares and Darjeeling by a small group of people as a part of variously localised projects of the *jati* self-improvement later became available to larger groups of Nepalese nationalists situated in numerous locations in India and Nepal (ibid: 151).

The development of language and literature in Darjeeling has to be understood in conjunction with the political environment within which it was ensconced. The political demarcation of the Darjeeling hills on the basis of ethnicity had been put forward two years before the Morley-Minto Reforms in 1907. The period after the First World War once again gave signs of reform in the constitution and by this time numerous groups had emerged that were lobbying for a severance from West Bengal administration. Fearing that the interest of the district would be sidelined in the reforms, the Hillmen’s Association, a conglomeration of the representatives of the Nepali, Bhutia and the Lepcha communities, presented a memorandum before the Montague-Chelmsford Reform Commission in 1917. The lobby for rights as a single Nepali community was dependent on their unifying as a common community and thus the process of making the Nepali *jati* more visible to the colonial administrators was an initiative taken by the growing literati who headed numerous organisations like the Hillmen’s Association, Kalimpong Samiti, Nepali-Bhutia-Lepcha Association, Gorkha Dukkha Nibarak Samiti etc (Bagahi and Danda, 1982: 340-44). These organisations could not achieve solid concessions but were highly instrumental in building and solidifying a Nepali identity based on the idea of kinship of a common *jati*, a pluralist synthesis of myriad groups to constitute a *jati* and thus, the construction of the Nepali.

While the notion of a Nepali *jati* had taken roots in the Darjeeling hills since the early twentieth century, the Nepalis who had migrated to Sikkim were living under a Bhutia monarchy and thus, the

proliferation of Nepali language and literature was limited. Nonetheless Sikkim has made important contributions to the development and popularity of Nepali language and literature in general and most specifically through the institutional recognition that it brought to the language in India.<sup>40</sup> Although poetic works like Santabir Limbu's *Adriat Darshan* (1940) was published in *Uday*, the Benares based journal, it was only after the formation of the *Apatan Shitya Parishad*<sup>41</sup> in 1947 that language and literature took an organized form in Sikkim (Chettri, 1999:22). The *Parishad*'s first literary contribution was *Indrakil Pushpanjali* (collection of poems) in 1950 and the *Parishad* had association with famous literary figures from Nepal like Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Bal Krishna Sama. It was an apolitical and non-communal organization, formed by people of different ethnic groups united through literature. Other literary associations arose after the establishment of the *Apatan Sahitya Parishad* like the *Akhil Sikkim Chattra/Vidyarthi Sammelan* (All Sikkim Students Association) (around 1956-57) which published a journal called 'The Pole Star'. There were other journals like the 'Triveni' and 'Kanchenjunga' published in 1957 which later became the newsletter of the Sikkim State Congress Party. In 1963 the *Sikkim Sahityakar Sampark Samiti* was established which published *Sunakhari* in which prominent literary figures like I.B.Rai,<sup>42</sup> Agam Singh Giri<sup>43</sup> published their work. The *Yuva Pustalaya Sikkim* (Youth Library Sikkim) was established in 1964 with its journal called *Nav Jyoti* and was a leading organizer of the birth anniversary of Adikavi Bhanu Bhakta in Sikkim. In 1981 the *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Sikkim* was established which later became *Sikkim Sahitya Parishad*. It published the journal *Kanka* and in 1985 also established the coveted 'Bhanu Puraskar', a literary award given for contributions to Nepali literature. The *Parishad* also made immense contributions to what is known as *bhasa andolan* or the agitation for the recognition of Nepali as one of the official languages of India which was awarded in 1992 (ibid: 22-58). Thus, along with Darjeeling, Sikkim also made important contributions to establishment of the political legitimacy of the Nepalis of India.

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<sup>40</sup> While Hindi and English were used as a medium of instruction in schools, Nepali steadily became the bridge language between different communities and slowly the lingua franca of the kingdom (Hiltz, 2003:76).

<sup>41</sup> APATAN was an acronym for the founders of this literary organisation-Agam Singh Tamang, Padam Singh Subba, Tulsi Bahadur Chettri and Nima Wangdi.

<sup>42</sup> Indra Bahadur Rai (b.1928) is one of the most influential Nepali writers. Based in Darjeeling, questions of cultural identity are prominent in his work. He was the first recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1976 (Poddar and Prasad, 2009).

<sup>43</sup> Agam Singh Giri (1928-1971) is considered as one of the most important poets representing the Indian-Nepalis. According to Rai (1994:153) Giri gave expression through his poems to the feeling of frustration prevalent among his people and dealt with issues of identity of the Indian Nepalis.

(iv) *Language and the formation of the Nepali nation-state*

Language not only played an important role in the construction of the Nepali outside of Nepal but it was also instrumental in forging the concept of Nepali nationalism of a country which till 1930 officially identified itself as the Kingdom of Gorkha. Benares proved an important breeding ground for anti-Rana activities and fostered the birth and formation of numerous political parties that finally ended the regime in 1951 (Gaenszle, 2002:75). Although democracy was introduced in Nepal in 1951, almost all the powers actually resided in the monarch which enabled King Mahendra to implement his *Panchayat* democracy in 1960-62 as an indigenous alternative to western and Indian parliamentarism and a ‘uniquely Nepali’ form of government (Whelpton, 1997:47; Burghart, 1984:102). With constitutional monarchy and regional influence of Indian independence came the commitment towards progress and *bikas* (development) which was seen as parallel to the expansion of education especially during the Panchayat period (1960-1990). One of the main features of the Panchayat period was the emphasis on building national consciousness which revolved around the King, Hinduism and the Nepali language (recognized as the official language of Nepal by the Constitution of 1959, thereby marginalizing all other indigenous languages). This was vital for the internal cohesiveness of the ethnically and linguistically diverse population as well as for the upkeep of the image of the ‘only Hindu kingdom in the world’ as a tactical measure to safeguard its sovereignty against its two neighbours, India and China.

The modern nation state is able to accelerate the process of accepting and identifying with a national identity through mass education and in particular by teaching history in a way that encourages citizens to think of the state’s past achievement as their own (Whelpton, 1997:48). In the construction of Nepali nationalism, it was language which once again played a primary role. In a directive issued by the Nepal National Education Planning Commission in 1952, the Nepali language was to be the exclusive medium of education, from the third grade on at the cost of all other regional languages. No other language was to be taught even optionally in an aim to promote homogeneity and national unity (Hacchethu, 2003:224).

The conscious use and categorisation of a community as ‘Nepali’ was first experienced outside of Nepal and provided the Nepali state with a concept with which to mould Nepali nationalism. In spite of being headed by an elite group, development of Nepali as the *lingua franca* in Darjeeling completed the process of internal homogenisation amongst the diverse ethnic groups, thereby creating the Nepali *jati*, an identity which all could claim to belong to. On the other hand construction of the Nepali nation was a state oriented project which was

conducted by subjugating the language and culture of numerous ethnic groups. However, these developments, which were crucial to the development of the Nepali identity, have also ossified the discourse and analysis of the Nepalis as a monolithic, homogenous entity, which the following section will reveal as contrary to contemporary reality.

The grand narrative of Nepali history had its foundations in the literature and history that had been written in British-India by a small group of variously expatriated Nepalis who built a historical genealogy backed by the state apparatus and systematically disseminated to the nation. Figures like Bhanu Bhakta, Amar Singh Thapa from Gyawali's pantheon of *bir purush* were resurrected as Nepal's national heroes in order to create a brave history of the Nepali nation (Onta, 1996). Nepali national history was written from the corpus of *Panchayat* sponsored Nepali national culture and with the standardization of the national education system which promoted the culture of the dominant Parbatiya groups rather than of other groups within the population. This led to a greater identification with the promulgated national culture, which was actually *Parbatiya* culture (Whelpton, 1997:48). By 1980s, over half the population in Nepal spoke Nepali as their mother tongue with close to four-fifths being able to converse in the language (Hutt, 1988:2).

## **SECTION TWO- BEING NEPALI**

### ***2.1 Identifying the Nepali-the regional context***

The social construction of the Nepali *jati* that had been initiated by the literary elites of Darjeeling, who were either first or second generation migrants from Nepal, also played an important role in the creation of the national identity of Nepal itself. However, this historical and cultural connection between India and Nepal has altered with the changing political landscape. In the broad South Asian context, especially in India, 'Nepalis' are perceived as a single, homogenous group, undifferentiated from Nepalese citizens. While ethnic and cultural identity might be a cross-border phenomenon, a crucial aspect of political identity is that of belonging to a certain political unit or a state. Thus, the Nepali identity, which exists in two different political units at the same time, has led to problems of citizenship and social acceptance for Nepalis living in India. As identities come to be strictly defined and compartmentalized by political boundaries the Nepali identity finds itself incompatible with the larger Indian identity. The cultural bridges which once joined the migrants to their home, Nepal, are now seen as impediments to their complete integration and acceptance as Indians.



The relationship between India and Nepal is based on cultural similarity owing to migration and the eventual diffusion as well as assimilation of the various aspects of culture (religion, caste system), in the modern context. At the same time, Nepal's economic dependency and India's geopolitical interests are the basis on which the relationship between the two countries is established and negotiated. Ethnic homogeneity has been extended to political homogeneity as expressed by the Indian state through the Indo-Nepal border, which prior to 1947 had remained as a border of regimes rather than nations (Gaenzle, 2002:86) but since has been transformed by the Indo-Nepal Peace and Friendship Treaty of 1950. The Treaty defined and institutionalized the relationship between two nations whereby 'non-discriminatory national treatment of the citizens of both the sides in economic and cultural affairs' has been established'. However, this Treaty, especially Article 7 which has provisions for the citizens of both the countries to travel, work and live freely in both has been criticized by Nepalis living on either side of the border. The Nepalese citizens see the Treaty as symbolising India's hegemony and an infringement of their political sovereignty, Indian-Nepalis remain resentful of the Treaty (as evidenced by the symbolic burning of the Treaty in Darjeeling in 1986 and more recently in 2007) because it entitles them to all the rights 'like' Indian citizens (which Nepalis from Nepal are also entitled to) and not 'as' Indian citizens. This eventually 'relegates them to a cul-de-sac' and justifies them being treated as foreigners in their own country (Subba, 2007:200).

However, for the thousands of people who cross the Indo-Nepal border at various points, demarcation of political boundaries might have regulated their movements, but in no way has it hampered cross-border movement as the international border remain porous and easily accessible. Migration is a familiar and accepted part of the Indian-Nepali community which is well documented in historical records as well as poetry and prose. In the context of Indo-Nepal migration, the movement is almost uni-directional with more people crossing the border over to India than to Nepal. Outbound migration from Nepal has escalated in the past decade owing to the Maoist insurgency and while the number of people migrating to the Gulf or other Asian countries has increased, 85 percent of those migrating to other countries make their way to India looking for employment in India's urban centers (Seddon et al, 2002:23).

In the contemporary context accurate data on the number of people crossing over from Nepal is not possible owing to the free border but most studies estimate around 3 million Nepalese citizens migrate to India (Thieme, 2006 in Kollmair et al, 2006: 153) out of which more than 200,000 are estimated to be working in the capital city of Delhi alone and an equally significant proportion working as sex workers in the various Indian cities. Majority of the

migrants are engaged in menial, low income services which are usually ‘difficult, dirty and dangerous’ (Seddon et al, 2002:26; Thieme and Boker, 2003:343-346). Another set of migrants are the retired Indian Gurkhas soldiers who pursue various forms of wage labour, usually as watchmen or security guards. Known as *bahadur* (brave) in these Indian cities, employment of Nepalis as watchmen is not only ‘fashionable’ and ‘desirable’ (Dixit, 1997; Sinha, 2007:361) but also has come to form serious stereotypes about the Nepalis and are often used as a common anti-Nepali slander. Reproduced in Hindi cinema, where Nepalis are portrayed as ‘awkward and comical’, being a Nepali is also often equated with being a prostitute, a guard or a servant (Shersthova, 2010:313).

Thus, in spite of the large number of Nepalese citizens as well as Indian-Nepalis who migrate to urban Indian cities for education or professional employment, it is the Nepali *momo* (dumpling) seller or the *bahadur* outside homes and offices who become the first point of contact and information for the average Indian. The stereotype of the Nepali that is prevalent in the national imagery has no room for a distinction between Nepalis from Nepal and Indian-Nepalis, of whom the majority are Indian-Nepalis for whom Nepal forms a background to the stories of their ancestors but in terms of political connection or attachment, Nepal is as distant as Bangladesh or Bhutan (Subba, 2002: 120).

Another key aspect that promotes the notion of homogeneity is the degree of geographical ignorance of the areas in which the Indian-Nepalis live, namely the north-eastern region of the country. Apart from the Garhwal Hills, which is located in the western Himalaya, the majority of the Indian-Nepali population is distributed in the various states of the eastern Himalaya. Here in varying numbers the Indian-Nepalis are engaged in different occupations ranging from labourers in the coal mines of Meghalaya to dairymen in Assam. While they form the dominant community in areas like Sikkim and Darjeeling, Indian-Nepalis are considered as one of the minority groups in the other north eastern states like Assam, Meghalaya, Manipur, regions which are at best unfamiliar to the majority of Indians and at worst subject to extreme exoticification. When examined from a centre-periphery equation of the nation-state, it is the Hindu, Hindi speaking central and northern India which is identified as the core or mainstream India, while the north-eastern states appear as vague, distant and amorphous peripheries (Sinha, 2007:33). Thus, for an average Indian, this region is ‘on the map, but off the mind’ (Baruah, 2007:4). This situation is further complicated for the Indian-Nepali whose citizenship and hence, loyalty to the nation is always suspect and who finds himself constantly battling what Nath (2005:28) calls the ‘myth of a double homeland’ and being a ‘privileged nation’ (Subba, 2007:202) as they are apparently beneficiaries of privileges from both India and Nepal. Either

mixed with other groups from the north-east or harassed for being Nepalese, the average Indian-Nepali is still treated as a member of a diasporic community and has not yet received acceptance for being who he/she is, an Indian of Nepali origin. Thus, stereotypes coupled with a lack of information can be cited as one of the factors that promote a homogenous discourse evident in social as well as political imagery in India.

While social acceptance is highly subjective and difficult to gauge, recognition of Nepali/Gorkhali as one of the national languages of India in 1992 is probably the only signifier of recognition at the national level. Since language has become an instrument which validates the Indian-Nepalis' nationality, subtle distinctions which were otherwise not evident, have become issues of grave concern evidenced by the controversy over Bhanubhakta that arose in the height of the Gorkhaland agitation. In 1986 the leading political outfit in Darjeeling, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) launched the Gorkhaland movement which saw the desecration of the statues of *adikavi* (first poet) Bhaubhakta as a sign of rejection of cultural connections with Nepal and replacing him with Agam Singh Giri as the true *adikavi* of the Gorkhas (Mitra, 1986). Although the vandalised Bhanubhakta bust has been replaced with a full length statue in Chowrasta, Darjeeling, this episode was an expression of the politicisation of the insecurity faced by Indian-Nepalis over their identity.

Notions of homogeneity that prevail at the macro level have important consequences for Indian-Nepalis living in India as they fuel insecurity, which is amply represented by the movement for Gorkhaland as well as the implicit fear in the Nepalis of Sikkim. The assumption of the Nepali as a homogenous and a stagnant entity can no longer be held as true and the analysis of Nepalis living in three different areas reveals how Nepali identity has become multilayered and acquired great variety and depth in its articulation and manifestation.

The following section presents a brief political history of Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim and a summary of the contemporary political situation based on primary as well as secondary evidence. Different themes and issues discussed in this section will be elaborated on and analysed in greater detail in Part Two of the thesis. The aim of the following section is to set the background for each case study as well as to highlight links between the three cases. Sikkim, east Nepal and Darjeeling experienced immigration and settlement at different times and under different socio-economic conditions which has had an impact on the expressions of ethnic identity. The Nepalis living in these three areas highlight how members of the same ethnic group-Nepali, which was constructed in India and indoctrinated through education in Nepal, use their ethnic identity differently in order to attain different socio-politico goals.

## 2.2 Identifying the Nepalis- the local context, background to the case studies

### (a) Darjeeling

The present district of Darjeeling (inclusive of the sub-divisions of Kalimpong and Kurseong) was carved out of territories previously belonging to the kingdoms of Sikkim and Bhutan. Darjeeling was initially developed as a sanatorium for the British army but the success of tea and cinchona plantations made it an important British investment also.

The demand for a separate administrative unit comprising of the Darjeeling hills and a section of the Jalpaiguri district, which had been annexed from Bhutan in 1865 was first placed by a small congregation of the educated elites of the hills called the Hillmen's Association in 1917. The demand for a separate system of administration has passed through many stages, stirrings of which can be located in the literary movements as well as the active participation of elites that inspired and promoted amity amongst the hill community. The period from 1907-1935 can be seen as the first phase of political initiative by the elites albeit without the formal formation of any political organisation and simply by submitting requests and memoranda to the British.

However, social integration of the hill communities weakened with the introduction of Nepali as the medium of instruction, which was seen as a cultural threat and the start of Nepali domination over the Bhutia and Lepcha communities (Bomjan, 2008:83). This relation was weakened further when the first elections that were conducted pursuant to the Government of India Act, 1935. This saw greater integration of Nepali communities as opposed to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities leading to a fracture of the hill community on the basis of ethnic affiliation. In 1943, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) was formed which demanded the separation of Darjeeling District from Bengal, specifically on the basis of history as well as culture (ibid: 86).<sup>44</sup> Thus, in 1980, when new political parties, the Pranta Parishad and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) came into existence with the objective of demanding a separate statehood on the basis of Article 3<sup>45</sup> of the Indian Constitution, there was already an ethnic base ready to be mobilized.

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<sup>44</sup> By 1967, the League had changed their political goal and adopted a resolution on the autonomous district council within West Bengal itself. This was a damaging phase for the demand for a separate state (Moktan, 2004:140-142).

<sup>45</sup> Article 3 of the Indian Constitution deals with the formation of new states and alteration of areas, boundaries or names of existing State. According to this Article, the Parliament, upon the recommendation of the President may:

- (a) form a new State by separation of territory from any State or by uniting two or more States or parts of States or by uniting any territory to a part of any State;

The political scene in the Darjeeling hills was dominated primarily by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and the Communist Party India (CPI) (Marxist) which, had managed to establish support in the tea estates after the decline of the AIGL. In 1986, the GNLF officially launched a mass movement for the separate state of Gorkhaland as a guarantee for legitimacy of Gorkhas as bona fide citizens of India as well as an assertion of the cultural, linguistic, difference from the people of West Bengal. It was a demand for self-determination which translated to control over the resources that were being 'drained' out of the hills to the coffers of the State of West Bengal, ethnically represented by the Bengalis. This was however opposed by members of the CPI (M) and what started as small skirmishes between the two factions, quickly escalated to full-fledged violence that evolved into a major anti-government agitation (Subba, 1992; Dasgupta, 1999:66).

This situation was further intensified by the treatment of a political problem as a law and order issue by the state leading to the escalation of violence (Banerji, 1986:1721). The agitation finally ended in 1988 with the creation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), the first autonomous council outside of northeast India, and the recognition of Nepali as the co-official language (with Bengali) of the three hill sub-divisions. The DGHC however was unsuccessful in eradicating the malaise of unemployment, underdevelopment and poverty. Failure emanated from political infighting and the leadership of Subash Ghising who as the Chairman of the DGHC had no real power or authority as all the crucial decisions were still made in Calcutta. Thus, in 2007, Ghising was ousted by the Gorkha Jana Mukti Morcha (GJM) led by Bimal Gurung, who have since revived the demand for Gorkhaland. They put forth a multi-pronged approach to achieve Gorkhaland; to highlight the cultural difference of the Gorkhas, stage non-violent non-co-operation against the State (for example refusal to pay taxes, hunger strikes )<sup>46</sup> and gain institutional support in the Parliament.

The idea of a Gorkhaland serves the dual purpose of promising development to the Darjeeling hills and legitimacy to the hundreds of thousands of Nepalis living all over India.

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- (b) increase the area of any State;
  - (c) diminish the area of any State;
  - (d) alter the boundaries of any State;
  - (e) alter the name of any State:

Source: [http://www.legalserviceindia.com/constitution/const\\_india.htm](http://www.legalserviceindia.com/constitution/const_india.htm) (Accessed: 22/12/09).

<sup>46</sup> However, in spite of their attempts at Gandhian techniques of resistance, there have been a number of violent outbreaks in the plains of Siliguri and the Duars which are also being demanded as a part of Gorkhaland (Benedikter, 2009).

Nonetheless, the failure of the DGHC raises important questions not only about the failure of the administrative structure of the state but also of the failure of those at the helm to harness the potential. It begs the question as to whether the system failed the people or whether the people failed themselves.

After a series of negotiations with the central government and the new state government,<sup>47</sup> a political and administrative compromise was reached in July 2011 with the formation of the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) which is similar to the earlier DGHC that it replaces in form and content, except that it is empowered with certain administrative, financial and executive powers. It is an autonomous self-governing body established to administer the socio-economic, infrastructural, educational, cultural and linguistic development of the Gorkhas living in the hills.

Gorkha as a socio-political construction exists on many levels as does the identity crisis that it seeks to remedy. Experiences and perceptions of 'identity crisis' are central to the formation of the Gorkha identity. These experiences are highly contextual thereby making it imperative to analyse ethnic politics through the varied negotiations of people with the state and other economic structures.

The Darjeeling hills never had the chance to make the transition from a colonial to a post-colonial state because in spite of a change in governance, the administrative and class structures remained constant. The majority of the people were, and still are engaged in the tea plantations. Resources are still not utilized for the benefit of the local population and even though education and living standards might have risen, the infrastructure and the services provided by the government remain archaic and inadequate.

Development in Darjeeling hills has remained stagnant owing to ineffective policies and even worse management. Population growth is not matched by the increase in the existing facilities nor the development of newer ones. Tourism and the tea industry form the backbone of the economy and both have been experiencing severe slump for the past two decades. More than seventy per cent of the population are involved, directly or indirectly, in the agricultural sector, especially tea. Therefore the closing down of tea gardens or even temporary shut downs of factories affect a very large section of the population. Apart from employment generated by small businesses especially, during the tourist season, there is no private investment in the hills. This contributes to widespread unemployment and poverty amongst the educated and

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<sup>47</sup> All India Trinamool Congress led by Mamata Banerjee defeated the Left government in the 2011 West Bengal General Elections. The CPI (M) had held power in the state for thirty-four years.

uneducated. While the main town of Darjeeling is over-populated, aggravating problems related to water and waste disposal, the rural areas face problems of connectivity and communication along with lack of other civic amenities.

The state is conspicuous by its absence especially in the *Kaman* or tea estates which have become a breeding ground for 'estate culture' promoted through a psyche of subservience and dependency on the factory for livelihood, health, education and food. This is related directly to low wages (even though recent negotiations have increased this to Rs90/day, this is still not calculated on the basis of inflation) and with the majority of the total hill population living within the folds of an estate culture, understanding and analysing the tea gardens becomes essential as they are the most important sites of the construction and mobilisation of identity. It is in these environments where resources are scarce but the demand and desire for consumption goods is high that political jargon finds maximum support.

Plantation culture extends from the hills to the plains in the terai region or the duars, which is also being demanded as a part of Gorkhaland. The socio-economic problems faced by the plantation population, whether Nepali or *Adivasi* in the tea belt of Duars are similar (low wages, housing, security etc) but it is through ethnicity that the solutions for these problems are sought. Nepalis in the Duars live in a new found fear of ethnic backlash and social boycott which has been brought about by the Gorkhaland movement. Interaction with the Nepali residents of the Bargakot tea estate in the Duars revealed that above all, it was that of their Indian citizenship that they were most concerned about, especially given the expulsion of the Nepalis from the bordering areas of Bhutan and Meghalaya. Insecurity about being driven from homes persists but so does the fear of cultural dilution. Thus, in the Duars, there is a genuine sense of identity crisis because of the constant presence of the 'Other' against whom ethnic boundaries have to be drawn and negotiated, leading people to reinforce the Gorkha identity.

#### *The Indian state*

The pertinent question that thus arises is the role that the state plays in the use of this identity. Although social integration of the people from the hills and the plains has been difficult, the West Bengal government has always considered Darjeeling to be an integral part of the state and taken a strong stand against its separation from West Bengal. Lack of development is seen as symptomatic of the non-acceptance of the community by the state. This has been the key ingredient of all political propaganda of the majority of the hill based political parties and is highly internalised by the community. The state is seen as supporting the forces

that maintain status quo and ‘promoting alcohol and not education’.<sup>48</sup> In the contemporary political scenario Gorkha and Gorkhaland may have found new significance but this is also accompanied by a greater sense of disillusionment because of the lack of tangible results as well as the autocratic attitude of the GJM. For example, public meetings and processions held by the GJM had to be attended by at least one member of each family and although political participation has increased, whether this is forced or voluntary it is difficult to discern. Here, the local, village level organisation or the *samaj* have become sites of political enforcement as non-conformists are socially boycotted or publicly shamed (while the reverse happens in the Duars).

As identity becomes increasingly attached to or synonymous with territory, claims and counter claims over it are bound to emerge. Emerging cities like Siliguri which is at the foothill of Darjeeling are claimed by both the Nepalis and the Bengalis. Thus, the Gorkha identity, in spite of the numerous criticisms and contradictions attached to it, is a powerful evocation of culture in order to seek benefits from the state, the relation with which has always remained volatile. Thus antagonism towards the state is linked to ethnicity as social and economic discrimination is seen as directly related to ethnicity. The Gorkha identity also aims to remedy a larger question of the Indian citizenship of the Nepalis living in India and thus also derives its potency from anxieties related to it.

*(b) Sikkim*

In contrast to the apparent as well as perceived state apathy in the Darjeeling Hills, Sikkim represents a case of extreme intrusion by the state in the cultural lives of its citizens. The state is dominant, over-arching and powerful. It controls all aspects of its citizen’s lives especially through its role as the largest employer in the state. Prior to the 1975 ‘merger’, Sikkim was an independent kingdom inhabited by the Lepcha, Bhutia, Tsong and later Nepali ethnic groups and ruled by the Namgyal dynasty from 1642-1975. The political and administrative structure revolved around the Chogyal and his council which was drawn from the representatives of the main Bhutia, Lepcha and Tsong clans. The members of the Council were compensated for their services through land grants, making them land owing nobility or Kazis, which eventually set the stage for the feudal system in Sikkim (Rose, 1978:206; Das, 1983:7). Sikkim’s strategic location as the portal for trans-Himalayan trade in the 18<sup>th</sup> century and later

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<sup>48</sup> Khadga Bajay, retired journalist, interviewed by the author on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Banarhat, West Bengal.



as the buffer zone between India and China has played an important role in its history. In 1861 Sikkim was made a British Protectorate and after Indian independence in 1947, it became an Associate State of India in 1950. The Sino-Indian war of 1962 however elevated its position as an important frontier state, instigating India to impose a constitution in early 1970s leading to its eventual merger in 1975 (Das, 1983).

Prior to migration from Nepal in the late 17<sup>th</sup> and early 18<sup>th</sup> century, large parts of Sikkim were uninhabited and its lands uncultivated. Owing to the initiative of the British Resident J.C.White and the local Kazi and Newar elites who profited from settling new tenants and labourers, the Nepalis had established themselves as the majority ethnic group by the early 18<sup>th</sup> century (Rose: 1978; Das, 1983:66). The feudalistic arrangement of the society, however, ensured that the agriculturalists and labourers remained the poorest. Thus irrespective of their ethnicity, the majority were either landless or owned poor lands and their rights overruled by those with authority (Ling, 1985; Nakane: 1966). A powerful minority thus controlled economic and political power thereby institutionalising ethnic differences most effectively.

This sense of disparity finally manifested itself in the emergence of organized party politics in 1940, with the birth of the Sikkim National Congress (SNC), the leaders of which were influenced by the Indian struggle for independence. Most of the members of the SNC as well as its leaders were Nepalis of Sikkimese origin giving the contest against the feudal system a definite ethnic tinge (Chakravarthi, 1994:97; Gupta, 1975). Finally, after many negotiations and a radical political movement in 1975, the monarchy was dissolved and Sikkim was declared as a constituent state of India. Democracy however ushered in more political instability and ethnic insecurity as leadership quickly changed hands from Kazi Lhendup Dorji, the first Chief Minister, to N.B.Bhandari in 1979, resting finally in the hands of P.K.Chamling in 1994, whose break-away party, the Sikkim Democratic Front (SDF) has been at the helm of state since their electoral victory in 1994.

Although difference in culture and ethnicity has played an important role in the political history of Sikkim, it has emerged as a central feature of Sikkimese politics since 1994 as the state has been increasingly intrusive in the cultural life of its citizens. Built on the foundation of ethnic politics, the SDF was skilfully able to take advantage of the unrest that had been caused by the non-implementation of the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, a scheme for positive discrimination that was introduced by the Indian government in 1991.

The eventual implementation of the Mandal Commission in Sikkim in 1994 after the downfall of the Bhandari government was historically significant. It added a new dimension to

the identity of the Sikkimese-Nepali people as they were now divided into different categories that had been devised and approved by the Central government (OBC, MBC) which also marked the beginning of an internal division within the Nepali ethnic group itself. Because ‘Nepalis’ were the largest ethnic group with the most flexible internal socio-cultural boundaries, the ethnic groups which have been subsumed under the Nepali category were easily able to associate with or disassociate themselves from this category. The political nature of these categories is made explicit by the fluctuation of the members who comprise these groups. For example, ethnic groups that belonged to the OBC category could be easily moved to the MBC category en masse and those belonging to the upper caste groups were moved into the OBC category. The creation and promotion of these categories highlight the shift in the enactment and facilitation of identity politics from speeches and propaganda to governmental policies and activities that encourage and support ethnic diversity.

While the ST, SC, MBC or OBC category may be useful and creative ways of distributing public goods, this mode of ethnic identification has facilitated the creation of vote banks which can be accessed and mobilised by different political agents. On the other hand it has also led to the exploration, discovery and essentialisation of identity, which usually implies the revival or creation of the tangible aspects of culture. With each ethnic group undergoing a degree of new found curiosity and interest in reconstruction of their cultures, politics in Sikkim is unabashedly organised around ethnicity, a system which is dependent on the nexus of bureaucrats and most importantly, ethnic associations (See Vandenhelsken, 2011; Shneiderman and Turin, 2008).

Although some genuine demand for cultural preservation does exist, in the face of increasing urbanisation and ‘westernization’ as well as ‘Indianization’ of values, instrumental aspects like reservations and concessions that come with embracing and enacting ethnic practices cannot be understated or ignored. Thus, the state as the political agent has led to the creation of a political framework which is receptive and encouraging of ethnic diversity and has thus placed political agency in the hands of ethnic associations who have now become the gatekeepers to ethnic culture. The primary problems faced by the state revolve around two issues, which are almost historical in nature—the dilution of the rights of the Sikkimese through the influx of migrants, and second the insecurity over employment prospects. These two insecurities highlight very important points about Sikkimese politics and resolving these issues is at the heart of political stability and success, which the state accomplishes by creating a structure of material dependency extending from the towns to the villages. *Sarkarle palkayo*, ‘the government has made them dependent’ is a phrase which is often heard in rural Sikkim.

Complementing economic dependency is the use of culture as a tool, especially by fostering ethnic assertion amongst the largest section of the electorate as a means to greater access to resources, which ultimately leaves the electorate open to manipulation by the state.

In Sikkim, ethnic groups belonging to the Nepali category, unlike in Nepal, have never faced any external pressures to give up their culture and practices. Their history of migration and the prior presence of other groups in the area of migration enabled cultural fusion and the creation of the Sikkimese-Nepali identity. Thus, in the present context the revival of different Nepali sub-ethnic groups heralds a drastic change to the Nepali integration that was experienced and represented in the past. However, this change can also be attributed to the mechanism of the state and the different policies or the creation of socio-economic categories. Thus, as the state pushes forth its agenda of creating vote banks, discovery and essentialisation of culture will take place.

This also poses bigger questions of identity not only to those trying to analyse the situation but also to those who are in centre of it all. Unsure of the cultural insignia that one should support in a time which is truly transitional, the individual is confronted with contradictory trends which represent 'going back' to cultural roots but at the same time are seen as progressive. However, in the social matrix of being 'Sikkimese' which is represented by three ethnic groups, Bhutia, Lepchas and Nepalis, the traditional view of the Nepali as the immigrant has always persisted. Thus, in spite of the fragmentation of the Nepali ethnic group into different sub-groups, in the presence of other groups like the Bhutias or the Lepchas they will always identify and be identified as Nepalis.

While some lament the fragmentation of the Nepali group, others call it a new form of ethnic unification. However, whether positive or negative, the state is viewed as the primary agent which has brought about the growth in cultural awareness to the masses. Of all the tangible aspects of culture, language are the most emphasized as it is one of the key cultural traits that is required by the state as well as the central government.

Sikkim, like Nepal and in contrast to Darjeeling presents a case of the cohesive Nepali ethnicity being fragmented to its separate units. The state wilfully exploits the socio-economic insecurities of the people and channels it through ethnic politics in order to ensure its political security, thereby revealing not only the malleability of Nepali ethnic groups but also their potential for politicization.

(c) *Nepal*

Sikkim and Darjeeling highlight two different trajectories of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya. In comparison, ethnic politics in Nepal is reminiscent of certain aspects which are visible both in Sikkim and Darjeeling.<sup>49</sup> Similarities with Sikkim can be drawn through the over-arching presence of the state in the cultural life of its citizens. While it is a contemporary affair in Sikkim, it was most prominent in Nepal through the nation-building process of the early 1950s that had been crafted around the upper caste hill Hindu groups. Also known as Nepalization among its tribal, non-Hindu population this process comprised of the promotion and intense internalization of the values and culture (language, food, dress and festivals) of the *Parbatiyas*.

On another level, ethnic politics in Nepal also reflects the exploitative and extractive nature of the 'centre-periphery' politics which is experienced in the Darjeeling hills. Political and economic discrimination towards non-Chettri or Bahun ethnic groups has been a historical fact which began with the installation of the Hindu monarchy and became increasingly institutionalised with the spread of bureaucracy and a centralised administrative system. This system was further entrenched by the implantation of the caste system in the social structure of a disparate group of people and it is this institutionalised discrimination that is sought to be remedied through the re-organization of the country on the basis of ethnic federalism.

From 1950-51 Nepal was in the grip of an intense anti-Rana movements which was a combined outcome of three factors-armed revolution led by the Nepali Congress, efforts made by the incumbent King Tribhuvan and the alignment of independent India with anti-Rana forces in India (Hachetthu, 2009:28, 29).<sup>50</sup> Following political instability after the fall of the Rana regime in 1951, King Mahendra assumed complete control of the country, banned all political parties and enforced the Partyless Panchayat system in 1960, thereby controlling all aspects of Nepali administration.

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<sup>49</sup> Given the geographical, historical and cultural interconnectedness of Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal it becomes rather difficult to locate the point of origin of a particular political phenomenon. Thus, while it might be fair to say that ethnic politics in Nepal incorporates those aspects seen in Sikkim and Darjeeling, it would be equally fair to consider Nepal as the origin of political turbulence which is then manifested in Sikkim and Darjeeling.

<sup>50</sup> Indian influence was acutely important in Nepali Congress's 1950-51 uprising against the Ranas which was launched from India. The movement depended on Indian support for its success and had to be terminated because of Indian pressure to reach a compromise agreement rather than continue fighting for an immediate and total transfer of state power (Whelpton, 1997:45).

In 1967 King Mahendra launched the ‘Back to the Village National Campaign’ (BVNC) which drew heavily on the concepts underlying China’s Cultural Revolution and was aimed at instilling national fervour and unity amongst all participants as well as ensuring the deep entrenchment of the *Panchayat* system (Brown, 1996:47). The political ideology of pre-1990 Nepali polity revolved around certain specific themes, primary amongst which were state-backed Hinduism and the dissemination of Nepali language. State backed Hinduism involved provisions of the *Muluki Ain* of 1854<sup>51</sup> which contained a five-tier national caste hierarchy.

This led to greater centralisation of politics and administration with the eventual aim of cultural and hence national homogenization. Position on this caste hierarchy provided the basis for a forceful *Hinduization* of the polity in which the state guaranteed inequality based on one’s caste in various sectors of society. Consequently this formed the basis of the discrimination against *matwalis* and dalits. King Mahendra introduced a new *Muluki Ain* in 1963 where caste and ethnicity were no longer significant legal categories although they continued to remain socially relevant (Pradhan, 2002:11-12). This intensified during the Panchayat period<sup>52</sup> (1960-1990) which was marked by numerous state strategies that promoted a hill, upper-caste Hindu version of national integration encapsulated in the Panchayati slogan of “*Ek bhasa, ek bhesh, ek desh*” (one language, one style of dress, one country) (Gaige, 1975: 23; Whelpton, 2005). On the other hand, the promotion of the Nepali language was done at the cost of other indigenous languages and Nepali became the language of dominance and discrimination against those who were speakers of other languages (Onta, 2006:305-306).

The Partyless Panchayat however faced serious opposition from the Nepali Congress as well as the different factions of the Communist Party in Nepal. This opposition against the system manifested itself in the form of student agitation in 1979 first in the Kathmandu valley which then spread to other towns. This led to the suspension of the BVNC and the

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<sup>51</sup> According to Gurung (1997: 501) Jung Bahadur who is associated with the promulgation of *Muluki Ain* in 1854 was not the first to introduce the caste system in Nepal as the Ain was merely the culmination of a long standing tradition which goes back to the Licchavi period (approximately 400-750 CE). A prominent one was that of Jaya Sthithi Malla (1382-95) which categorized Newars into sixty-four castes and again during the reign of Mahendra Malla (1506-75). This Hindu social code was later introduced in Gorkha by Ram Shah (1603-36).

<sup>52</sup> This system provided for directly elected village or town councils (Panchayats), their members forming an electoral college to choose district level representatives, who in turn selected from amongst themselves the majority of members of the national legislature or the Rashtriya Panchayat, the remainder being either representatives of government sponsored class organisations or royal nominees. And the system proclaimed to give impetus to local leadership and popular participation, advocated decentralisation of administrative authority and political responsibility (Lohani, 1973:26; Whelpton, 2005:101).

announcement of a referendum to decide upon the future of the *Panchayat* system (Brown, 1996:91). Although fifty-five per cent of the masses voted for the *Panchayat* system, it was however neither able to alleviate the country's economic position nor provide political stability. On another level this system also lost credibility due to its increasing exclusivity and unaccountability as it was unable to deliver the *bikas* or development that it had promised and partly also because of the manner in which it tried to suppress dissent (Hutt, 2004:3). While these factors posed as serious threat to the regime itself, another source of opposition was from the civil society. An accumulative impact of the progressive measures taken during the *Panchayat* period was that there had come to being a 'critical mass' of people who supported democracy (Hacchethu, 2009: 32). Thus dis-satisfaction with the *Panchayat* system was being expressed from a wide section of the public.

In a bid to garner support, the government started loosening restraint on political activities leading to the proliferation of numerous ethnic organizations, some of which were supported by the government itself in an attempt to enlist ethnic and low caste groups to support the *Panchayat* regime. This was instrumental in the mobilization of ethnic minorities in opposition to *bahunvad* or brahmanocracy (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfuss, 2003:6). However political discontent continued which eventually led to the first *Jana Andolan* (People's Movement) in 1990 that brought an end to the *Panchayat* system and absolute monarchy.

In July 1990 Nepal *Janajati Mahasangh*<sup>53</sup> (Nepal Federation of Nationalities)-which in 2004 became the Nepal *Adibasi Janajati Mahasangha* (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities, NEFIN) - came into existence. These along with the emergence of ethnically oriented parties like the Mongol National Organization in the eastern hills and the *Sadbhavana Party* in the Terai, marks the onset of minority politics in Nepal. The indigenous movement which had begun organizing in 1950s, gathered momentum with the establishment of democracy in 1990 giving these parties the freedom to articulate their concerns and grievances against the State (Whelpton, 2005; Fisher, 2001). Ethnic mobilization, in terms of activism for identity and recognition, began to flourish through their ethnic organizations owing to the open democratic environment. The principles of popular sovereignty, equality, freedom and cultural rights which the newly democratic country claimed to espouse combined with the expansion of the international human rights regime led to the articulation of marginalized and excluded voices (Hacchethu, 2003:233).

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<sup>53</sup> *Janajati* is a term to denote a community which is outside the fold of the Hindu caste system, previously known as the *Matwalis* ( Tamang, 2005:6 cited in Hangen, 2007:19)

However, the new democratic political system and the stability of the state was constantly challenged by the inter-party and intra-party conflicts, corruption and manipulation of constitutional loopholes. This is exemplified by the fact that the government changed fifteen times in fifteen years between 1990 and the coup in 2005. This situation was aggravated further by the declaration of the ‘peoples war’ by the Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) in 1996, which came to a formal end in 2006. This decade long insurgency changed the socio-political dynamics of Nepal. Although it gave voice to frustrated groups within the country, it also brought destruction and large scale displacement, furthered poverty and fractured communities. The year 2006 also saw Jan Andolan II, one of the most powerful anti-establishment struggles in the history of Nepal headed by the Seven Party Alliance (SPA)<sup>54</sup> and the Unified Communist Party Nepal (Maoist) (UCPN-M) which marked the end of monarchy and the declaration of Nepal as a Democratic Republic. In 2008 the monarchy was abolished and the drafting of a new constitution is underway which will guide the re-organization of Nepal. However, there is little clarity over the specific mechanisms through which this massive change will be achieved (Middelton and Shneiderman, 2008).

Explicit political demands (separate ethnic states, federalism, political representation, linguistic freedom) as opposed to the earlier demands of cultural preservation and the violent articulation of these demands (a trend spearheaded by the Maoists) marks a change in the political scenario itself (Lawoti, 2007). While local autonomy and federal framework had been raised as political demands by various regional groups in 1950 and again in 1990, it became a specific program for the Maoist rebels and thus gained currency with ethnic activists. These are explicit demands with implicit claims. Every ‘homeland’ would become one of the states of federal Nepal and thus with the decentralization of power that comes with federalism, control over and distribution of resources would be in the hands of those who head the federal state.

Ethnic groups categorised under the broad terminology of Adivasi/Janajatis (indigenous/ethnic) are entitled to positive discrimination through reservation in employment and education. Although these groups are not barred from applying for various concessions and positions but factors like ethnic nepotism and a bureaucratic system dominated by the upper caste discourages people from applying for employment or other benefits at the very outset. Thus, given the negligible number of ethnic minorities (in proportion to their population) who are employed in the government sector, access to information and ease of application in

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<sup>54</sup> The Seven Party Alliance comprised of the Nepali Congress, Nepali Congress (Democratic), Communist Party of Nepal (Unified Marxist Leninist), Nepal Workers and Peasant Party, Nepal Goodwill Party, United Left Front and the People’s Front.

the public sector is missing. Although recruitment to the civil service should be based only on merit, the nature of social stratification only allows those in the higher *Parbatiya* castes to gain access to the required education and necessary information and thus obtain the necessary qualifications to enter the civil services. This may be referred to as hereditary meritocracy whereby people belonging to the upper strata, such as Brahmins, have an enormous advantage over other groups in the society. This advantage is reflected in recruitment to the civil services which selects large numbers of those belonging to the upper caste (Jamil and Dangil, 2009:202). Thus, the Nepalese Public Service Commission is highly unrepresentative not only in terms of gender, religion, and caste but also in terms of ethnicity, region and class.<sup>55</sup>

### *The eastern frontier- Limbuwan*

It is within the ambit of transitional politics that the borders of the homeland for the Limbu ethnic community-Limbuwan- have been drawn by different political parties and ethnic organizations despite the lack of consensus between all those involved. One of the most important aspects of this movement is the lead taken by ethnic associations rather than the national political parties. In comparison to past, where concerted but isolated events for Limbuwan have taken place, the present movement was initiated by the foremost ethnic organisation for the Limbus'- the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC).

Nepal, surprisingly, still enlists political participation from its citizens in spite of the low credibility and accountability of its political representatives (exemplified by their failure to draft the new constitution four years after being elected as members of the Constituent Assembly). The contemporary political scene with its fuzzy boundaries between political parties, interest groups and ethnic associations represents a complex maze, confusing and contradictory at times with similar actors performing different roles and the same actor performing multiple roles. Layers of roles are nested within each other, all of which test and strain social relations. However, analysis of changes and development is made easier by accepting the political nature of the social actors and by understanding that political parties demand immense loyalty, making them members of political parties first and then of other social associations. However, this not to doubt the ethnic allegiance but rather to assert the

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<sup>55</sup> For example, the participation of different castes and ethnic groups in the government bureaucracy is far from equal. The recruitment of gazetted officers from Dalits, Janajatis, Terai Castes, and Muslims did not improve during the decade post-1990 while that of the Brahman-Chettri group actually increased from 67 to 87 per cent during that period. Among higher level police officers, 79 percent come from Brahman/Chettri group, 13 per cent from the Janajati group, 11 per cent from Newar and 0.5 per cent from the Dalit category (Tiwari, 2008:42).



level of control that political parties still hold in the construction of the framework of ethnic articulation.

Inefficient bureaucracy, nepotism, partiality and corruption were all seen as the characteristic features of the state by the masses yet the demand for Limbuwan, a federal state, still finds resonance and is successful in mobilising people politically. This can be attributed to its actual historical existence in the past, ethnic attachments with *kipat* as well as the lure of developmental benefits that will come with the federal state of Limbuwan. Participation in workshops, ethnic rallies (which have strong political connotations) as well as events organised by political parties is indicative of a *rajneetik chaso* (interest in politics) which is not matched by an equal measure of *rajneetik gyan* (political knowledge), highlighted by the lack of information, in rural as well as semi-urban areas,

In this situation where ethnic issues are not directly articulated by the major political parties, ethnic associations like the KYC, which act at the interface between the state and the people, have started playing important political roles, at least within the Limbu community. The demand for Limbuwan has also found strength in the present scenario because it falls within the realm of national as well as international discourse on the rights of the indigenous, manifested in the evocation of the International Labour Organisation's Convention 169<sup>56</sup> (which pertains to the Rights of the Indigenous and Tribal Peoples), at every event organised by any ethnic association. This has generated many problems as there is no clarification about the components of the Convention and thus, when identification of the indigenous itself is highly problematic and politicised, confusion regarding rights or *agra-adhikar* (prior rights)<sup>57</sup> over resources between the indigenous and other ethnic communities is only but inevitable. However, these are issues and discussions at an organisational level, usually ending in stalemate, which are yet to percolate down to the grass-roots and affect social interaction.

Lack of state accountability and the inconsistency of the major political parties in their commitment towards the Limbuwan agenda (which is also an indirect indication of their stand

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<sup>56</sup> Mounting pressure from the *janajati* (indigenous peoples) movement in Nepal which was in tandem with the international emphasis on indigenous rights, the Government of Nepal signed the ratified the ILO Convention 169 in 2007, making Nepal the first South Asian country to do so.

<sup>57</sup> *Agra-adhikar* means prior or first rights, especially in the political sphere. Under this scheme every ethnic homeland would democratically elect, for a total of two terms, the governing Minister from the ethnic group after which the homeland was named. Thus, in Limbuwan only a Limbu could be the Chief Minister for the first ten years. *Agra-adhikar* was also proposed in arena of affirmative action with Limbu candidates being given first priority over other ethnic groups.

on ethnic federalism) have created ample space for the rise of regional parties. Ethnic politics has thus finally created an opportunity for the members of ethnic groups to engage at the highest political level, a position which has not often been possible before. This situation thus provides hope and incentive for the younger generation to become members of political parties as new opportunities of political mobility and advancement are opened up by the regional parties. Given the prevalence of favouritism (especially ethnic) being politically active is almost a necessity in Nepal and this phase of political transition, where even the major parties are making concessions to ethnic demands within their parties as there is a proliferation of regional parties, is the opportune moment to be a political participant.

Thus, the political promotion of the Limbu identity shows the use of ethnicity in confronting the state or at least those at the helm of the state to demand equal political access and opportunity as well as equitable distribution of resources.

The case studies of eastern Nepal, Sikkim and Darjeeling present the variation in the manifestation, articulation and use of ethnic identity as a political resource. These three cases highlight how the 'Nepali' identity has been reworked and re-moulded in order to fit the political, economic and social exigencies in which these groups are located. While the Sikkim and Darjeeling cases discuss the variation in the expressions and use of ethnic identity, the case of the Limbus is a telling example of how the Limbu identity is constructed against this very idea of a homogenous 'Nepali' identity. The three cases thus exemplify the politics of being Nepali in the eastern Himalaya and establish that understanding and being a Nepali is very far removed from the homogeneity that was once imagined.

## Part Two: Ethnic Politics in east Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim

### General Introduction

One of the most outstanding developments in three cases discussed in this thesis is that of the variation in the manifestation and use of Nepali identity as a political resource at the local and regional level. All three case studies show the emergence and assertion of different identities as a reaction to the idea of a homogenous Nepali that was constructed by the literary elites in Darjeeling as discussed in the preceding section.

The second section of this thesis takes this construction of the homogenous Nepali to three different areas and analyses the politics of being a Nepali in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. The three case studies are based on ethnographic fieldwork conducted over a period of seven months (July 2010-February 2011) in the hills and plains of the eastern Himalaya. The three cases, whilst distinct in their social, economic and political contexts as well as the incentives and modes of political mobilization, are linked together by the simultaneous existence of politics on the basis of Nepali ethnic identity. The three cases show the dialectic relationship between ethnicity and politics. While on the one hand, ethnicity is the basis of political contention and negotiation between states and ethnic groups, on the other hand the state and the existing political structures determine the form and content of ethnic identity. The three cases illustrate this relationship whilst also highlighting the instrumental rationale that determines which aspect of identity needs to be emphasized politically in order to gain the most beneficial outcome. This is also an outcome of institutionalization of ethnic cleavages by the state as well as the ethnic groups themselves which has led to an attachment of routinized, within system payoffs to political mobilization based on ethnicity (Chandra, 2005: 236). Ethnic politics in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal is analysed against the structural mechanism of patronage politics and re-distributive politics which makes ethnicity the most viable resource for political mobilization, thereby providing an understanding of how and why groups choose to assert one identity over another. The wide framework through which to study and analyse the three cases is based on the socially constructed nature of ethnic groups which enables their politicisation by ethnic elites as well as the state in a bid to access or control public goods or what Laitin (1999:5) calls 'political pork'. Ethnic groups thus represent coalitions which have been formed as a part of rational effort to secure benefits created by the forces of modernization and those which are desired but scarce (Bates 1983:152 in Fearon, 1999: 3). As a result, motivation or demands determine the shape and form of ethnic groups. The role of the state is

crucial in determining the course of ethnic politics and the choice of identity that groups seek to make meaningful. Thus, the relationship of ethnic groups with the state becomes the structural basis of political processes in the three cases. The three cases are a study in the use of ethnic identity as a political resource in order to engage in or get greater access to the political patronage, which in turn controls access to essential goods (political, material and cultural). This is enabled by the existence of an overarching institutional framework that has legitimised ethnic politics.

The Sikkim case study highlights the gradual conversion of an ethnic category to what Mosse (1991:64) calls a 'welfare and bureaucratic category' thereby changing the form as well as the function of Nepali ethnic group in Sikkim. The Darjeeling case study reveals two contradictory processes that the Nepali identity is undergoing. The first being the on-going processes of homogenization of the Nepalis which defines and essentializes group identity and the second is the alteration in the different groups that this terminology now encapsulates. The case study on the Limbus of east Nepal, on the other hand discusses how identity construction and its articulation in east Nepal is built against the idea of a Nepali that was propagated by the Nepali state after the downfall of the Rana regime in 1951. Thus in all the three cases, the emergence of ethnic politics and the variation in its manifestations is built on or against the idea of a homogenous, culturally defined Nepali.

Being a Nepali in India or in Nepal is not value neutral. Ethnic identification carries with it numerous advantages as well as impediments, which are the focus of much discussion in the three cases. Nepalis of Sikkim bear a different set of social and political identity from Nepalis in the Darjeeling hills which are again different to that of the Limbus of east Nepal and it is these differences that the thesis sets out to establish. Whilst acknowledging the existence of separate national policies and discourses both in India and Nepal, the thesis considers the Nepali identity as a cross-border phenomenon in order to discuss the politics of being a Nepali. The bearers of this identity in all the three cases have had different experiences which have influenced their life chances as well as their politics. Thus, all the three case studies pay attention to the benefits as well as the disabilities associated with being a Nepali

The Nepali identity is located in a wider matrix of social, economic and political relationships with other ethnic groups and most importantly with the state which then influence the form of identity which is emphasized. Thus, the assertion of tribal category in Sikkim, the Gorkha in Darjeeling and the Adivasi/Janajati in Nepal is influenced by wider discourse and

interaction with the political-economic structures. Each case study is representative of a form of localised politics with its own particular frames of reference, social and economic structures. Yet at the same time the case studies as a whole emphasize the reconstruction and the concomitant use of this identity in the regional politics of the eastern Himalaya.

N.B. Pseudonyms have been used in all the three cases to protect the identity of respondents.

### Ilam and Panchthar Districts in east Nepal



Source: [ncthakur.itgo.com](http://ncthakur.itgo.com)

## **Chapter Three: Changing structures in *Naya* Nepal and the resurgence of the Limbu identity**

### ***Introduction***

The first case study focuses on the structures that have restricted the participation of the Limbu ethnic group in the wider economic and political processes. This has led to an ethnic response which has been facilitated by the change in the opportunity structures at the national and international level thereby enabling us to understand the relation between ethnicity, politics and Limbu identity.

If politics, as defined by Weber (in Gerth and Mills, 1948:78) is the struggle between men to influence the distribution of power, either amongst states or groups within a state, then Nepalese politics can be used as a prime example. Nepalese politics gives evidence to how power cannot be attained without circumventing the power of others, making oppositional politics its permanent hallmark. The political history of Nepal has been demarcated into different stages/periods<sup>58</sup> (Pradhan, 2002:19) which have all emphasized a tradition of oppositional politics. Every stage, whether it be the period of Rana oligarchy, the Panchayat period or the post 1990 democratic era, has brought forth new players and a re-positioning of the old. Political parties in Nepal had arisen out of the oppositional politics against the Ranas and according to Baral (1995: 430-31) this has had a lasting impact on the overall development of political parties in general. Born out of an oppositional socio-political movement and therefore with extra-parliamentary origins without a long democratic process, political parties in the systemic and institutionalized sense could only exist for a short window between 1951-60. After a decade of Maoist insurgency (1996-2006) and even longer political instability starting with the onset of multi-party democracy in the 1990s, Nepal is on a path of political transition, from the only Hindu kingdom in the world to a secular republic that recognizes ethnic and religious diversity of the country.

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<sup>58</sup> According to Pradhan (2002:19) in Nepal there have been three models of society as reflected in the laws enacted by different political regimes. In the first model representing the Gorkhali and Rana regimes, cultural pluralism was recognized but differences were translated into hierarchy and institutionalized through the caste system. The anti-thesis to this model was the Panchayat model of the nation state which did not recognize cultural differences and instead envisioned a society where all subjects were equal and assimilated into one homogenous category; ethnicity was not a basis for a legal category. The synthesis of these two models is the plural and non-hierarchical model envisioned by the Constitution of 1990 where the dominant culture remains status quo.

In this present process of creating a *naya* (new) Nepal, federal re-organization of the administrative units of the country as opposed to the present unitary system has emerged as one of the primary demands. This has however turned into a bone of contention with no unanimity over the basis of decentralisation. The country is now facing a deadlock between ethnic groups, who through their ethnic associations demand state re-organization on the basis of ethnicity and the major political parties who have remained ambivalent over these issues. While the political situation in Nepal remains unresolved, the aim of this chapter is to understand the dynamic identity based politics existing in Nepal with special reference to the eastern district of Ilam.

The chapter analyses the assertion of the Limbu identity over other forms of ethnic identity (Kirata, Mongol) as well as that of a Nepali as promoted by the nation-state. This chapter focuses on the political re-positioning of the Limbus in the context of changes in domestic politics as well as the international discourse on indigenous groups.

Minorities in Nepal are organised on the basis of caste, ethnicity and religion (all of which tend to overlap at some level). Ethnic groups identify themselves as ‘Janajati’<sup>59</sup> a term adopted in 1990 under the leadership of the Nepal Janajati Mahasangh. The term applies to peoples with a distinct language, culture, social structure, oral or written history and horizontally distributed territory in contrast to ‘caste’ groups which are a social group stratified vertically on the basis of ritual hierarchy (Gurung et al, 2006:1). In 2004 this organization renamed itself as the Nepal Adivasi Janajati Mahasangha (Nepal Federation of Indigenous Nationalities or NEFIN) which along with a proliferation of ethnic political parties marked the formal onset of ethnic identity politics in Nepal. In spite of persistent demands by ethnic and minority groups it was only in 2002, that the National Foundation for Development of Indigenous Nationalities (NFDIN) was established to address the grievances of ethnic groups against state-led social, economic and political discrimination.

For the Limbus in the eastern hills of Nepal, being a Nepali has come at the cost of their ethnic and indigenous identity. While this has benefitted a few, the vast majority have been subjected to socio-economic discrimination thereby propelling a movement against an identity

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<sup>59</sup> *Janajati* is a term to denote a community which is outside the fold of the Hindu caste system, previously known as the Matwalis (Tamang, 2005:6 in Hangen 2007:19).



imposed by the state in order to reclaim their ethnic and indigenous identity. Whilst this movement can be seen as a form of contention against the state, a closer inspection reveals that it does not aim to dislodge the political or economic structures but rather to gain more access to them. Given the international discussion on indigenous rights, it is quite natural that for those who have been historically repressed and marginalized on the basis of their ethnic identity, the tide has turned in their favour.

This chapter locates the emergence and assertion of Limbu ethnic politics against these important structural changes and aims to highlight the role played by external structures in ethnic politics. Thus, this chapter looks at the impact of ‘enabling’ structures that have (i) contributed to a heightened sense of ethnic discrimination (through the ethnically biased bureaucracy) and (ii) the impact of internal factors like the Maoist insurgency and the international Indigenous Rights discourse which have shaped the movement. While these ‘enabling’ structures have not had a direct impact on ethnic politics, they have nonetheless influenced the form and course of ethnic politics in the eastern hills of Nepal.

This chapter does not question the motivation or existence of ethnic grievances against the state but rather seeks to explain the changes in the ‘enabling structures’ that have facilitated the political articulation of ethnic identity. The chapter argues that while the Maoist insurgency and the adoption of the international Indigenous Rights regime might have opened the area for debate and political mobilization of ethnic sentiments, ethnic politics is eventually played out on the ground by a new range of actors, who now include ethnic activists and identity based political parties. Another important factor is also of the ‘macro-habitus’ which supports the demand for an ethnic resolution to social, economic and political grievances. This ‘macro-habitus’ is composed of the position of the Limbus in the social and economic hierarchy in Nepal as well as their historical background as the indigenous group of Limbuwan. Both these factors coalesce to construct a certain imagery of how the Limbus perceive themselves as well as the world around them, which then affects identity construction and political mobilization.

Nepal is undergoing a period of political transition which has opened up opportunities for ethnic politics but the changes that the movement seeks to bring can only be understood by analysing the cause for discontent. Thus, **Section 1** of this chapter discusses the institutional structures and their historical origin that have led to the routinization of ethnic bias leading to intense frustration amongst those who have been systematically left out. Against this background **Section 2** discusses identity politics in eastern Nepal which is based on the demand

for Limbuwan, a homeland for the Limbu ethnic group. Whilst discussing the role of the ‘enabling structures’ this section focuses on the enactment of identity politics by the leading Limbu ethnic association and upcoming regional parties. This section highlights the importance of the reconstruction and presentation of the Limbu ethnic group as the indigenous people of the area which therefore justifies their demand for Limbuwan. However Limbuwan is not merely a demand for mere cultural emancipation but also for access to the resources that are controlled by the state which is dominated by the upper caste Chettri and Bahun groups. Thus, this chapter discusses the mutually reinforcing role played by ethnic identity and socio-economic deprivation in the eastern hills of Nepal.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in the districts of Ilam and Panchthar in east Nepal from July 2010-October 2010.

### ***3.1 Institutionalizing ethnic inequality***

The end of the Maoist insurgency and the second Jan Andolan (People’s Movement) in 2006 marks the beginning of a new political era in the history of Nepal, where unlike previous times ethnic identity has become central to national debate and discussions. The ‘ethnic question’ has become so important that lack of political unanimity over it led to the dissolution of the Constituent Assembly in May 2012, which had been specially elected in 2008 for the formulation of the new Constitution. In this context the second Jan Andolan can be deemed to be an important turning point in the history of Nepal, a culmination of the political stagnation accumulating since the first Jan Andolan in 1990 but most importantly against the royal coup by King Gyanendra in 2005.

From the perspective of the Adivasi/Janajati groups ethnic discrimination has a systemic and institutional foundation (See Bhattachan, 2008; Hacchethu, 2003; Lawoti, 2007). For example the Constitution of 1990 was drafted by a committee handpicked by King Birendra and other political elites. Out of the nine members of the Constitution Recommendation Committee, six members belonged to the upper caste Bahun/Chettri community, while the remaining three<sup>60</sup> belonged to other groups which effectively ensured upper caste control over the final outcome of the Constitution. In spite of seeking to gauge the views of the widest possible range of Nepalis, the Constitution Recommendation Committee (CRC) described

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<sup>60</sup>They were Nirmal Lama (Tamang), Pradyumna Lal Raj Bhandari (Newar) and Ramananda Prasad Singh (Tharu) (Malagodi, 2007:3).

ninety per cent of the public recommendations on religion, caste and ethnicity submitted to it as minor and communal for a democratic Nepal. Thus the suggestions provided by the various ethnic leaders, organizations and political parties of secularism, reservation of seats to regional and administrative authority, federal structure of the government and equal status for all languages were disregarded by the CRC (Bhattachan, 1995: 130; Hachhethu, 2009: 35; Kumar, 2010: 28). The new leadership failed to make any significant break from the past and in spite of the slight alterations in the national debate with the coming of democracy and the change in the political system, the traditional structures of power remained the same.

Apart from the declaration of multi-party democracy the Constitution of 1990 declared the state to be multi-ethnic and multi-lingual and gave emphasis to the fundamental rights through Article 3. However, the idea of maintaining a distinct identity and safeguarding national interests (especially against India) resulted in the Constitution maintaining the three pillars of the Panchayat era- Hinduism, the Nepali language and the Shah monarchy (Malagodi, 2007). Unsurprisingly, these elements, in turn, maintained the status quo of the dominant groups and the Constitution of 1990 was seen as another attempt to impose a national identity based on the cultural and linguistic heritage of the upper caste minority (Fisher, 2009). Thus institutional mechanisms like the Constitution provided support to other elements like the bureaucracy and judiciary and also sustained the social, political and economic domination of certain ethnic groups over others.

While these constitutional mechanisms were a source of frustration for those belonging to the Adivasi/Janajati groups who were under-represented in all sphere of political and economic activity,<sup>61</sup> the general political climate of the country took a turn for the worse with the decade long Maoist insurgency (1996-2006)<sup>62</sup> and the second Jan Andolan in 2006. This

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<sup>61</sup> According to Bhattachan (2008:44), prior to its dissolution in 2002, in the Nepalese Parliament, about sixty percent of the total sixty members of the National Assembly (Upper House) and 205 members of the House of Representatives (Lower House) were Bahun-Chettris. Apart from the low representation of Adivasi/Janajati groups, there was not even a single representation from the Dalit community in the House of Representatives who comprise about one-fifth of the total population of Nepal.

<sup>62</sup> As Chaitanya Mishra (2007:81,100) points out, 'the identification of causes and effects (of the insurgency)- and the specification of their interconnection- is a difficult task.' He proposes that what can be achieved is the identification of various factors that are necessary but not necessarily sufficient, for the insurgency. Most analysts locate the movement in the wider political economy of poverty, illiteracy, low level of educational attainment, unemployment and underemployment, economic inequalities in terms of land ownership and income, caste, ethnic, regional and gender oppression. The Communist Party of Nepal (Maoists) locate these structural conditions in the processes of capitalist imperialism, Indian expansionism and the associated conditions of underdevelopment

eventually led to the abrogation of the monarchy on 20<sup>th</sup> May, 2008 and the attempt to construct a *naya* (new) Nepal has been underway since then.

A sense of bewildering normality prevails in Nepal in the face of massive political instability, economic regression, insurgencies, inflation, strikes and power cuts. Despite these problems, the country seems to function on a basic level thereby highlighting the important role played by the *karmacari tantra* or the bureaucracy in maintaining this administrative and functional status quo of the country. However, the political transition in Nepal has been unable to change and/or dislodge this important and ironically, disabling structure which along with administration of the state has also perpetuated ethnic discrimination.

The power of bureaucracy is well acknowledged by those who have always been recipients of the state's rules and policies but never had the chance to partake in the construction of it. Despite the change in the political organization of the state, the bureaucracy is still dominated by upper caste Bahun and Chettri caste groups making one of the largest extensions of the state highly unrepresentative of the ethnic diversity of the country. According to Gupta (2006:212) the state is a translocal institution that is made visible in localized practices. The bureaucracy and civil servants then become the 'face' of the state thereby making ethnic discrimination starkly apparent. Thus when Upendra Jabegu<sup>63</sup> pointed out that in Nepal, 'more powerful than the politicians is the *karmacari tantra* (bureaucracy) and even within that you will find only Bahuns and Chettris', he was only voicing the thoughts of numerous Adivasi/Janajatis like him that I had often heard during my fieldwork.

The unitary and centralised nature of the state is represented by the well-entrenched bureaucratic structure which radiate out of Kathmandu, spreading towards the seventy-five districts. These districts are divided into fourteen zones and grouped in five development regions; each district is further divided into Village Development Committee (VDC) and each VDC into wards. Power and resources are allocated from Kathmandu thereby not only complicating re-distribution but also compromising accountability. This also evidences to the role played by the bureaucracy in providing the logistical and technical framework in

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characterized by 'semi-colonialism' and 'semi-feudalism'. For further discussion on the probable causes that triggered the insurgency see Thapa (2002); Fujikura (2003); Hutt (2004).

<sup>63</sup> Senior member of a national party and the Limbu ethnic association in Panchthar, interviewed by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Panchthar District, Nepal.

maintaining the functions of the state. However as Acharya (2012)<sup>64</sup> points out, the problem lies not so much with the unitary nature of the state but with the absence of devolution of power from the centre to the provinces which has exacerbated experiences of economic and political deprivation in the peripheries of the country.

While the domain of Nepali politics has always been highly unstable, the bureaucracy on the other hand has not only provided stability but has also expanded, especially after the Jan Andolan of 1990. The position of the bureaucracy was further strengthened during the period of the first Jan Andolan (1990) which made it the only source of public goods and services, especially in remote places and therefore of interest and importance to politicians and entrepreneurs. During this period the state became the largest supplier of public goods and the civil services represented the largest employment sector (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1993: 177). Unfortunately this vast bureaucratic mechanism was one of the important sites of the institutionalization of ethnic discrimination in Nepal as the elite caste group which occupied ninety-eight percent of the top positions in 1854 still occupied ninety-two percent of the top administration positions in the mid-1990s. In 1999 the members of upper caste hill Hindu groups occupied around seventy percent of the positions in the legislature, judiciary and administration (Lawoti, 2007:23). Thus, instead of being neutral and impartial, one of the most important and pervasive extensions of the state is ethnically biased.

According to Lawoti (ibid) high caste, hill Hindu elites who represent thirty-one percent of the population dominate the state, politics, economy and society. This overwhelming underrepresentation of most ethnic groups is bound to generate a negative reaction, a sentiment which is emphasized by the General Secretary of NEFIN<sup>65</sup> who says, ‘the Chettri and Brahmins got the cream of the country when the Ranas were ruling, they got the cream of the country when the King was ruling and now they want the cream of the country when it is a Republic. This is the trick of the Chettri and Bahuns’. Thus, real as well as perceived ethnic discrimination is an important sentiment that facilitates the political mobilization of the Limbus.

Because a close relationship between the societal and administrative culture exists in Nepal where structures like the caste system, family and other belief structures are reflected in

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<sup>64</sup>Source: <http://www.nepalnews.com/home/index.php/guest-column/18315-state-restructuring-inserting-economic-agenda.html> (Accessed: 09/10/2012).

<sup>65</sup> Angben Sherpa, executive member of NEFIN, interviewed by the author 22<sup>nd</sup> September 2010, Kathmandu Nepal.

the administrative structure, it becomes imperative to understand the origins not only of bureaucracy but also the ethnic bias which has always been inherent in it.

### **3.1 (i) *Origins of the karmacari tantra (bureaucracy) in Nepal***

The Rana period (1846-1951) marks the distinct formation of a bureaucratic organization of the kingdom through the gradual codification of governmental rule. According to Agarwal (1976 in Shrestha, 2005:177-78) the period of 'his (Jung Bahdur's) rule was a period of remedy and a period of seed time. The remedy lay in ending lawlessness and anarchy in the country; the sowing was of a system which could stand the test of time for more than a century.' Thus the administration fulfilled two purposes- the first being the maintenance of law and order and the second, revenue collection. This period also saw the centralization of power in the authority of the Prime Minister who scrutinised every administrative decision and oversaw the appointments of all the top officials.

This has been elaborately described by Caplan (1975:33) who writes that the spatial distance between Kathmandu and the different outposts gave the Rana Governors more autonomy, centralisation of power replicated itself as the Governors and their families became the source of power and authority themselves. Practices like that of *pajani*, whereby all appointments were regarded as valid for only one year and could be then renewed or terminated emphasized the power of authority and therefore winning the personal favour of a high official became more crucial in determining tenure than the demonstration of any ability. Also, since there were no other formal mechanisms through which appointments could be made, suitability for government positions rested on subjective factors. This encouraged the system of *chakari* whereby the members of public seeking government service sought to place the governor under an obligation by attending to him regularly, giving presents, running errands etc till the Governor would take notice (ibid). Caplan (1975) further describes another system that evolved for those who did not have *afno-manchay*/ i.e someone in the administration to recommend them, or did not have the time to engage in *chakari*. The alternative would then be to give *ghus* or bribe. Thus, some of the systems that were institutionalised during this time were: the *chakari* system, the *salami* system (presenting cash to the PM and Chief Saheb by the government servants during Dasain), the *Najaranan* system (presenting some gifts in cash or kind to the Ranas on the occasion of their marriage, festivals) and *darshan bhet* (presenting cash to the Prime Minister by the new recruits in accordance to their payscale).

According to Poudyal (1984:69-70) these practices were initially based on tradition but by the time Chandra Samsher took office as the fifth Prime Minister (1901-1929), they had been formalised with separate desks being set up in offices of personnel records to collect the amount. The post Rana-administrative structure underwent considerable expansion and reorganization. The Civil Service Act of 1956 which created a Public Service Commission signalled the state's intention to replace the 'personalised administration' of the Rana period with an impersonal bureaucracy. The centralisation of power in the king and the royal palace was aided by the control over the widely expanding bureaucracy both before and after the *Panchayati* period (1962-90) which was an improvisation of the Rana administration, only bigger with many more specific departments. Theoretically it meant that the administration conformed to modern bureaucratic processes but in practice such actions were decided informally by making administrative rules and regulations discretionary (Baral, 1995:35).

The introduction of Panchayat democracy<sup>66</sup> in 1962 under 'the active leadership of the king' as an indigenous alternative to western and Indian parliamentarism (Whelpton, 1997:47) was accompanied by a re-organisation of the kingdom into seventy-five development districts and fourteen development zones. This led to an increase in the bureaucratization of administration which had both positive as well as negative repercussions. While it enabled people in the outlying areas to apply for government positions without having to travel to Kathmandu, at the same time it created the conditions of security and permanency that enabled relationships and attendant patterns of obligation to develop both among administrators and members of the public. It represented aspects of Weber's definition of bureaucracy that includes highly selective meritocratic recruitment and long term career rewards which create commitment and a sense of corporate coherence. At the same time unlike Weber's notion of bureaucracy it was embedded in a concrete set of social ties that bound the state to society and provided institutionalised channels for the continual negotiation and re-negotiation of goals and practices (Evans, 1992: 12). Of those hired after the Rana period, approximately four out

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<sup>66</sup> This system provided for directly elected village or town councils (Panchayats), their members forming an electoral college to choose district level representatives. These representatives in turn selected from amongst themselves the majority of members of the national legislature or the Rashtriya Panchayat, the remainder being either representatives of government sponsored class organisations or royal nominees. The system proclaimed to give impetus to local leadership and popular participation, advocated decentralisation of administrative authority and political responsibility (Lohani, 1977:26; Whelpton, 2005:101).

of five attribute their success to personal links, direct or indirect, to the source of appointment (Caplan, 1975: 35-48). The present system relies (in the preliminary stages at least) on the utilization of existing personalised links to those responsible for appointment. Thus, the initial conferment of posts is incorporated into traditional patterns of exchange and becomes part of an ongoing system of obligations and paradoxically it is the growth of bureaucratization of administration that has enabled these nepotistic practices to expand (ibid: 52).

Moving away from the traditional patrimonial system, the Nepalese bureaucracy is a representation of a neo-patrimonial system, which is a modern form of the patrimonial system. In a neo-patrimonial system power is not vested in a single person but is rather spread across the bureaucratic structure in personnel who hold important positions. In this system there is a clear link between traditional patrimonialism as well as rational-bureaucratic domination. The essence of neo-patrimonialism is the award by public officials of personal favours, both within the state and in society; and the clients in return mobilize political support and acknowledge the chain of authority (Bratton and de Walle, 1994:458).

According to 2012 World Bank report,<sup>67</sup> with a population of twenty-seven million people and a per capita income of less than \$650, Nepal remains one of the poorest countries in the world, ranking 157 out of 187 countries. This is a figure supported by the Nepal Living Standards Survey (2011) which reported that 25.16 percent of the Nepalese population lived below the poverty line.<sup>68</sup> Against this economic background, the administrative structure of Nepal exhibits features of a neo-patrimonial bureaucracy which is the administrative instrument of an under-developed, agrarian economy. Thus, in spite of a veneer of modernity in the Kathmandu valley, in its intrinsic functioning Nepal remains a traditional state that does not govern but simply functions as a rent-seeking state.

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<sup>67</sup> Source: The World Bank

<http://www.worldbank.org.np/WBSITE/EXTERNAL/COUNTRIES/SOUTHASIAEXT/NEPALEXTN/0..contentMDK:22147453~pagePK:141137~piPK:141127~theSitePK:223555.00.html> (Accessed: 25/10/2012).

<sup>68</sup> The Nepal Living Standards Survey uses 2,200 calorie consumption by a person a day and access to non-food items as the index to measure poverty. Thus, based on market prices in 2011, a person earning less than Rs.14,430 per year was deemed below the poverty line. Eastern Nepal has the lowest poverty level (21.44 percent) while western Nepal had the highest (46 percent).

Source: Kathmandu Post, 20/10/2011

<http://www.ekantipur.com/the-kathmandu-post/2011/10/20/money/third-nepal-living-standards-survey-25.16-percent-nepalis-below-poverty-line/227426.html> (Accessed: 17/11/2012).



Under these circumstances the role of the state has increased with the expansion of developmental activities which are complemented with a burgeoning presence of international aid organizations. As Pigg (1993: 497) puts it, ‘for Nepal, development –rather than the residues of and scars of imperialism- is the overt link between it and the west... Nepal now identifies itself as an underdeveloped country in relation to the developed world’. Aid accounts for 22 per cent of the government budget and half of government’s capital expenditure. Total foreign aid is estimated to be around \$1 billion per year and rising (The Economist, 2011),<sup>69</sup> thereby promoting what has come to be known as a ‘donor regime’ which also replicates the patriarchal networks in the recruitment, promotion and disbursement of aid.<sup>70</sup> A study by Dangal (2005) reveals that the Nepalese administration is guided by particularism rather than universalism, ascription rather than achievement, and authoritarian rather than participatory values. Common administrative norms include slow decision making process, maintaining high levels of secrecy, ritualised official work and shifting responsibility to others and the influence of informal sources rather than formal rules in decision making. In addition, spatial as well as power distances between superior and sub-ordinates, centralised and non-participatory decision making processes are also the basic features of Nepalese administration. The roots of this clientalist structure can be traced back to the formation of the kingdom itself as Nepal has been administered through a complex tenurial system of state landlordism (Riaz and Basu, 2007:133). While patrimonialism was pervasive in bureaucracy, it made inroads into other political processes of the country. The culture of patrimonialism did not alter with the coming of democracy with sycophancy becoming the prime criterion for political selection and the multiparty polity reinforced this embedded social structure rather than discourage it (Kumar, 2003:169).

All of this has led to the enhancement of the patron-client network and enabled the functionaries of the government from the highest civil servant to the clerk, to establish themselves as the focal point in the matrix of distribution of resources (Pfaff-Czarnecka, 2008:90). This position is further accentuated by the fact that in most parts of Nepal, governmental agencies remain the only providers of such goods and service. Thus, while the state as a provider reinforced its focal role, the officials created or reinforced semi-clientalist

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<sup>69</sup> Source: The Economist  
<http://www.economist.com/blogs/banyan/2011/05/aid-and-corruption-nepal> (Accessed: 15/12/2012).

<sup>70</sup> Source: [http://www.nepaldemocracy.org/institutions/grassroot\\_governance.htm](http://www.nepaldemocracy.org/institutions/grassroot_governance.htm) (Accessed; 15/08/2012).

structures in which informal networks bind clients to them (Fox, 1994 in Pfaff-Czarnecka, 1993: 177). The state is the largest provider of goods and services but it is also effectively cordoned against non Bahun and Chettri groups. Lack of access is exacerbated by the inability to even be able to build patronage ties as this is also dominated by ethnic considerations, thereby leaving majority of the Adivasi/Janajati groups completely out of the system of re-distribution.

*Nepal ko kanun, Pashupati lay Janun* (only Pashupati [Shiva] knows what Nepal's laws are) was a common perception held by many respondents towards the state and its legal system. In Nepal the most efficient way of getting work done is through *afno manche* (nepotism) bribery and (since the bureaucracy lacks political neutrality) political connections. The implication of this link between the social and the administrative structure is that the majority of the lower caste and Adivasi/Janajati groups have not been able to access the very limited benefits and facilities that are intended for them. This can be attributed to the fact that they have not been able to enter into a patron-client relationship on the account of factors which are discussed below.

### **3.1 (ii) On the periphery- ethnicity and the state**

Lack of access to resources (political as well as economic) might be a condition prevalent in all parts of Nepal but the eastern periphery of Nepal is a case which exemplifies how these issues have come to be seen not only in economic but ethnic terms as well thereby enhancing the value of ethnic identity as a political resource in an effective negotiation with the state.

The districts of Ilam and Panchthar are in eastern Nepal and border Darjeeling and Sikkim which are in India. Historically these areas were a part of the kingdom of Limbuwan which enjoyed a fair measure of autonomy even under the Shah dynasty. The location of these two districts places them on the periphery of the nation-state thereby reducing the presence of the state. 'Kathmandu does not understand our problems'<sup>71</sup> is an oft repeated sentiment in the rural hills of east Nepal (more than 250 kms away from Kathmandu), which highlights the perception of the capital city as not only being geographically distant but also far removed from the problems of its rural citizens.

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<sup>71</sup> Maila Limbu, agriculturist interviewed by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> September, 2010, Yangnam VDC, Panchthar District, Nepal.

According to Sharma (2006: 1243) poverty also takes the form of horizontal inequality (rural-urban) and is evident through the limited access to public goods and services. For example, in urban areas a health post was accessible within a few minutes as opposed to over an hour in the rural areas and access to market, bank and reliable road networks were worse in the rural areas. This has led to twin problems of under-development and unemployment which are interlinked and mutually reinforcing.

As will be discussed in the Sikkim case study, the deeper the entrenchment of the state in the life of the citizens, the higher the dependency on it. This is however, lacking in Nepal as the presence of the government (through infrastructure or social security measures) is increasingly negligible especially in areas away from the *sadar-mukam* (main towns) thereby leading people to feel continually sidelined, neglected and ignored by the state. Personal observation in the remote areas of the eastern hills revealed the complete absence of infrastructure like roads, electricity and services like healthcare, education, security in some places while in other areas they were poorly serviced.<sup>72</sup> This placed additional burden on the local citizens who then resolve these exigencies through collective action.

Areas in the periphery also suffer from regional disparity in information, access and control over issues thereby increasing the level of transition that one will have to make in order to be a complete participant in the political process. Political interest is not matched by an equal amount of political knowledge, which is characteristic of belonging to the periphery. As expressed by Maila Limbu, ‘we are dependent on the radio. It takes quite a while for the newspaper to reach us from the main town. Lack of infrastructure hampers effective communication of news. The quantity as well as quality of information regarding the issues that are being discussed at the regional as well as national level is poor and often belated.’ Maila Limbu is an agriculturist from Yangnam village<sup>73</sup> and shares his opinion on the lack of governmental assistance to the farmers quite openly. He says, ‘we work all year round but we do not have enough to eat. They send small quantities of seeds during ‘off season’ but even that I think only five out of hundred must have received even that. We get no assistance from

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<sup>72</sup> One of the most unfortunate examples of the lack of infrastructure and services was during my visit to Yangnam village in Panchthar district. En route to the village we came across a small boy who had been bitten by a snake whilst harvesting cardamom. He was being carried to the nearest medical center in the *sadar mukam* of Phidim, which was almost three hours walk away. Had there been a medical center or even a motorable road, the likelihood of immediate and probably life-saving medical attention would have been greater.

<sup>73</sup> Yangnam village is in Panchthar District. It is connected by road to the *sadar mukam* of Phidim by motorable road which is only functional in the dry season. Agriculture (paddy, cardamom) is the main source of income.

the state, we are *atma-nirbhar* (self-reliant). We have heard that people in other places like Sikkim get many things but we get nothing from the state...No matter which government comes, the condition of the village remains the same. There are no benefits and development has lagged behind. Maybe it is our weakness that we cannot force the state to do anything for us.’ Their position on the periphery of the nation-state makes them distant from the Kathmandu based administration but their geographical proximity with neighbouring Sikkim fosters comparison on the living and working conditions, thereby promoting a sense of relative deprivation of economic goods.

*Enroute to Yangnam village which lay behind the monsoon clouds*



While the rural agriculturists complain about the lack of governmental assistance, Bishal Limbu<sup>74</sup> is a typical representative of the youth in the eastern hills who are faced with situations where education has brought no drastic improvement to their quality of life. Bishal is demoralised by the *afno-manchay pratha* (the tradition of nepotism) and the immense sycophancy that is involved in securing even a menial post at the local VDC. He believes that it makes them vulnerable to the machinations of political parties and that ‘one of the biggest problems is that the youth have just been reduced to a weapon by political parties.’ Involvement of young people with political parties even as volunteers, either part-time or full-

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<sup>74</sup> Young Limbu student, active member of the local Limbu party, interviewed by the author on 17<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

time, is thus attractive to those who are either illiterate, unemployed or have suffered setbacks in life. Not only do the hunger-strikes, demonstrations or road blocks keep them engaged, it also gives them some form of power and control that comes with being affiliated to a political party. Political parties in the east as well as in the terai (in the same likeness as the Maoist People's Liberation Army), maintain small armies for the safety of its members as well as 'muscle-power'. Usually known as volunteers, they have a notorious reputation amongst the people, especially those owning businesses or plying public transport (Carter Centre, 2011).

The majority of the people in the eastern hills are engaged in agriculture or small businesses as getting a *sarakri jagir* (government employment) is difficult, as emphasized by Passang Limbu,<sup>75</sup> a teacher at the local primary school. He says that people used to go to *lahur* (Gorkha regiment) but even that has become difficult owing to tough competition and a difficult recruitment process. Thus finding employment had become a *sangharsh* (struggle) now. One of the most serious repercussions of this has been the out-migration of young men from villages to either the bigger towns or Kathmandu, India and the Middle East. The absence of young men in village was one of the most striking things that I observed in Yangnam village where women, children and old men were the primary residents.

However, problems of economic redistribution which are usually linked to a disjunction between centre and periphery have also taken on a very ethnic form in different parts of Nepal, the exception being West Nepal where political action has been class based. *Bahunvad* or brahmanocracy is an openly recognised and acknowledged cultural feature whereby resources (public or private) are captured or controlled by the two upper caste groups, thereby limiting the representation of other groups and severely affecting their life chances (Lecomte-Tilouine and Dollfuss, 2003:6). Correspondingly the administrative system is seen as an extension of this high caste monopoly, designed to control or prohibit access to other groups. This forms one of the most important bases of grievances against the state in Nepal, thereby making state-led ethnic discrimination the root of under-development and poverty and its corresponding cycles of illiteracy and unemployment.

While the unitary system with its well documented lack of accountability (Adhikari, 2007:145) is seen as promoting inefficiency; bureaucracy and corruption are at the heart of underdevelopment. When combined with unemployment, socio-cultural factors like '*afno-*

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<sup>75</sup> Interviewed by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

*manchay*’ and *chakari*’ are thus deemed as important factors contributing to illiteracy, socio-economic backwardness, unemployment etc as not only do they act as filters for the upward movement of the different sections of the society, they also act as impediments to the access of public goods. This has led Adivasi/Janajati activists to proclaim that their backwardness in political and economic fields was not a result of their lack of *kshamata* (capacity/capability) but because of the exploitative state.

The inability to make useful patronage ties and partake in the re-distribution of goods and services has a real and serious impact on the lives of the people and while this should necessarily be pointed as a failure of the state, it is instead seen as an extension of ethnic discrimination by the state. Most Adivasi/Janajati activists that I interacted with during the course of my fieldwork liked to point out that it was not that they were not lagging socially or politically behind other groups because of their own shortcomings (*pachadiyeko*) but that they had been relegated to that position by the state (*pachadi pariyeko*).<sup>76</sup>

While economic deprivation of the periphery and other concomitant class based issues were seen as providing a fertile ground for the Maoist movement in west and central Nepal, it is issues of ethnic discrimination and social backwardness that have led to identity based politics in the relatively prosperous eastern Nepal. Ethnicity and socio-economic deprivation are seen as directly interlinked, a topic that was openly discussed in the eastern hills even with outsiders like me. The reason for uninhibited interaction could be attributed to the changed social and political environment where discussions on caste and ethnicity would not be deemed anti-social or anti-national. The other possible reason could also be who I was and where I was placed. While I was viewed as an outsider with interest in Limbu politics for my own personal benefit, I was also based in an institution in a foreign country which made it easy for them also to have their voices, opinions and politics heard to the outside world.

These sentiments of ethnic discrimination and its open articulation were also evident in a group conversation with the youth of Yangnam village.<sup>77</sup> They said ‘unemployment is the biggest problem but the bureaucratic structure cannot be negotiated nor understood without *afno*

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<sup>76</sup> Executive member of NEFIN, Ilam chapter, interviewed by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> July, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

<sup>77</sup> Group interview conducted by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2010. Most of the respondents were young Limbu men, high-school educated but unemployed.

*manchay* who will look out for the interests of a particular group'.<sup>78</sup> Thus, even the bureaucracy has an ethnic character which has prevented the career growth of many aspirants as circulation of information regarding openings and trainings is either tightly controlled, sometimes it is not relayed at all or the circumstances for application are made difficult. This particular aspect of the inner workings of the bureaucracy was confirmed by an official from the VDC in Ilam who felt that apart from other social and economic factors, the chances of Adivasi/Janajati students were also hampered by the lack of information that they received owing to their lack of *afno manchay* in an office or institution.<sup>79</sup>

Hemant Jabegu (Phidim, 2010)<sup>80</sup> expressing his opinion explicitly on ethnic discrimination said, 'the country should belong to all citizens but in this country there is only one *jat* which has everything. They are the ones who get all government jobs, they are the ones

<sup>78</sup>Table 1. Distribution of Dominant Castes (Chettri-Bahun) and Minorities in key positions in 1999

Positions	Percentage of Chettri-Bahun	Percentage of Minorities	Total Number of Positions
<b>Civil Servants</b>			
Secretary and Joint Secretary at the Royal Palace	71.4	28.6	28
Secretary of Equivalent in the Government	74.3	25.7	39
Inspector General of Police	75.0	25.0	4
Chief District Administrator	86.1	13.9	72
President of District Development Committee	66.6	33.4	75
Mayor and Deputy Mayor of Municipalities	49.1	50.9	116

Source: Bhattachan (2008:43).

<sup>79</sup> Shekhar Yonzon, employee at the Ilam, VDC, interviewed by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

<sup>80</sup> Local entrepreneur, member of the KYC, Panchthar interviewed by the author on 9<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Phidim, Panchthar, Nepal.

who go to America to study, and all ministerial posts go to them. They are in all the fields so if they are going to be the only beneficiaries, then members of the other groups will not have the incentive to live and sweat in this country. A *bahun's* son may get the chance to be an accountant whether by paying bribe, *chakari* or through political connections but the adivasi's son has no chance and thus he is forced to go to other countries to work and suffer.'

Personal testimonies of state supported ethnic discrimination and the resultant economic discrimination offered further evidence of the intense feeling of neglect and therefore the obvious contempt against the state. Respondents from the group interview in Yangnam were vocal about the unfair recruitment practices of the Nepal army. They relayed how the Nepali army recruitment rules were against them (the Adivasis of Nepal) because the required height for the army was a little more than the height of the average Adivasi, who belonged to the Mongoloid group, thereby tilting the balance in favour of the Chettri-Bahun groups. Discrimination and perceptions of it are therefore not only based on distance from Kathmandu but most importantly the ethnic framework which has given an ethnic form to social, economic and political grievances.

Kumar Sunwar,<sup>81</sup> President of one of the important ethnic associations in Ilam related how his multiple attempts to clear the civil exams ended in failure and frustration. He believed his failure could be attributed to the particular, ethnically biased nature of the exam papers. He recollected how there would always be questions on different elements of Hinduism or Hindu culture that were completely alien to him and to be answered in Nepali, a language which was not his mother tongue, leading to problems of writing the correct answers. His daughter now faces the challenge of getting a place in a medical school and he laments the lack of specific reservation for the Sunwar ethnic group, thereby immediately linking ethnicity to material benefits.

Like Kumar Sunwar's daughter, most of the respondents also sought solutions to their existential problems through their ethnic identity rather than other forms of identity (like class or gender). Economic and political deprivation of the Limbus was thus attributed to the 'ethnic nature' of the state that restricted patronage ties to them and thereby increased the value of ethnicity as a political resource as it is through this identity that they sought to remedy their situation.

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<sup>81</sup> Interviewed by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> August, 2010, Ilam, Nepal



According to the Census of 2001 upper castes constitute 35.4 percent of the total economically active population dominating professional (62.2), legislative/administrative (58.3) and clerical positions (53.6) (Gurung, 2006:3). The upper caste groups as the most populous in all the echelons of administration which has given it a definite ethnic character thereby supporting allegations of ethnic discrimination by the state. The youth group in Yangnam illustrate this point further by complaining that in their VDC there was not a single Limbu *hakim* (officer). This may not be have been exaggerated given that I personally observed that even in Ilam VDC there were only four members of staff who were from the adivasi/janajati category while the rest were upper caste Hindus. This was confirmed by Shekhar Yonzon who worked in Ilam VDC where out of thirty-seven employees there were only four who belonged to Adivasi/Janajati group (two were from the Rai group, one Tamang and one Newar). Shekhar Yonzon believes that one of the primary reasons for the backwardness of the *matwali* groups in the employment arena include the lack of perseverance and preparation as well as the inability to engage in *chaplusi* (sycophancy) which is important, whether profusely or otherwise, in order to attain the desired result.

This analysis of the eastern hills reflects how *jati* (ethnicity) and *varg* (class) often cut across each other, thereby leading political activists to assert that ‘this movement (for Limbuwan) is for the emancipation of both class and *jati*’ (Kumar Sunwar, Ilam, 2010) and ‘for those who are have been left behind by the development process’ (Pradeep Limbu, 2010).<sup>82</sup> The state has been pronounced guilty, of *soshan* (exploitation), for treating its ethnic minorities as second class citizens (Pradeep Limbu, Ilam, 2010) making them feel like a *pahuna* (guest) in their own country without the freedom to practise and preserve their culture (Upendra Jabegu, Phidim, 2010) therefore making it easier for ethnic elites to frame as well as mobilize political activity on the basis of ethnicity.

Since discrimination is based on ethnicity, redemption is also sought on the basis of ethnic identity specifically through the re-organisation of the state and the formation of ethnic homelands. This also highlights that the demand is not for a complete overhaul of the system but for the opening up of access to people who have been traditionally left out of the power structure. Thus, it is against the background of an ethnically biased bureaucracy and explicit, raging sentiments of ethnic discrimination that the changes in identity based politics in Nepal

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<sup>82</sup> Executive member of the KYC, Ilam, interviewed by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> August, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

has to be understood. Observation and interaction at the grass-root level therefore highlights that when the political opportunity structures changed in favour of the Adivasi/Janajati groups, their ethnic identity became the most important political resource as well as political resource. This could be attributed to the fact that owing to the changes in external political structures, the state started could no longer afford to ignore and sideline ethnic demands and at the same time, ethnic elites found the ‘ethnic template’ an easy resource to mine in order to gain a foothold in the political process. The next section discusses this particular development in greater detail.

### ***3.2 Structural changes and identity based politics***

#### ***(i) International indigenous discourse and Limbu identity politics***

Ethnic politics in the eastern hills can be deemed to be a product of the collision of a static, ethnically biased bureaucracy on the one side and the larger, international discourses on the ‘Rights of the Indigenous’<sup>83</sup> during a crucial moment in the political history of Nepal. These developments have had a serious impact on the framing of grievances, reconstruction of the Limbu identity as well as the re-positioning of an ethnic group in the wider matrix of local politics.

The end of the Maoist insurgency in 2006, the declaration of a democratic republic and the promise of a new Constitution brought fundamental changes in the articulation of ethnic grievances against the state. However, the impact of the Maoist insurgency goes far and beyond just the regime change that Maoists were eventually able to achieve. As one of their mobilization strategies the Maoists had utilized pre-existing ethnic discontent in order to recruit and garner support for their movement (Lecomte-Tiluiene, 2004). The Maoists served the cause of the ethnic groups by demanding a secular state, campaigning against Sanskrit education, demanding autonomy for the indigenous peoples and openly articulating the social, political and economic inequalities that were prevalent in the Nepalese society (Fisher, 2009). This brought ethnic grievances and proposals for ethnic federalism directly under the ambit of national debate, a victory for ethnic activists which had never been achieved before.

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<sup>83</sup> The state-led cultural assimilation projects after the Second World War and de-colonisation of states encouraged and supported by the UN, specifically the International Labour Organisation (ILO) (Article 2.9 of Convention 107, 1957) gave rise to the Indigenous Peoples Movement in the early 1970s (Cowan et al, 2001). An important achievement of this movement was the revised declaration of the 1989 ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples, which recognized their cultural distinctiveness from national communities.

The political transition that began with the end of the Maoist insurgency also represented a historical opportunity to replace *Bahunvad* with *Adivasi- vad* in an attempt to rectify the ethnic discrimination meted out by the state. Pradeep Limbu's (Ilam, 2010) opinion is a clear indication of this. He says, 'this is a historical moment and we must take advantage of it. The country can either go backwards or forward. We have to do something.' Echoing this sense of change and dynamism, Upendra Jabegu was hopeful that the new Constitution would eradicate the domination that the Adivasi/Janajati had suffered. He felt that, 'only one *jati* has been dominating and we as Adivasi/Janajati feel that only one *jati*, one language, one culture has been ruling over us. Even though the Constitution says its secular we still find that the *Muluki Ain*, in effect, promotes only one language, one religion and one culture but we are now hopeful that things will change.'

I met many individuals like Rajendra Jabegu who felt they had experienced the cultural domination of the state which denied ethnic diversity through the promotion of its homogenous Nepali identity. Keshav Raj Chemjong,<sup>84</sup> member of the KYC, *Vidyarthi Manch* (Student's Forum) recounted a personal incident where he was not allowed to speak in Limbu at a government office which led to an altercation and eventually an apology from the government official. Keshav Raj also felt that partiality on the basis of '*jati* and nose'<sup>85</sup> was prevalent in all government offices as well as organisations, albeit in a covert fashion. Another respondent, Passang Limbu<sup>86</sup> also reiterated that the language and culture of the Adivasi/Janajatis was being neglected by the state. He felt that the emphasis on just the Nepali language and ethnic partiality especially when in the area of recruitment made him question, 'are we (Limbus) also not Nepalis?' He says, 'there are still talks about declaring this nation as a Hindu *rajya*, there is still this pressure and we do feel upset about it'.

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<sup>84</sup> Member of the Kirat Yakthung Chumlung, Student wing and a student at the Panchtar Multicampus. Interviewed by the author on 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Phidim, Nepal.

<sup>85</sup> The upper caste Chettri and Bahuns are usually associated with features like high cheekbones and a sharp nose as compared to the Adivasi/Janajati, majority of who belong to the Mongoloid group and therefore have softer features-small eyes, flat noses.

<sup>86</sup> Resident of Ilam VDC and teacher at a local primary school. Interviewed by the author on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

Almost all of my respondents shared a sense of gradual extinction of Limbu language and culture. Oral transmission of knowledge, culture and history is one of the most prominent features of the Limbu ethnic group. Limbu practices of worship is based on the *Mundhum*, a collection of spiritual revelations, which is interpreted and revealed by the *Mudhumsba* and the *Fedangba* (shamans) who act as the conduits of the various spirits. Religion is linked to language as the *Mundhum*, which is full of metaphors and a source of the classical form of Limbu language,<sup>87</sup> has not been entirely translated into Nepali and thus an endangered language is an endangered religion. Leela Jabegu<sup>88</sup> says that the contemporary period is marked by a flux wherein there are people who are keen on learning the language and at the same time there are those who are not interested. I asked her whether *dhaan-naach*<sup>89</sup> was still popular amongst Limbu men and women, to which she responded, ‘they hold hands and dance but they don’t sing the *palam*. Rather they sing pop songs, Nepali songs.’ Leela herself had never sung the *palam* but spoke the Limbu language. She pointed out to me that one important cause of linguistic decline was that most young people were too embarrassed or ashamed to speak the language especially in a multi-ethnic context and against the prevalence of Nepali pop-culture, visible even in remote villages like Yangnam.<sup>90</sup> Interaction with other older agriculturists<sup>91</sup> in Chok Magu village also reinforced the general opinion that Limbu language and culture was gradually disappearing. One of the respondents in the group said, ‘my children don’t speak the language. What our ancestors wore, nobody wears them today, now only international clothes. Our ancestors used to weave and wear their own clothes but people don’t even recognize the *mekhle* (traditional female attire), *dhan-naach* has also disappeared. Children today don’t even know the Limbu names for the parts of the body.’ Thus there was an overwhelming sense of cultural erosion in the eastern hills which was once again indirectly related to the actions and

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<sup>87</sup> A *Mundhum* consists of legends, folklores, pre-historic accounts, sermons and moral or philosophical exhortations in poetic language (Edingo, 2007: 165). For detailed description and accounts of the use of the *Mundhum* in the lives of the Limbus see Sagant (1996).

<sup>88</sup> Resident of Yangnam village, Panchthar, interviewed by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Yangnam, Nepal.

<sup>89</sup> Literal translation is wheat dance, usually danced during festivals, harvests and even fairs. Men and women hold hands and dance in a circle to the beat of the *chyabrun*, a drum used by Limbu men while the women sing the *palam*, songs describing stories of the harvest, life cycle etc.

<sup>90</sup> The influence of Nepali pop culture was also very prominent in Ilam which shares close border with Darjeeling as well as the terai in the south. While fashionable, ‘western’ clothes, make-up, hair straighteners were readily available for girls, peroxide tinted, Korean hairstyles were very popular amongst boys at the time of fieldwork.

<sup>91</sup> Group interview conducted by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Chok Magu, Phidim, Nepal.

policies of the state which for decades had promoted only one language, one religion and one culture.

In the eastern hills these grievances against the homogenous construction and cultural domination (which also amounted to economic domination) by the state had found articulation through a homeland movement for the reinstatement of the historical kingdom of Limbuwan. Although championed by the *Maobadi* during the decade long insurgency, the demand for ethnic homelands and autonomous regions had been voiced as early as 1992 by the Karnali Liberation Front which published a booklet on its programmes and objectives on the basis of the historical legend of King Bali's kingdom.<sup>92</sup> Likewise the demand for an independent *Magarant* in central Nepal was made in 1993 by the Magarant Liberation Front and in the east the demand for the restoration of the historical kingdom of Limbuwan was led by the Limbuwan Mukti Morcha formed in 1986.

*CDs and DVDs promoting ethno-nationalism were freely available throughout east Nepal*



In the eastern hills, the traditional opposition to the state focused on the claims to *kipat*, has been a strong hallmark of the relationship between Limbus and the Nepali state (de Sales, 2000:50). This is evidenced by the anti-Bahun movement in the 1950s and through the

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<sup>92</sup> Karnali is located in the mid-western development region of Nepal. It is one of the poorest and most remote regions of Nepal. According to local myth King Bali Hang was a Kirata king with an extensive kingdom from Pokhara to Gorkahpur (Vansittart in Chemjong, 2003: 143).

activities of the Mongol National Organization (MNO) in the early 1990s, which was even successful in winning the regional elections in 1992.<sup>93</sup> Despite their earlier streak of success, the MNO has been losing ground steadily, unable to regain their position even in the contemporary era of ethnic politics. This can be attributed to the overall political atmosphere that was not conducive to ethnic politics as well as the generality of their agenda which was to unite all the ‘Mongols’ against the upper caste Hindus (see Hangen, 2010). In stark contrast, today the demands of indigenous/ethnic population have a specific target group and territory which makes it easier to focus claims and activities. This also makes it easier to mobilize ethnic actors in politics with examples from history of the bravado and tenacity of the Limbus against Prithvi Narayan.

Apart from the opening of the political domain to ethnic grievances by the Maoists, the other most important factor in the emergence of ethnic politics in Nepal is the influence of the international indigenous discourse which is firmly entrenched in the Adivasi/Janajati movement. Nepal as one of the poorest countries in the world has had to orient its national politics in accordance with the guidelines set out by its international donors. Even before the second Jan Andolan, international agencies like the United Nations had already made inroads into Nepalese politics. For example the celebration of the UN Year of Indigenous Peoples in 1993 renewed ethnic activism amongst different nascent ethnic organizations. In the same year debate on ethno-politics of language intensified as the government formed a commission to make recommendations about the national language policy (Bhattachan, 1995:128). The presence of international humanitarian agencies has led to greater awareness of ethnic/indigenous rights amongst ethnic elites, which when combined with their potential to disrupt life through strikes and sit-ins, especially in the semi-urban and border areas, has made them formidable political agents.

However, one of the most important developments in the Adivasi/Janajati movement was when Nepal became the first country in South Asia to ratify the ILO Convention 169 on Indigenous and Tribal Peoples in 2007 recognizing over fifty groups as ethnic/indigenous. The ILO 169 (as it is popularly known) recognizes the cultural distinctiveness of ethnic/indigenous

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<sup>93</sup> The MNO was more successful in winning local rather than national elections, particularly in Ilam where in 1992 the MNO candidates won 24 out of 47 VDCs and won the majority of the posts including the chair and vice chairman. In 1997, MNO candidates were however elected in only 19 VDCs (Hangen, 2007: 182) and the number has declined steadily over the past years.

groups and is aimed at promoting full cultural rights for indigenous and tribal people who it said had been progressively marginalised and dispossessed from their sources of livelihood and rendered vulnerable to cultural shock and loss of cultural identity (Xaxa,1999).<sup>94</sup> This Convention defines self-identification as indigenous or tribal as a fundamental criterion for determining the groups to which the provisions of this Convention apply with a qualification that this does not entail the rights that may be attached to this term under international law (Bijoy et al, 2010:57). According to this Convention, qualification as an *indigenous group entails descent from the original inhabitants of a region prior to the arrival of settlers leading to poverty and political marginality, limited access to services and absence of protection from unwanted development* (Cowan et al, 2001:19, emphasis mine). However, in spite of its origins in conditions which were different to those of Nepal and the ideological contestations surrounding its applicability in the post-colonial states of Asia and Africa, Nepal's ethnic groups and their representative associations have accepted the global indigenous discourse whole-heartedly as it finally provides them with a platform through which they can engage in productive negotiation with the state for the re-distribution of resources.

The impact of this international indigenous discourse on the articulation of ethnic grievances was evident in the speech given by Bhardoj Gurung,<sup>95</sup> executive member of NEFIN (Ilam chapter), at the World Indigenous Day celebrations. He reminded everyone present there of the economic discrimination and cultural suppression by the migrant Hindus who not only robbed them of their lands but also their indigenous identity. He insisted that state reconstruction had to be all inclusive, by which he meant that only a Gurung had the right to represent a Gurung, the Limbus had to be represented by someone from their community and so forth. This is an argument which emanates from NEFIN, Kathmandu whose General Secretary, Angben Sherpa,<sup>96</sup> whilst defending ethnic federalism and *agra adhikar* (prior rights) says, 'there are seventy-five districts in Nepal, some districts belong to Tamang, some belong to Rai but who is representing from all these districts? All Brahmins. For example,

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<sup>94</sup> The full version of the Convention has been attached as Annexe.

<sup>95</sup> This speech was given on 24<sup>th</sup> July, 2010 in a public forum to celebrate World Indigenous Day amidst members of other ethnic groups who were also dressed in their ethnic attire. The author was a participant observant on this present occasion.

<sup>96</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 22<sup>nd</sup> September, 2010, Kathmandu, Nepal.

Sindhupalchok district<sup>97</sup> belongs to Tamangs but who is representing them? Pashupati Shumshere Rana. Maybe he is the only Rana living in the district and he has been representing from Sindhupalchok for over fifteen-twenty years. This is not really justifiable'. Thus, without mincing their words the ethnic elites established a direct link between ethnicity and material ends (political, economic) as well as asserting that only ethnic identity could resolve all their problems, even those related to culture. Political instability, inefficient bureaucracy and lack of developmental benefits has led to severe political apathy. On being asked, which party he votes for Maila Limbu (Yangnam, 2010) jokingly replied, 'whoever gives me the bottle (i.e. alcohol)'. Although said in jest, this captures the residual sentiment and attitude towards the political system and governance which does not ensure health, education, sustenance nor security to its citizens.<sup>98</sup> Thus, the idea of Limbuwan, a separate state in a federal organization presents itself as an alternative and maybe an opportunity for some either to reclaim lost land or even just the increased presence of the state.

*Contesting the state: Welcome to Limbuwan*



<sup>97</sup> Sindhupalchok district is located in the Central Development Region of Nepal.

<sup>98</sup> While the fieldwork was limited to just the eastern hills and the Adivasi/Janajati groups in particular, it is quite probable that this is a common sentiment felt across the country. As Kanak Mani Dixit (2011) writes, 'what rankles the people is not so much that yet another constitution-writing deadline has lapsed, but the seemingly never-ending shortages of power, fuel, water, jobs, food and even passport. Source: [http://www.ccd.org.np/resources/wcms\\_100897\[1\].pdf](http://www.ccd.org.np/resources/wcms_100897[1].pdf) (Accessed: 22/12/2012).

The 2012 annual survey conducted by Himal Magazine expands on these themes of inefficiency, corruption further. (Source: [http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/nepalitimes/pdf/Nepali\\_Times\\_604.pdf](http://himalaya.socanth.cam.ac.uk/collections/journals/nepalitimes/pdf/Nepali_Times_604.pdf)).



## 2.3 Regional Repercussions

### 2.3 (i) *Kirat Yakthung Chumlung: Ethnic association and political activism*

Taking the lead and capitalising on this situation are ethnic associations which are important bridges between the political and the social realm as they function as effective mobilizers of the grass-root communities. However, the boundaries between the social and political fields are highly blurred as ethnic activists engage and support activities that are explicitly political. Whether it be the display of clothes and culture during the celebration of World Indigenous Day or articulating simultaneously their demands for ethnic federalism and indigenous rights reveals how cultural rights are seen as a natural component of economic and political rights and vice versa.

The importance of this political juncture has been well captured by Kirat Yakthung Chumlung (KYC, henceforth the Chumlung), the foremost Limbu ethnic association which was also one of the earliest advocates for the state of Limbuwan, at least from an organisational level. Founded in 1989 it is organised on a pyramidal framework, with Kathmandu once again at the top and its regional network expanding down to the rural areas. All Limbus are members by default and there are elected committees both at the district and the central level who act as representatives for the community in different gatherings and liaise between the authorities and the community members. As a firm proponent of ethnic homelands, the Chumlung believes that ethnic language and culture can only be preserved in a homeland<sup>99</sup> and that without political rights, there can be no cultural rights<sup>100</sup> The Chumlung' plays an important role in the creation and maintenance of Limbu identity, which fuels the demand for the social and political recognition of the Limbus. As its primary function the Chumlung organizes Limbu language and cultural dance classes in all the areas where it has a functional office, especially in eastern Nepal, with an aim to popularize Limbu culture amongst the younger generation. However, its activities are not just limited to conducting language classes or performing cultural dances. As the sole representative organisation it has also moulded its social objectives to accommodate political rights which it manifests by organising multi-party meetings demanding cultural

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<sup>99</sup> Executive member of the KYC, Central Committee, interviewed by the author on 22th September, 2010, Kathmandu, Nepal.

<sup>100</sup> Pradeep Limbu, executive member of the KYC, Ilam chapter, interviewed by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup>September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

freedom and equality (which used to be its primary demand) and to now also agitating politically as a pressure group for a Limbu state thereby highlighting the impact of political opportunities on social organisations. Thus, the Chumlung has been at the forefront of the development of Limbu language and script (the Sirijonga script, made popular by the Limbu scholar Iman Singh Chemjong) by raising awareness about the language, conducting adult literacy classes and developing books and other reading materials in Limbu. It also publishes a monthly newsletter '*Tanchoppa*' (Rising Star) which is aimed not only at discussing and providing information about the different issues but also at standardizing the Limbu language and script.

The Chumlung has also played a leading role in introducing Limbu language classes into primary school education and by providing human resources to the centrally-based Curriculum Development Centre and since 1994 helped produce text books for classes one to five (Subba and Subba, 2003:4). In 1993 to mark World Indigenous Day, the KYC initiated the 'Literacy in Mother Tongue' project, a non-formal education program with the aim of promoting literacy in the Limbu language. This project also aimed at disseminating information on topics like gender equality, drug abuse as well as human and indigenous rights, especially those related to the ILO 169 (ibid).

Language development and linguistic rights have also been taken forth by the Limbu Language Development Association (LiLDA), a community based organization established in 2000 which also works in the preservation of indigenous crafts and skills. They have published numerous books in Limbu which is used in both formal as well as non-formal education, organize Limbu Language and Script Learning Class for speakers as well as non-speakers of the language, a workshop which is gaining popularity even amongst the non-Limbu speakers. The workshop was being conducted at the time of fieldwork and I observed that a large number of students were non-matwalis (upper caste Hindus) and were seated right in the front of the class. Deependra Kurumba,<sup>101</sup> co-ordinator of the language class saw attending the language class as an investment, 'we publicised that there would be only seventy seats for the course but were so inundated with applicants that we had to conduct two classes simultaneously. People are aware that tomorrow if there is a Limbuwan then Limbu will be the official language, thereby making it useful to learn when they have the chance.' Deependra Kurumba however also complains that owing to the increasing popularity of English and the traditional dominance

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<sup>101</sup> Interviewed by the author on 6<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Phidim, Panchthar, Nepal

of Nepali, a large number of Limbus, especially the young ones, consider the Limbu language to be a ‘useless language’. This not only highlights a threat faced by most regional languages across the Himalaya but also shows that the influence of Chumlung might not be as pervasive as its members might want outsiders to believe. Indeed, the limited applicability of Limbu language in day to day living was also acknowledged by Bairagi Kaila,<sup>102</sup> a noted literary figure in Nepal who blames it on the *rashtriyata ko lahar* (wave of Nepali nationalism) which favours Nepali over other languages and it is exactly this wave that the indigenous movement has been trying to challenge.

*Limbu language class underway in Phidim*



Keeping with the criteria and the guideline set out by the ILO 169 the indigenous movement in Nepal defines its ethnic identity through its emphasis on non-Hindu practices and its history of socio-cultural subjugation through the state sponsored process of Nepalization of their ethnic values. Thus, one of KYC’s many agendas is to sensitise people about their religious and cultural practices. Most active in the bigger towns, the impact of their activities and ideologies is slightly weakened by the time it reaches their rural members but an effective way of mobilization is through the youth who come to the *sadar mukam* for education or

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<sup>102</sup>Bairagi Kaila is the *non de plume* used by Til Bikram Nembang who was born in Panchtar District in 1940. An eminent Limbu poet and scholar, Bairagi Kaila was educated in Darjeeling and is famous in Nepali literary world for his collaborative work with Ishwor Ballav and Indra Bahadur Rai known as the *Tesro Ayam* (Third Dimension) movement in 1963. In 1974 he published a collection of his poems titled *Bairagi Kaila ka Kavitaru* (Poems of Bairagi Kaila). Bairagi Kaila was interviewed by the author on 25<sup>th</sup> September 2010, Kathmandu, Nepal.

employment. The larger towns are thus a catchment area for the Chumlung as they have branches in most of the colleges and its activities are publicized through an extensive social network amongst most Limbu students who also publish a monthly Limbu journal called *Sema* which has articles in both Limbu and Nepali.

The impact of youth participation in cultural activities has been slowly percolating to the villages. For example, on the topic of festivals, most of the respondents from Yangnam village (2010) indicated that there had been alterations in practice of festivals with the younger ones being more reluctant to celebrate Hindu festivals like Dasain and trying to revive Limbu festivals like *Chasok Tongnam*. As recounted by Maya Jabegu in Ilam<sup>103</sup> even Diwali which was known as *Balihang Tongnam*, had taken on a different meaning in being associated with the story of King Balihang, the Kirata king, rather than the Hindu version of the return of King Rama from exile

Apart from cultural preservation, the Chumlung has made steps towards the social development of the community (Ram Sherma, Phidim, 2010)<sup>104</sup> in an attempt to alleviate the economic problems of the Limbus who are beset by expensive rituals and ceremonies. However, before the formation of KYC social reformation and unity was brought about by an organized sect called the Satya Hangma Panth, a puritanical, organized form of Kirati religion developed by Guru Phalgunanda. This religious sect worked towards bringing social reformation within the Limbu community and at the same time began the construction of *manghims*/ temples as areas of communal worship.

Chumlung is heavily involved and invested in the movement for Limbuwan and was one of the first organizations to openly demand it. As an ethnic organization they feel that it is their responsibility to preserve their culture in order to be able to stake political claims based on it. Ganga Jabegu,<sup>105</sup> highlighting the role of Chumlung in the Limbuwan movement says, ‘Chumlung has played a central role in the movement for Limbuwan. During its sixth Annual

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<sup>103</sup> Primary respondent and Limboo activist, interviewed by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.

<sup>104</sup> Primarily engaged in the translation of the Mundhum, interviewed by the author 7<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Phidim, Nepal

<sup>105</sup> Central committee member of the KYC and the only respondent to have returned a short questionnaire on the role of the KYC in the cultural and political life of the Limbus. The quote was in response to a question that asked about the role of the KYC in the Limbuwan movement.

Convention in 2007 the main agenda of the Convention was the demand for Limbuwan and it is only after the Convention that a political party for this specific purpose was formed. However, this party split into numerous parties and Chumlung has been at the forefront in providing a common platform to these parties'. Thus, in spite of being a community based organization, it was one of the earliest proponents of a political movement for an ethnic homeland as well as to promote the rights of the Adivasi/Janajati as enunciated by the ILO 169.

The KYC has made rapid contributions not only towards sensitizing Limbus about their religion, language but also by providing a common platform for political parties on which to discuss issues pertaining to the creation of Limbuwan. Embedded within the discourse of indigenous rights guiding the ethnic movement in Nepal, the Chumlung is a founding member of NEFIN and while they support the activities of NEFIN by participating actively in the various *chakka-jam* (motor vehicle strikes), demonstrations and *raakay julus* (fire-torch processions) they propagate the issues of rights of all the indigenous groups over resources. However at same time talk they also about the '*agra-adhikar*' or special rights of the Limbus as the original indigenous population of Limbuwan which positions them in an awkward relationship with the members of other communities.

Owing to the non-aggressive nature of its programs (like talks, workshops) Chumlung has often been equated with a 'dog with no bite' by Limbu members of different political parties. However its contribution in framing as well as propagating Limbu cultural practices within the Limbu community is appreciated by most. In Panchthar, which is the bastion of Limbus (with more than forty-eight per cent of the total population being Limbus) Chumlung has been upfront about its politics. One of the most tangible examples of this is the construction of the gate that welcomes visitors to the state of Limbuwan and where it is mandatory for all vehicles to have Limbuwan number plates.<sup>106</sup> Speaking on the significance of the gate, a prominent member of the Panchthar Chumlung, Upendra Jabegu (Panchthar, 2010) was proud of their bold political statement and that they could call their land 'Limbuwan' freely. When asked whether the government officials said anything? He responded, 'policy is on one side, power is on the other side. Limbus of all parties support Limbuwan so they (i.e. state) cannot do anything.'

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<sup>106</sup> This was also a strategy that was seen in the recent Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling where all vehicles had to change their number plates from West Bengal (WB) to Gorkhaland (GL). This act may be deemed as a display of territorial authority and a challenge to the state.

Thus, numerical strength has enabled the forceful assertion of the idea of the homeland of the Limbus and the amalgamation of culture and politics which is right in line with the national demand for the re-organization of the state on the basis of ethnicity. Transitional politics and the international indigenous discourse has catapulted the Chumlung to a dimension where it can now be vocal about the political rights of the people that they represent and take concrete actions that favour the image as well as identification of the community. For example, during the last census in 2010, it was one of Chumlung's main aims to educate people on the religion that they should choose during the census. They instructed people to fill in 'Kirat' as their religion and 'Limbu' as their language as opposed to Hinduism as their religion and Nepali as their language and according to respondents from a group interview in Chok Magu, being able to talk openly about their culture and religion has given them an immense sense of freedom. The respondents felt that, 'during the Panchayat era we were not allowed to talk of our religion, we had to write Hindu in our citizenship but now we write Kirat. There is no prohibition to writing our language, earlier we would have been caught by the police, cultural domination was definitely there during that period but now that we can talk openly about it we feel intense freedom.'<sup>107</sup> Thus, it is moments of cultural freedom like these (brought about by important, structural changes in the political symmetry of the country) that the Chumlung has capitalised on and strengthened its arguments against the ethnic hegemony of the state. At the same time it is also engaged in actively reviving Limbu culture in order to increase its cultural value which they hope can then be translated to political capital which might then enable Limbus to get better access and control over the scarce public goods.

Chumlung's activities have a wide ranging impact on the modes of identification of the people as it presents them with an identity, which may be parallel if not alternate to their national identity. Chumlung may not directly challenge the bureaucratic system but it works to generate interest and awareness amongst the Limbus as indigenous people of Limbuwan. This presents an alternative political narrative (as opposed to that promoted by the state) as it positions the state as encroaching upon the rights of not only its citizens but its indigenous people, the original people of the land, thereby immediately making all its actions tyrannical and unjustified.

The social, economic and political inequality that is predominant in Nepal is a result not only of lack of resources. The network of bureaucracy and its various social dimensions

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<sup>107</sup> The respondents comprised of Limbu agriculturists, interviewed by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> September, 2010, Phidim, Nepal.

like *chakari*, *afno-manchay* and bribery are equally, if not more responsible for this situation. Thus, political revival of ethnic identity presents itself as a chance to reclaim lost opportunities and in this the Chumlung plays a crucial role as not only does it preserve and popularize Limbu culture, it also reminds the people and the state of all that has been lost, which needs to be redeemed both in terms of material (like *kipat*) as well as cultural heritage. Chumlung plays an important role in formulating a positive imagery as well as highlighting the political potential of the Limbu ethnic group, thereby making individuals make the ‘ethnic choice’ i.e. to choose ethnicity in its specific representation as their political identity. This is accomplished through the revival of Limbu language and culture and linking cultural erosion to discriminatory state policies, thereby framing and articulating pre-existing grievances in explicit political terms. Demands for Limbuwan and *agra-adhikar* are directly linked to material demands of the Limbus thereby highlighting the instrumental rational that is inherent in cultural revival as well as the potential of ethnicity as political resource.

Aiding and complementing this process to a certain extent and going beyond the boundaries of ethnic associations are the regional ethnic parties who have been able to take advantage of the favourable political conditions and public sentiments.

### 2.3 (ii) Emergence of regional parties

*One of the many ‘Limbuwan’ parties*



The emerging regional parties of the eastern hills are almost a reflection of the national parties through the innumerable splintering that they have endured and persisted, with some

like the *Sanghiya Limbuwan Rajya Parishad* (Federal Limbuwan State Council) emerging as one of the leading Limbuwan parties (as they are locally know). Working in a coalition called the *Sanghiya Loktantrik Rashtriya Manch* (Federal Republic National Front), a coalition of twelve different ethnic political parties; it was successful in getting two representatives elected to the Constituent Assembly on the basis of Proportional Representation (PR) in 2008.

Formed in the aftermath of the Jan Andolan II, regional parties of the eastern hills are a curious mix of contradictions. While shrinking away from the label of a purely ethnic party, these groups draw most of their cadres from particular ethnic groups. The names of the parties (for example-*Sanghiya Limbuwan Rashtriya Morcha*) is a clear indicator of the purpose, aims and the ethnic demography that they seek to attract but they nonetheless claim to be multi-ethnic entities. These groups strive to claim a *sajha* ('common' or 'shared') Limbuwan where the Limbus will enjoy a degree of *agra-adhikar* or prior rights from amongst all the other ethnic groups living in that area (Krishna Shrestha, Ilam, 2010).<sup>108</sup> This is seen as the most effective measure to ensure democracy and safeguard minority rights. In spite of the apparent 'intellectual vaccum' (as accused of by intellectuals from within the community itself) these regional parties have been successful in identifying and articulating the grievances of the members of the ethnic communities.<sup>109</sup> This was aptly summarised by Madhav Chettri,<sup>110</sup> a senior UML leader who says, 'using *jatiya* (ethnic) cover and *jatiya* slogans the *shoshak varg* (exploiter class) has equated the deprived class with an ethnic category. In contemporary Nepal it is *jatiya* politics that has become more important than class based politics.' While some equation between class and ethnicity is possible, it is however an idea which has been taken to the extreme and used in the political domain, conveniently ignoring the ground reality that there are rich Limbus as well as poor Bahun/Chettri groups.

The combined indigenous/ethnic population of Nepal represents over thirty-eight percent of the national population, thereby making ethnic groups the largest section of the electorate too. While discussing the scale of movement the numbers and figures of the Adivasi/Janajati population is an important factor and given their population, the ethnic

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<sup>108</sup> Central committee member of the Sanghiya Limbuwan Rashtriya Manch, interviewed by the author on 22<sup>nd</sup> July, Ilam, Nepal.

<sup>109</sup> This was an oft-repeated opinion by most of the Limbu intellectuals and mainstream party members both in Ilam and Kathmandu.

<sup>110</sup> Interviewed by the author on 2<sup>nd</sup> August, 2010, Ilam, Nepal.



movement is thus not a marginal one which can be easily reconciled (Lecomte-Tilouine, 2009: 292). Demographic majority which when translated to the regional context, converts numerically dominant ethnic groups into dependable vote banks. Thus, in the proposed Limbuwan, the Limbu majority holds great value leading to dependence on ethnicity for the credibility or even longevity of any political party.

The political assertion of ethnicity owes its foundation to the work of ethnic associations at the central as well as regional level. Especially in urban areas, this has revived curiosity amongst the young and instilled *jatiya* pride in the old as people no longer find it embarrassing to wear traditional dresses or speak in their native languages. This has also led to an increased participation in cultural activities. This wider acceptance of culture socially as well as politically, has also created an opportunity for ethnic elites to make a foray into local level politics. Ethnic elites whose sole identification was previously through their political affiliation were now renewing and asserting their ethnic ties and culture in order to take advantage of the political situation which has now become receptive towards ethnicity (Kumar Sunwar, Ilam, 2010). Thus, this situation has given rise to a new layer of elites who are influential probably not because of their standing in the political party but rather because of their influence and social standing within their community. While transitional politics and state re-structuring may have created the opportunity for the growth of regional parties, the attitude of the national parties has still not been able to convince ethnic groups of the sincerity of their intent and in spite of all the claims of inclusiveness, *thau ajhai sanguro cha*, ‘the space is still narrow’ for the Adivasi/Janajatis.

Political efficacy now depends upon the efficiency with which a political party is able to tap into local grievances and issues, something which can only be detrimental to the gains of the party if ignored. Ethnicity may not be the only factor that the electorate takes into consideration but it is emerging as one of the most important factors by which a party is now judged. People may not move across party lines but there is a growing demand within the national parties to address ethnic issues. For example, according to Upendra Jabegu, the poor performance of the UML in the 2008 Constituent Assembly election (UML came in third after the Maoists and Nepali Congress) was a direct consequence of its non-committal attitude towards the Limbuwan issue. The major national parties are still dominated by upper caste elites and thus the holders of the proverbial ‘whip’ which with they control their members. This therefore demonstrates that ethnic politics is still played within the leeway that the political

parties are willing to allow. This is contrasted by the blatant expression of ethnic demands by the smaller regional parties who present themselves as the true representative of ethnic interests and thus position themselves as important stakeholders in the direction of the politics of the eastern hills. The emergence of these regional parties directs towards the opening of the political space which is making the democratic agenda more inclusive. Despite their limited success, the very existence of these parties offers a platform for direct political negotiation with the state, thereby making Limbu ethnic identity more attractive as a political choice, especially for those who have been unable to scale the hierarchy of the major political parties. On the other hand, blatant demand for Limbuwan and exclusive rights for the Limbus has an appealing tone to it and thus the emergence of regional parties exemplifies the instrumental use of ethnic identity as a political resource in order to gain more political control over public goods through the establishment of new lines of patronage and connections for the Limbus. This in turn has been facilitated by change in the power structure of the country that has opened some space for regionalism as well the international discourse on indigenous rights that has been adopted and localised by ethnic associations. Using real as well as perceived sense of ethnic discrimination, Chumlung and regional Limbuwan parties have been successful in producing a collective Limbu consciousness that is directed at reclaiming lost cultural identity as well as seeking economic retribution from the state through a Limbu homeland. This highlights the potential of the Limbu ethnic identity that is now being harnessed by groups and individuals to partake as distributors or recipients of resources that are held by the state.

### ***Conclusion***

This case study is a regional representation of the transitional politics that is underway on a national level in Nepal. It is a discussion of the multiple strands of political processes that are involved in the expression of ethnicity as a political identity. Whilst discussing the important nexus between socio-economic failure of the state, their ethnic manifestations and the emergence of new political actors, the case study highlights the important role played by external structure in the articulation of social, economic and political grievances. The existence of systemic ethnic bias has been a handicap for generations of those not belonging to hill, high Hindu caste groups and it was the re-alignment of political structures that enabled mobilisation and articulation of ethnic issues. As discussed in the sections above, the change in political structure has facilitated the emergence of new political actors in the form of activists and regional parties who have made Limbu ethnic identity and its symbols the focus of political

action. This has led to the assertion of an indigenous identity over other larger or more common identities, especially the Nepali identity promoted by the state.

This case highlights how bonds of culture, kinship and tradition can be successfully utilised to forge political bonds in order to engage in contestation with the state for complete control or better access to it. In the larger context of the thesis, this case of the Limbu identity helps unravel the usefulness of an ethnic identity as a resource that can be mobilised to achieve political outcomes. Thrust into the arena of ethnic politics, the case of the Limbus shows that identity construction and the politics around it can have multiple bases which can be mobilised only during a particular window of opportunity. As will also be discussed in the following case studies, institutions and structures play an important role in the choice of identity manifestation and it is this negotiation between structures and political agents that bring about a variation in the articulation of ethnic identity.

# Darjeeling District and the Duars



Source: [Himalnews.wordpress.com](http://Himalnews.wordpress.com)

## Chapter 4: Choosing the Gorkha: Ethnicity and Politics in the Darjeeling Hills

### *Introduction*

Towards the end of my interview with I.B. Rai,<sup>111</sup> one of the most eminent Nepali writers, I asked if he felt there were any differences between Nepalis of Sikkim and Nepalis of Darjeeling. In that question I was asking him to verbalize the subtle distinction that Nepalis in Sikkim and Darjeeling have always felt but have been unable to articulate clearly. In response to my question he said, ‘since the time of the Chogyals, the Nepalis of Sikkim have remained isolated. They were not allowed to mingle with Nepalis from other parts of India. Maybe because of this, the Nepalis of Sikkim will never look out for Nepalis living in other parts of India. If something happens to Nepalis living in Assam, the Nepalis of Darjeeling will feel hurt and angry but Nepalis from Sikkim remain immune to it. They might give donations sometimes but that is about it.’ Thus, according to him it was this feeling of *afnopan* (affinity) that distinguished the Nepalis of Sikkim from those in Darjeeling.

While empathy and moral solidarity within the Indian-Nepalis should have remained a private, subjective matter, a closer inspection of the Nepalis living in Sikkim and Darjeeling highlights the political nature of this relationship. Why do the Nepalis of Sikkim not share this *afnopan* (affinity)? Why do they not identify themselves as Gorkhas? Despite a shared history of migration why has this identity not found expression in the political vocabulary of the Nepalis in Sikkim? These are the questions that are at the heart of this chapter. While a common culture and language binds Nepalis in Sikkim and Darjeeling, the political articulation of ethnicity as well as ethnic politics is different in the two areas. The aim of this chapter is thus to resolve these questions. This can only be done by understanding the social and political construction, implication and the territorial nature of the Gorkha identity which at once joins Darjeeling to millions of Nepalis living in India but at the same establishes distance from Sikkim.

‘Gorkha’ is one of the multiple identities that are available to the Nepalis living in Darjeeling district in northern West Bengal. They can choose to either simply identify themselves as Nepalis or choose the specific ethnic group/*jat* (Limbu, Rai, Magar etc) that they

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<sup>111</sup> Indra Bahadur Rai is one of the leading writers and critics of modern Nepali language and literature. His literary creations depict different aspects of the life and existential experiences of Indian-Nepalis. Interviewed by the author on 21<sup>st</sup> January, 2011, Siliguri, West Bengal.

belong to as their primary identity in social and political interactions. However, it is the Gorkha identity which has been used for political mobilisation and contestation against the West Bengal government for a separate state called Gorkhaland. The demand for Gorkhaland bears close resemblance to demands for ethnic homelands in Nepal as a remedy to the social and economic discrimination meted out by the state. However the idea of Gorkhaland is in contrast to that of Limbuwan because Gorkha as an ethnic category has emerged more out of the common social, political and economic exigencies rather than simply homogenous cultural features, kinship systems or other primordial understandings of ethnic groups (like the Limbus). The Gorkha is an ethnic group as far as it satisfies a sense of common belonging; a sense of shared history and most importantly acts as a base for political action. In this context, following David Brown (1994:1) ethnicity is interpreted as an ideology which individuals employ to resolve the insecurities arising from the power structures within which they are located. The Gorkha identity, despite its colonial and military connotations was an identity borne out of political necessity for legitimacy as bonafide Indian citizens. This demand for political recognition has been sustained through long standing grievance about economic discrimination and neglect by the state which is controlled and dominated by the ethnic 'Other' - the Bengalis. The Gorkha is not only socially constructed but is also a representation of the demands for greater control and access to resources, economic and political, which have been restricted (or at least perceived to be restricted) by the state on account of ethnic differences. Despite appealing to emotive issues of citizenship and belonging to the Indian nation-state, the demands for Gorkhaland, a smaller state, have a distinct instrumental aspect to it. Once again, as seen in Nepal, the inherent potential for political mobilization of ethnicity has been well harnessed in the Darjeeling hills. However, state structures and other institutional mechanisms lead to a difference in how and which aspect of the Nepali identity is articulated politically thereby leading to a variation in ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayas.

The aim of this chapter is less to analyze the origins of the Gorkha identity or the Gorkhaland movement and more to resolve the primary research question-why do groups and individuals choose one form of ethnic identity over another- this chapter looks at the socio-economic processes that have sustained the political and moral viability of this identity. This chapter thus engages with the role played by British colonization and experiences with neo-colonization as a part of India in the creation and support of the Gorkha identity.

This chapter once again discusses a similar set of questions that had been raised in the previous chapter. The case study of the Gorkha identity engages in the analysis of the social,

political and economic costs of being a Nepali in the Darjeeling hills and at the same time looks at the *macro habitus* that has promoted this identity. This *macro-habitus* is inadvertently linked to position that the Nepalis of Darjeeling occupy in the wider socio-economic hierarchy, their insecurity as a cultural minority in West Bengal and their ambiguous socio-political position as Indian citizens.

The chapter is divided into two sections. **Section 1** discusses the historical origins of the colonization of Darjeeling, the migration that colonial industries attracted, societal relations and the 'habitus' that colonization fostered but most importantly the impact it had on the worldview of the residents. It then discusses the role of trade unions and political mobilization in the tea estates which are crucial sites of identity construction and political activity before focusing on the persistent economic impoverishment of Darjeeling which was at the heart of the colonial enterprise in the eastern hills and now the vortex of the Gorkhaland movement.

**Section 2** discusses the utilisation of the Gorkha identity as a political resource for mobilization that is aimed at change the prevailing status-quo. Instead of engaging in a political analysis of the Gorkhaland movement, this section analyses its contribution to the process of identity formation. This section aims to resolve questions regarding the necessity of creating the Gorkha as an ethnic category, its use as a political identity, and the changes that it is undergoing as a response to the changing demography of the Darjeeling hills. This chapter will show that the Gorkha as an ethnic category is chosen for political representation as it satisfies not only the question of ethnic distinction from the majority population of West Bengal as well as from Nepalis of Nepal, legitimizes the demand for a separate state and hence control over the resources that it generates but its construction as *bir* (brave) and a martyr reinstates a sense of pride and belonging to the Indian nation. However the state is seen as engaging in discriminatory practices and hence influencing the form and content of political mobilization.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in the hills of Darjeeling District (Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Mungpoo) and in the plains of northern West Bengal (Siliguri, Bagrakot, Banarhat) from December 2010-January, 2011.

## 4.1 Politics of Economy, Politics of Identity

### 4.1(i) Social and Political History

In 2007 the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJM, Gorkha Peoples Liberation Front) declared the renewal of the demand for a separate state for Nepalis living in India. Their immediate demand was the separation of Darjeeling District and parts of the Duars in the Jalpaiguri District from West Bengal and the formation of Gorkhaland on the basis of Article 3 of the Indian Constitution.

The booklet ‘Why Gorkhaland’ published in 2009 by the GJM states,

‘the demand for Gorkhaland is basically a question of the Gorkha Indian political identity ... as the spectre of “alien-ness”, “foreigners” and “evictions” continues to hunt (sic) the Indian Gorkhas even today. Why is there this ‘identity crisis’ for the Gorkhas despite their being Indian citizens for centuries, having either come with the territory that became British India under various treaties or as a part of the population movement over the centuries? Why is the Indian-Gorkha-ness so loosely received across the country that they have to emphasize their nationality by compounding their identity with their nationality? The Gorkhas must be recognised as equal stake-holders in the governance of the country and its future. Recognition of the Gorkha identity will signify their assimilation into the mainstream of Indian life and thereby further the process of nation building. A separate state will reiterate their “Indian political identity” and their Indianess.’

The excerpt above highlights a complex interaction of cultural identity, citizenship, discrimination, power and the desire for its final resolution through a separate administrative setup for a ‘homeland’. In addition, the Darjeeling hills have also become representative of the plight of the Nepalis of India<sup>112</sup> in general, carrying the onus of discrimination, identity crisis and therefore leading the cause for its resolution through Gorkhaland.<sup>113</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> In a recent unpublished paper T.B.Subba makes a useful distinction between Nepalis *of* India, who are born in India and are Indian citizens and Nepalis *in* India who usually migrate to India for employment or education.

<sup>113</sup> The primary intention of my fieldwork in the Darjeeling hills and the Duars was to try and understand the Gorkha and the multiple interpretations of that identity. I was aware of the stories and the stereotypes surrounding the Gorkha and was interested in understanding how they had been imbibed by a community as a source of political inspiration. This made it important to understand the physical, social and economic space (without any romanticism) in which the *bir* Gorkha existed.



Darjeeling is a colonized space where deprivation and discrimination have a historical precedent in the plantation estates that were established in the hills and the plains of north-east India. From a sparsely populated hillock occupied by local Lepcha, Magar and Limbu villages to one of the famous hills stations in India, Darjeeling's origins are steeped in the history of the British Raj. It was initially developed as a sanatorium in 1837, a respite from the heat and dust of the Indian plains but suitable climate and geographical relief quickly led to it being exploited for commercial tea plantations. With the expansion and diversification of British trade in the late 18<sup>th</sup> century, tea from India became one of the most profitable trading commodities. Thus, after the initial establishment of tea plantations in Assam, the successful British experiment with tea encouraged extensive venture capital and the development of the tea industry, especially after 1856 when new varieties of tea started thriving and could be grown on a commercial scale.<sup>114</sup> The tea industry is one of the largest employers in the state and is based on a very high fixed land-labour ratio, with 3.5 workers per hectare which implies intensive farming of land and provides employment for approximately seventy percent of the total population of Darjeeling, directly as well as indirectly (Datta, 2010:145).<sup>115</sup>

Plantation agriculture, although a representation of modernity and western industrialization, was and still is labour intensive. Since the ideal locations for these plantations were heavily forested and scantily inhabited areas, recruitment of low paid migrant labour became a characteristic feature of plantation agriculture.<sup>116</sup> The wages of the labourers known

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<sup>114</sup> By the end of 1866, there were about 39 gardens with 10,000 acres under cultivation which expanded to 18,888 acres and 156 gardens and by 1914 there were 156 gardens employing over 30,000 permanent workers and 12,141 temporary workers (Sarkar and Lama, 1984:88; Griffiths, 1967:88). Presently there are eighty-seven functional tea gardens in the Darjeeling hills alone, majority of which are owned by private companies and a few by the West Bengal Tea Development Board.

<sup>115</sup> According to the Economic Review (2011-12: 112) published by the Finance Department, Government of West Bengal, a large percentage of the working population (75.20 percent) in Darjeeling district is engaged in non-agricultural work (including tea-estate workers) while only 14.59 percent of the working population are engaged as cultivators while an even lower percentage (10.21 percent) were working as agricultural labourers. Also see Dekens (2005:83, 84).

<sup>116</sup> Labourers for tea plantations in Darjeeling, Terai and the Duars areas of present day North Bengal were recruited from eastern Nepal and tribal areas of Jharkhand by *sardars*, who received commission upon successful recruitment and establishment of the labourers in different *dhuras*/blocks (Sharma, 1997:5).

as ‘coolies’ or ‘mazdoor’ was lower than the wages of other agricultural labourers <sup>117</sup> and this acted as a major disincentive for the local agriculturists to join the plantation which prompted the recruitment of labour from other areas. The wage structure which had been introduced in 1891 had remained intact till independence (Xaxa, 1985: 1662). Living inside barricaded enclosures, usually in rows of poorly constructed quarters called coolie lines, every action of the laborer was monitored by the plantation police. Forcible capture of absconding coolies and corporal punishment were seen as the right of the *sahib* planters, while flogging and other kinds of coercion were considered the most effective ways of dealing with the recalcitrant labor (Gupta, 1992:182). The North Bengal Mounted Rifles maintained discipline in the Darjeeling plantations and it was only in 1947 that it was officially disbanded. Another form of control over the labourers was through land. In order to supplement their cripplingly low wages, the labourers were allotted plots of land, but with no tenancy rights. Working also as subsistence agriculturists, the laborers relied on the mercy and goodwill of the managers as they could be evicted anytime and under any trivial pretext. The land constrained the freedom and movement of the laborers and was thus the invisible shackles that bound the laborer to the plantation (Gupta, 1985:2). Representing a capitalist mode of production, there was segregation on the basis of class which also corresponded to difference in ethnic attributes. Managers and assistants were Europeans and Anglo-Indians, skilled workers were Bengalis and unskilled workers were either tribals from Jharkhand or different ethnic groups from eastern Nepal (Xaxa, 1985:1659).

Racial hierarchy was visible in the administrative structure and was strictly enforced. On one side were the Managers (*burra*/ big) sahib and the assistant managers/ *chota* (small) sahib and on the other were the large number of plantation workers, collectively known as coolies but divided into *marad* (man), *aurat* (woman) and *chokra* (adolescent) on the basis of the work done in the factory (ibid). The colonial plantations had legal and extra-legal sanctions and given the support of the colonial state, the class of *burra* sahib and his assistants (usually Bengalis) were laws unto themselves. The captive, uneducated labor living in isolation and in the absence of any legal protection was placed in a position of total dependence on the plantation, which fostered disempowerment and the establishment of a patron-client, *mai-baap* (mother-father) (Bhowmik, 1980:1525; Chatterjee, 2001: 5) relationship with the plantation managers.

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<sup>117</sup> The 1906 Labour Investigation Committee conceded that labourers earned insufficient wages but it was argued that insufficiency had no relation to the wage rate or the wage system but it was rather the fault of the labourer who spent it frivolously (Gupta, 1985:4).

This had a major impact on the world-view of generations of those living in the plantations and is reflected even today in the despondent attitude of plantation workers like Vishu Bhujel<sup>118</sup> a *bagan* (garden) worker in the Duncan TE, Duars. He calls the plantation life a *daas-pratha* (slavery) and that the plantations as one of the most backward places, kept deliberately so in order to retain the labourers in the garden as no educated person, aware of their rights would ever engage in plantation labour. This sense of injustice and helplessness can also be attributed to the hierarchical class system which has been inherited and internalized by generations of workers. Historically, hierarchy at the work place coincided with the social world. Difference in physical features of the British planters, the Bengali administrators and the multi-ethnic, Mongoloid group was used successfully to homogenize different ethnic groups into different classes. However, this very segregation was successful in the eventual construction of a meta-identity of the Gorkha.

The position of the plantation workers in the socio-economic hierarchy has a direct implication for the quality of life of the labourers and their dependents. Walking around plantation estates both in the hills as well as in Darjeeling, what struck me the most was how congested the living areas in the estates were, with houses adjacent to one another and small vegetable patches next to tea bushes. While workers in the hills had small plots for vegetable gardens, workers in the Duars lived in congested spaces with their Adivasi neighbours. However in both the areas, the plot of land on which they lived was not theirs to own. Even in the Cinchona plantations in Mungpoo, despite the relatively large cultivation areas that were available to the factory workers, they still had no ownership of the land which was a major source of anxiety for them.

Interaction with Bishnu Prasad Sharma,<sup>119</sup> one of the labourers at the Duncan TE revealed a palpable sense of insecurity which I had also heard and seen in other estates. Bishnu Prasad was nervous about his impending retirement as that would mean eviction from the estate where he has lived all his life. In spite of having worked in the *bagan* for thirty seven years, his economic insecurity loomed large. He said, ‘the day I retire I will get a letter from the manager saying thank you for working so hard for us but please evacuate the quarter in six months. I have given my sweat and blood to this *bagan* but I have nothing. Where will I go?’

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<sup>118</sup> Worker at Duncan TE and an active member of the Labour Union, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Bagrakot, West Bengal.

<sup>119</sup> Plantation worker, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Duncan Tea Estate, Bagrakot, West Bengal.

Describing his life of poverty Bishnu Prasad said that life on the plantation reflects the Nepali proverb *kuti lyayo, bhuti khayao* (thresh the wheat and eat it immediately), basically to earn only enough to eat, lead a hand to mouth existence as minimum government assistance has left them at the mercy of the tea estates. These people faced existential issues that really affected every single aspect of their lives. Economic problems were severe, real and seemed to be a cycle that the workers could not break away from.

*Living in Happy Valley Estate, Darjeeling*



Bishnu Prasad's insecurity is further exacerbated by the unstable status of the Indian-Nepalis and the fear of being evicted like the Lhotsampas. Citing lack of political agency of those attached to plantation he said, 'we are territorially bound to the plantation and thus our politics is limited and because we are in Bengal, very little of our grievances are heard. This is Bengal and there will be Bengali-ism, isn't it? Our *mano-bal* (mental strength) has been weakened considerably. It is only when a person is educated and strong mentally as well as physically that he can think of doing anything but here we are weak and feel inferior.' Bishnu Prasad's statement is loaded with references to the different types of constraints that are preventing the economic and political development of the Nepalis living in the hills and terai of West Bengal. While forces of capitalism have reduced them to powerless labourers, the state and its ethnic biases have made them politically inconsequential thereby leading to a decline in their *mano-bal*.

*Daily life in Bagrakot and Banarhat, West Bengal*



Apart from class hierarchy and economic subservience, dependency on the tea estates can also be deemed as one of the important factors that has had a serious impact on the worldview of those living on the plantations. After the exit of the British planters in 1947 the tea plantations were taken over by their Indian counterparts and the years following Independence saw a decline in tea production owing to a number of factors, of which constant changes in the management and excessive trade-unionism were primary. This led to factory lock downs, exposing the dependency and poverty of the labourers as they were completely dependent on the tea factories not just for their livelihoods but even the provision of basic necessities. This was due to the Plantation Labour Act, 1951<sup>120</sup> which holds the tea companies responsible for the welfare of the labourers and their dependents.

In spite of the guidelines provided by the Act a comparative study conducted in 1996 on the tea growing states of Assam, West Bengal and Tamil Nadu revealed that housing facilities in West Bengal tea estates were either inadequate or sub-standard (twenty-five percent of the houses were temporary (*kuttcha*) made of bamboo and mud and the roofs made of thatch) and that the sanitary facilities were deplorable along with inadequate water supplies (Bhowmik in Bhowmik et al 1996: 54-55). Except for Makaibari TE, most of the plantations are owned by absentee landlords and the gardens often change hands between different companies who are more interested in the extraction of profit over a short period of time (Tirkey, 2005). This

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<sup>120</sup> The Plantation Labour Act, 1951 was enacted to provide for the welfare of the labour and to regulate the conditions of work in plantations. It came to force in 1954 and has been amended four times, the last being in 1986. In principle the tea companies are supposed to provide a wide range of facilities to the labourers, ranging from health, education, ration etc. However, education, housing, ration, firewood all comprise a consolidated wage and therefore helps sustain the argument of low monetary wage in the tea estates. For detailed description of the provisions under this Act, see [http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/policy/Plantations%20Labour%20Act\\_amended.pdf](http://www.teaboard.gov.in/pdf/policy/Plantations%20Labour%20Act_amended.pdf)

dependency on the tea estates has led to what Naren Chettri<sup>121</sup> calls a ‘culture of poverty and dependency’ in the estates owing to the lack of human, social and economic capital, a trend that extends beyond the boundaries of the tea gardens and spreads across the Darjeeling hills. According to Naren Chettri, land is either leased by the government to private tea companies, owned by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Private (at least the stretch from Siliguri to Darjeeling) or is under the West Bengal Forest Department. Thus, ownership of non-estate land is highly rare in the District especially in Darjeeling and Kurseong sub-districts which have major tea and cinchona plantations.<sup>122</sup> This dependency on the tea estate is matched by their inability to exercise their rights as workers, which abets further frustration and helplessness. Workers of the Happy Valley TE<sup>123</sup> complained, ‘the *malik* (owner) is taking advantage. If we go on a strike demanding pay revision, he can shut the factory down for the week and we lose all our wages or he can shut the factory down completely. They even deliberately declare a garden sick so that we are paid lower bonuses and increments. There are hardly any general or educational facilities provided.’ Some like Mahesh Kumar Pradhan<sup>124</sup> even look at the British era favourably saying, ‘according to the agreement with the trade union they are supposed to give us blankets, slippers, firewood but they don’t even give ration on time. The *malik* these days act as if they wished they didn’t have to pay us...in certain *bagans* some of the things that the British used to give, they have not been able to give us even that much. Thus, if there is a Gorkhaland tomorrow we will establish exemplary standards in the tea gardens within Gorkhaland’.

However, tea garden closures and lower tea production means that gardens are unable to generate additional employment.<sup>125</sup> In an uncanny similarity to what was practiced during

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<sup>121</sup> Social entrepreneur and activist interviewed by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2011, Kalimpong, West Bengal.

<sup>122</sup> Kalimpong sub-division on the other hand could not be developed as a plantation due to the inability of connecting it on the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway line, which facilitated the private ownership of land. This has enabled the locals to engage in agriculture, floriculture who thus represent an amorphous and varied class rather than a homogenous class of plantation workers.

<sup>123</sup> Group interview conducted by the author on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2010, Darjeeling, West Bengal.

<sup>124</sup> Former employee at the Duncan TE, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Duncan T.E. Bagrakot, West Bengal.

<sup>125</sup> According to the West Bengal Industrial Development Corporation Annual Report (2009-10) the tea industry in West Bengal is going through a crisis due to lack of investment in the maintenance of gardens, rising costs of inputs, lower yield rate and fall in prices. The report attributes the present crisis mainly to the negligence of the

the colonial era, all the tea grown in Darjeeling or Duars is taken to auction houses in Calcutta where it is branded, auctioned and sold leaving the tea labourers as mere *mazdoors* (labourers) with no stake in any other level of tea production apart from plucking and processing the leaves in the factories. With limited chances of growth, the labourer can play no other role in tea production in the capitalist enterprise that began with the British Raj. The tea gardens which are managed by the West Bengal Tea Development Corporation have become leading examples in the denial of the statutory rights of the workers and of non-compliance of the provisions of the Plantation Labour Act and therefore a model for private tea companies (Bomjan, 2008:21). Thus, economic deprivation has become a way of life and can be attributed to neo-capitalistic structures that are at work in Darjeeling.

The continuing discrimination and neglect of the labourers has also been well described by Bomjan (2008:20). He writes, ‘the incident<sup>126</sup> and occurrence of the suicide and lock out of Orange Valley tea garden was carried out by the daily newspapers of Nepali language only. The daily papers except one in other language published from the district of Darjeeling did not consider the happenings worth reporting. But on the same day the death of six pigeons and approaching monsoon and clearing of drains by Siliguri Municipal Corporation had four column(s) of news in the national dailies published from the region.’ The state of neglect that exists in the gardens and of the people living there has enhanced sentiments of being ignored and deprived by the state, which has leased the land as well as the labour living on it to the tea companies who are driven by profit only.

This feeling of neglect and abandonment by the state has become an intrinsic part of the justification for the sustenance and political use of the Gorkha identity. Thus, insecurity over land, lack of control over resources and the general apathy of the state administration has found voice through an ethnic movement rather than one based on class owing to the existence of powerful ethnic frameworks and socio-political figures like the *bir* Gorkha which are more potent in galvanizing popular support than any class based identity. This may seem as a

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garden owners as the profits generated have not been ploughed back into the gardens. The Report further states that the repeated negligence of the gardens over the years has resulted in growing sickness of the tea gardens, especially in Darjeeling. In 2009-10, tea production declined by 7.3 per cent in Darjeeling District. Source: [http://www.wbidec.com/images/pdf/annual\\_report/annual\\_report-09-10/Tea-Industry.pdf](http://www.wbidec.com/images/pdf/annual_report/annual_report-09-10/Tea-Industry.pdf) (Accessed 17/09/2011).

<sup>126</sup> The incident refers to the suicide committed by one of the workers at the Orange Valley TE, Darjeeling on 26<sup>th</sup> April, 2007.

surprising trend given the history of class based mobilization in the tea estates under the influence of the Communist Party of India (CPI) in the early 1940s by prominent Communist figures like Ratanlal Brahmin.<sup>127</sup> On the 15<sup>th</sup> of September 1945, the first union in the tea gardens was established by the CPI- *Darjeeling Tea Garden Worker's Union* which was soon followed by the *Darjeeling District Chia Kaman Shramik Sangha* (Darjeeling District Tea Gardens Labor Union) affiliated to the regional political party, Gorkha League.<sup>128</sup> This eventually led to the formation of the National Union of Plantation Workers affiliated with the Indian National Congress (Sarkar and Lama, 1986:14-16).

By 1977, the CPI (M) had already made the tea belt its bastion when it was voted to power in the West Bengal General Elections. Their close competitors were the Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League whose popularity subsequently declined after the death of its charismatic leader Deo Prakash Rai as well as due to intra-party factionalism. This enabled new parties like Pranta Parishad and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), both formed in the early 1980s as well as the CPI (M) to infiltrate and consolidate their hold over the tea gardens. With large sections of the population living on tea estates, tea gardens gradually evolved into important sites of political mobilization, recruitment and conflict (see Subba, 1992).

However, this mobilization did not remain as a class movement for long as it was infiltrated by ethnicity in the form of the Gorkha, an identity which was more potent in generating collective action. The political history of Darjeeling gives evidence of the repeated resurrection of the Gorkha identity as a political resource to negotiate, primarily with the state. Since the inception of political consciousness in the hills, the image and idea of the Gorkha has been utilized by all the political parties- whether it be the All India Gorkha League, Gorkha National Liberation Front and even the CPM-they all have had to orient their agenda around

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<sup>127</sup> One of the early pioneers of Communism in Bengal who along with Jyoti Basu and Rup Narayan Roy were the *navratnas/nine gems* of the first Politburo of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) in 1964. He was also the CPI member of the Legislative Assembly from Darjeeling from 1947-52. The CPI (M) was formed at the Seventh Congress of the Communist Party of India in 1964 as a revolt against revisionism and sectarianism in the Communist movement in India.

<sup>128</sup> Commonly known as Gorkha League, the All India Gorkha League (AIGL)/ Akhil Bharatiya Gorkha League was formed in 1943 in Darjeeling with the explicit aim of securing a separate administrative set up on the basis of ethnic and cultural differences. its predecessor the All India Gorkha League was formed in 1924 in Dehradun, hailed as a 'political party of the Indian Gorkhas, by the Indian Gorkhas,' so as to supplement and complement the struggle for India's Independence (Bomjan, 2008:86).



the attainment of Gorkhaland, using images and language commonly attached to the imagery of the Gorkha. As Subba (1992:90) remarks, the early pioneers of communism in Darjeeling, Ratanlan Brahmin and Ganeshlal Subba, ‘knew what would sell in Darjeeling- not Marxism, Leninsm but Gorkhalism’ as it had stronger emotive potential than any other form of representation. Thus, in the tea estates of Darjeeling, class conflates with ethnicity and of the two identities it is ethnicity that has been chosen as the means through which to negotiate with the state for greater control over resources.

#### **4.1 (ii) *Living, working and existing in Darjeeling***

While the tea estates might be an important site of political activity, the economic deterioration of Darjeeling district itself is a primary cause for the political frustration of the people of Darjeeling District making it the vortex of an ethnic movement which supports and sustains the Gorkha identity.

Darjeeling features in the Indian Planning Commission’s ‘100 most backward Districts’ (Aiyar 2003: 21) where 18.1 percent of the population live below the poverty line and 5.3 percent of the households go hungry (Debroy and Bhandari, 2003: Annexe). However, the West Bengal Human Development Report (HDR) 2004 ranks Darjeeling district with the second highest per capita income (Rs. 18,529) after Kolkata. This irony can be attributed to the increase in the trade commerce and real estate investment in Siliguri<sup>129</sup> and the profits of the tea industry which does not trickle down to the large majority of workers who are unemployed and live in poverty (rural poverty ratio is 19.66 per cent and urban poverty ratio is 15.21 per cent) (HDR 2004:80).

Travel brochures promote Darjeeling as the ‘Queen of the Hills’ with images of lush tea plantations set against the background of the scenic Mt. Kanchendzonga. However, tea gardens not only dominate the popular imagery of Darjeeling but also the physical landscape thereby reducing the total amount of land available for the development of other industries in the hills (Tirkey, 2005:92). Tourism is another source of employment for the local people of the Darjeeling hills but because it is restricted to only a number of areas, its impact on local

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<sup>129</sup> Siliguri is strategically located on the border of Nepal, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It connects the Indian mainland to north-eastern India. Apart from being one of the fastest growing commercial cities in West Bengal, Siliguri has also historically been a center of both official as well as black-market trade in various foreign consumer goods from Thailand via Bangladesh and from Nepal (Ganguly-Scarse and Scarse, 1999: 267).

employment opportunities is limited.<sup>130</sup> Albeit limited to a small area, tourism is one of the most important sources of employment for the local population. This thriving industry has also taken a setback as a result of the political agitation with tourists choosing nearby Sikkim or Bhutan over Darjeeling. While political agitation has effectively kept the tourists away there has been severe over exploitation of natural resources like timber. For example in 1951 about 45 percent of the total area of Darjeeling was under forest cover but by 1986 the number had fallen to 23 percent (Ganguly, 2005: 474). Thus, in Darjeeling it is generally perceived that not only is the state not contributing to eradicating unemployment but it is robbing them of their natural resources as profits from these resources never make their way back to the hills.

Apart from low wages in the tea estates, unemployment is one of the biggest problems plaguing Darjeeling District as there are no employment avenues that remain unexploited. This situation is compounded by the fact that Darjeeling District has the highest literacy rate (72.9 per cent) in West Bengal after Kolkata (HDR, 2004:148). With over 24, 313 students appearing for the *Madhyamik*/ higher secondary exams in 2011 alone (The Telegraph, 2011)<sup>131</sup> Darjeeling faces a serious problem of the educated unemployed. This prompts men as well as women to migrate either to neighbouring Sikkim<sup>132</sup> or to other Indian cities in search for employment in call centres if educated or as domestic servants, nannies and assistants in beauty parlours if uneducated. While government jobs are difficult to find in general, top administrative positions are occupied by officers from the Indian Civil Services and the West Bengal Civil Services, who are often recruited from different parts of the country. Barring a handful of ST/SC candidates there are very few non-Bengali civil servants or those occupying high positions in the government (Bomjan, 2008:33).

All these socio-economic grievances are strongly presented and understood through an ethnic framework which has become more persistent and prominent owing to the recent Gorkhaland movement. Ringit Lepcha<sup>133</sup> describes the out-migration of the young and

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<sup>130</sup> Kalimpong sub-division is also promoted as one of the tourist destinations but apart from tourism small cottage industries like cheese, hand-made paper, floriculture, noodles etc provide means of subsistence thereby limiting the reliance on government employment, which offers only very limited opportunities.

<sup>131</sup> Source: The Telegraph, West Bengal, 22/02/2011. (Accessed 03/10/2011).  
[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110223/jsp/siliguri/story\\_13621955.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110223/jsp/siliguri/story_13621955.jsp)

<sup>132</sup> Which then in turn causes tensions relating to the 'outsider, non-Sikkimese' status of the people coming in to work in the state.

<sup>133</sup> A member of the Youth wing of the GJM, resident of the area surrounding Happy Valley TE, interviewed by the author on 26<sup>th</sup> December, 2010.

educated to different Indian cities in order to work in call centers as a ‘brain-drain of the society’. He complains of the lack of new positions or the appointment to the vacant ones as being ridden with systemic impediments that have been put in place by the Bengali state. According to Ringit, positions which demanded high educational qualifications were either declared vacant or interviews were conducted either in Siliguri or Kolkata even for positions within Darjeeling District. Writing in the context of tourism, which is one of the most important sources of income, T.B Subba (1989:312) says, ‘the majority of the employees and almost all the top ranking officers in the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation<sup>134</sup> being the Bengalis, the sense of participation among the locals in the promotion of tourism is not up to the expectation. The locals generally get employment as photographers, or as taxi and bus drivers.’ Thus according to the generally accepted narrative, the state is seen as practicing exclusionary policies that are designed to sideline the hill people. While there might be an element of truth in this, the importance of this narrative lies in its potency as a basis for political mobilization.

This exclusion of locals was also a common phenomenon in the tea gardens where local managers are a rarity, much to the annoyance of the local workers. Members of the Happy Valley TE union<sup>135</sup> were vocal about the lack of opportunities for career advancement, ‘the auction houses are in Kolkata and thus the people working in Kolkata get bigger posts while we remain labourers forever. *Thulo thulo manchey haru* (big, well placed people) sit in those auction houses but they have never even seen a tea bush in their lives while we who are born and brought up here never get a chance’. These voices of frustration and anger also revealed that issues around employment went beyond simple demand for greater investment in human resources encompassing the sons of the soil- the Gorkhas.

Frustration over unemployment as well as under employment is rampant in Darjeeling district and as Ram Mukhia<sup>136</sup> explained to me, ‘even if I am educated all I can do is just cut grass (fodder) there is nothing else to do’. Ram linked rampant unemployment to the

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<sup>134</sup> West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation was established in 1975 in order to streamline the tourism industry.

<sup>135</sup> Group interview conducted by the author on 22<sup>nd</sup> December, 2010, Darjeeling, West Bengal.

<sup>136</sup> Worker at the Cinchona factory, interviewed by the author on the 5<sup>th</sup> January, 2011 at Mungpoo, Darjeeling District, West Bengal

infrastructural underdevelopment of the region and compared that to the prosperity of Sikkim. In doing this he highlighted the relationship between the economy, polity and development all of which could be, apparently, accomplished in a new state. This relationship was also evident in an interview with Maya Dahal,<sup>137</sup> a health worker and an active member of the Nari Morcha of the GJM (Women's Front). Maya Dahal had a long list of grievances ranging from lack of employment, infrastructure to unaccountability of the politicians. I asked her if she felt all of these problems would be resolved with a new state to which she replied, 'I am sure that things will change if Gorkhaland is created. If there is a state tomorrow then it will be a small state and it will be democratic. Before when the DGHC was in place we were not aware of anything. The public did not even know that Ghising had gone ahead and accepted the DGHC. Things have changed now. *Janta sachet bhayo* (the public are aware now) and if there is Gorkhaland, the public will be more aware because we all know we need to develop. Look at Sikkim, Pawan Chamling has started so many projects and other beautification projects. Thus, state is related to identity as well as development.' By extension, it can be said that the Gorkha as an ethnic identity is evoked to fulfill instrumental purposes of securing a platform through which to negotiate with a state that is accused of engaging in discriminatory ethnic politics.

The sense of ethnic discrimination by the West Bengal state was persistent in almost all the interviews conducted during the fieldwork. The economic and administrative failures of the government were translated as ethnic discrimination which necessitated the demand for a new state. An example of administrative inefficiency was recounted by Kunga Tamang<sup>138</sup> who talked of his experiences of strikes and agitation even as a student demanding for a full time Principal at the Government College. It was only after eight years of general action that the government college got a full time Principal. His frustration was however articulated as resentment against the state which is controlled administratively by the Bengalis. -'Bengal is responsible for our situation today. The way they see us is different, they look at Darjeeling and say *amar sonar* Bengal (my golden Bengal) but they do not embrace us as their own.' Elaborating this sentiment of ethnic discrimination, Mahesh Kumar Pradhan (Bagrakot, 2011) says that from Bagrakot there are over two hundred young men who have joined the army, the Border Security Force and even the Bihar and Jharkhand police. When asked if there were any

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<sup>137</sup> Leading member of the GJM's local women's wing, interview conducted by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2011, Mungpoo, Darjeeling.

<sup>138</sup> Self-employed youth who ran a taxi service to Siliguri. Both his father and grandfather had worked on the estate. Interviewed by the author on 21<sup>st</sup> of December, 2010, Darjeeling, West Bengal.

in West Bengal police he replied, 'we cannot think of getting employed in West Bengal services because of ethnic discrimination. Even if we are five foot tall, they will write we are only four foot ten inches and debar us.' Thus, while unemployment and underdevelopment were the recurring themes that emerged from the conversations in the hills, they were understood only in the framework of ethnic discrimination.

Language has remained an important bone of contention in Darjeeling District. In 1958 the West Bengal government moved a resolution that proposed to make Bengali the only language for all administrative and official purposes in the state. This resolution was followed by an attempt to remove the Nepali language course from Calcutta University ignoring its earlier recognition for study up to graduation level. This resolution was enacted in 1961 as the 'Official Languages Bill' but massive protests compelled the state legislature to accept Nepali as an additional language for the hill divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong (Lama, 2008: 247-48). This however not only raised emotional concerns about the status of the Nepalis in West Bengal but also prompted logistical concerns as candidates from the hill areas of Darjeeling have to be conversant in written as well as spoken Bengali. It is compulsory for WBCS (executive) officers to pass a paper in Bengali if they want their yearly increments sanctioned (Bomjan, 2008:34). While every Nepali speaking candidate has to be well versed in Bengali the reverse is not true for those Bengali candidates who are posted to the Nepali speaking Darjeeling hills. Darjeeling district is the farthest district from Kolkata and thus administrative problems abound, which are amplified by a division between the administrative staff who are primarily Bengali and the clients who are Nepalis, thus as Kunga Tamang (Darjeeling, 2010) said, 'If we want to enquire about our pension or gratuity we have to either go to Kolkata or Siliguri where we are defeated by the Bengali language in the offices.' Thus ethnicity was seen as being directly linked to the inability to access scarce resources.

The conspicuous absence of the state is marked by the problems that the people have to face on a daily basis. Investment in social services like health and infrastructural development is negligible. While small health posts are scattered on the hillside, there are a handful of hospitals in the major towns which are not equipped to handle complicated cases thereby necessitating any medical emergencies to be transferred down to private nursing homes in Siliguri, for at least those who can afford it. For example, the travelogue of a German surgeon

travelling through different parts of India, often volunteering at hospitals is quite insightful in its description of the medical facilities. Dr.Elias Engelking<sup>139</sup> writes (in 2005):

‘... the Sadar hospital is in the lower, poorer part of the town. Officially there are 300 beds and unofficially 500 beds. The conditions are so indescribable that I lack the words to describe it. The absolute basic necessities are missing: hygiene, running water, medicines, diagnostic devices etc. The missing diagnostic devices are replaced by clinical investigation as far as possible. The language of the physicians amongst themselves is Bengali and that of the nurses and most of the patients is Nepali. The patients represent the poor and poorest caste of the population. They cannot afford to invest larger sums of money for additional medical treatment. The average income of a family is 1-2 euro per day, far less for some others. You must imagine the basic condition as follows- no running water...normal bulbs are the source of light and should these not be sufficient, a flashlight, an autoclave (sterilisation equipment) that is run on the gas-burner and perhaps one or two patients lying in the entrance area lying on the ground waiting in queue for their turn’.

Scarcity of water is another major problem in almost all the areas of the District which do not have a natural source of running water or lakes nearby. The main town of Darjeeling epitomizes this problem. Dependent on the water reservoirs that were built by the British in 1910 and 1932 for a town with a population of ten thousand, Darjeeling town with a population of over 120, 414 (2011 census) suffers major water shortages throughout the year and more severely during the summer season. Projects to bring water to Darjeeling from the river Balasan were proposed but never took off owing to lack of funds as well as initiative and the Neora Valley Project in Kalimpong drawn up in 1978-79 and completed in 1995 does not provide sufficient water to the sub-District (Bomjan 2008: 44-45).

Thus, as Janmal (2009:35) writes, if the long reign of the GNLf in the DGHC was characterised as ‘Contractor Raj’, the urban water supply system in Kalimpong can likewise be described as ‘Fitter Raj’ where “unscrupulous pipe-fitters of the water works with the connivance of the department *babus*” to provide illegal water connections to those who can bribe them thereby making access to the scarce public goods even more scarce. A common perception remains that distance from Kolkata is associated with some degree of neglect by the state and the need to develop these institutions requires the intervention of the state (HDR,

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<sup>139</sup> ‘A medical journey through India’ <http://india2005.org/462.html> (Accessed:1/10/2011)

2008:198-99). The Kolkata based government has always been deemed as remote, opaque and unaccountable to the local people and experiences of expulsion from party and Parliamentary position [as experienced by members of Parliament R.B. Rai and Dawa Lama, representatives of Lok Sabha and Rajya Sabha respectively from the CPI (M)] has led to a ‘syndrome of inhibition’ (Ganguly, 2005: 475; Bomjan, 2008: 25).

Nonetheless, the underdevelopment of the hills has to be understood in the context of the performance of West Bengal as a whole. The Communist Party of India (Marxists) had been at the helm of the state from 1977 till 2011 and while there seemed to be an apparent political stability but a close inspection of the standard measurements of economic development highlights that West Bengal was an average performing state owing to excessive unionisation and poor labour relations (Banerjee et al, 2002:1). While it has achieved many significant milestones in land reforms and agricultural growth since the 1980s, in contrast to these impressive achievements in the country-side, the state of industries, education infrastructure or fiscal discipline has progressively deteriorated (ibid).

Within West Bengal a significant part of the state is relatively more economically backward and also tends to be less advanced in terms of human development indices. A comparative analysis of various indicators (education, health) places Darjeeling at a better position than other districts like Nadia or even neighbouring Jalpaiguri.

Table2: Comparing Human Development Index in West Bengal

	Health Index	Income Index	Education Index	Human Development Index
West Bengal	07.0	0.43	0.69	0.69
Kolkata	0.82	0.73	0.80	0.78
Darjeeling	0.73	0.49	0.72	0.65
Jalpaiguri	0.61	0.38	0.60	0.53
Malda	0.49	0.36	0.48	0.44

Fig. 1 Source West Bengal Human Development Report, 2004:13<sup>140</sup>

Thus arguments of relative deprivation would not suffice because when measured against other districts in the state, poverty and underdevelopment is almost equally distributed.

<sup>140</sup> For details of methodology and nature of calculations of the indices see Guha-Roy, 2003.

While the dearth of infrastructure and development may be a common feature in developing societies but as T.B. Subba (1992: 43) points out, ‘the criteria of judging whether a particular region or ethnic group is economically advanced, stagnant or retarded are many... What matters more is how a particular ethnic group perceives its economic status.’

The poverty and socio-political backwardness of the hills of Darjeeling district is seen as symptomatic of the ethnic prejudice of the Bengali dominated administrative structure against the Nepalis who also comprise the largest ethnic group in the District. The relationship between Kolkata and Darjeeling is viewed as an unequal one between a centre and periphery, based not only on economic deprivation but also ethnic discrimination, which is perceived as a reflection of the national prejudice against Nepalis in India. While the flight of Nepalis from Meghalaya and Assam<sup>141</sup> are offered as evidence of the position of Nepalis in India, the expulsion of the Bhutanese-Nepalis/ Lhotsampas is cited as a case example of the condition of the Nepalis outside of Nepal, thereby breeding fear and insecurity amongst the Indian-Nepalis who are rightful citizens of India. Unresolved socio-economic problems and political aspiration have resulted in the emergence of politics based on the Gorkha identity in North Bengal, which is supported by an overwhelming majority of Indian-Nepalis living in different parts of the country. The rationale behind this resonance with the Gorkha identity and its utility as a political resource will be discussed in the following section.

## ***4.2: Politics and the Gorkha***

### ***4.2 (i) Of socio-economic issues and ethnic frames***

*Yo bhoomi ko laadai ho* (this is a fight for the land)<sup>142</sup> is a sentiment which reverberates amongst the Nepali community whether it be in the hills or the Duars and has a literal implication also. Under the colonial system private ownership of land by the local residents was highly restricted and limited only to the *Khasmal* area.<sup>143</sup> Consequent lack of ownership of land and the access to its resources has fostered a culture of landlessness, poverty and

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<sup>141</sup> See Wagle, 2010 and Parajuli, 2006 for further discussion on these topics.

<sup>142</sup> Former employee at the Cinchona factories and one of the earliest supporters of the GJM in the Cinchona plantation interviewed by the author on 5<sup>th</sup> of January, 2011, Mungpoo, District Darjeeling, West Bengal.

<sup>143</sup> Every tea estate will have a Khasmal area where private property can be held.



dependency. This culture is characteristic of the tea industry in the north-east and exacerbated by the negligent attitude of the state towards its ethnic minorities.

While the deteriorating economic condition of the hills has played an important role in instilling a sense of discrimination and therefore catalyzed the demands for change, what remains important and interesting is the use of the Gorkha identity in this political movement. While the observation of the physical space can be an indicator of the grievances common to an area and maybe even motivations for political participation, the persistence and use of the Gorkha identity raised questions of why did people choose the Gorkha as a symbol of their frustration against the state and other capitalistic forces? However, before analyzing whether the Gorkha identity was a political choice or a deeply ingrained and institutionalized way of life, the primary question revolved around recognizing the Gorkha itself.

The political as well as social mobilization of the Gorkha identity owes much to the earlier literary elites as much as to Subhash Ghising, the leader of the GNLF and the Gorkhaland movement of 1986. What had begun as a demand made by Pranta Parishad, a local political party, in the early 80s evolved into a mass movement for a separate state under the leadership of Subhash Ghising and the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). It was particularly instrumental in establishing the idea of a homeland as a measure to prevent the Gorkhas from being treated as foreigners or domiciled Nepali citizens along with the powerful imagery of the brave, *khukuri* brandishing Gorkha (Ganguly, 2005: 478).

Although the demand for a homeland might have remained dormant after the formation of the DGHC in 1986 the 'Prashant Tamang phenomenon' of 2007 showed that although subdued, the Gorkha was not forgotten. As a participant in 'Indian Idol', a national pop-idol contest, Prashant, a Nepali from Darjeeling, immediately became the representative for millions of Nepalis and their aspirations of acceptance and assimilation with the Indian nation, as well as a symbol of solidarity of Nepalis living in different parts of the world. Campaign for 'votes' through text messages and phone calls for Prashant was undertaken on a war footing and ranged from signature campaigns, planting trees, processions, pamphlet distribution and picketing mobile service producers to warning power suppliers (as Darjeeling is notorious for power cuts).<sup>144</sup> Leading this was not Subhas Ghising but one of his former aides, Bimal

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<sup>144</sup> Source: <http://prasanttamang.blogspot.co.uk/2007/06/sikkim-and-darjeeling-in-integrated.html> (Accessed 20/03/2012).

Gurung. The euphoria and support led not only to Prashant winning the competition but also led to the ousting of Ghising and the formation of the GJM by Bimal Gurung. Capitalizing on the movement the GJM immediately renewed the demand for Gorkhaland and in 2011, after three years of ‘non-violent, Gandhian’<sup>145</sup> agitation, signed the Tripartite Treaty which led to the formation of the Gorkha Territorial Authority. In the context of this research, the Gorkhaland movement played an important role in reviving the Gorkha identity as well as in its re-construction in a bid to incorporate all the ethnic groups living in Darjeeling. As the movement progressed, the understanding of the term ‘Gorkha’ also altered. This highlights how the Gorkha identity itself is a product of the social as well as political construction of literary elites as well as other political agents and is flexible enough to include new ethnic groups that might be politically beneficial.

There was a strange, ambivalent politics of identity going on in the hills of Darjeeling at the time of fieldwork in 2010 which made the Gorkha identity more elusive than ever. The identity of the Gorkha had changed over the years- from a *khukuri* wielding Nepali man to now an ethnic group following Gandhian principles and inclusive of other ethnic groups (Bhutia, Lepchas, Tibetans and even Marwaris) who lived in the hill regions.

*Bhutia, Lepcha or Nepali, we are all Gorkhali*




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<sup>145</sup> Although the 2007 Gorkhaland movement did not replicate the violence of the 1986 agitation, there were numerous instances of violent skirmishes between the Nepali and Bengali ethnic groups, especially in the foothills of Darjeeling where the majority population is ethnically Bengali. In the hills, the assassination of Madan Tamang, leader of the ABGL, in the middle of Darjeeling town on 21<sup>st</sup> of May, 2010 was one of the most shocking and violent instances of the homeland movement. Although implicated, the GJM was never proven guilty of the crime nor was the motive made clear. Madan Tamang and the ABGL were opposed to the momentum and direction of the Gorkhland movement. His death raises questions of democratic practices within the Gorkhland movement and the prevalence of impunity in politics.

While previously, the term was directly representative of the Nepalis living in Darjeeling most specifically and of the Nepalis living in India more generally, the boundaries of the term ‘Gorkha’ have now widened. It now incorporates members of other ethnic groups like Tibetans, Lepchas living in Darjeeling hills, who do not have any similarity, historical or cultural with the Nepali population included in the fold of the ‘Gorkha’ category. This is a progression which is not very difficult to understand as it is one of political necessity for those living in the Darjeeling hills to present a united front to the West Bengal government. Defending this move by the GJM, Sunil Rai,<sup>146</sup> Central Committee member of the GJM, says, ‘we have changed the concept of the Gorkha a bit. Now everybody (Bhutia, Lepcha, Marwari and Bihari) is a Gorkha. Although other groups may not have an identity crisis like us (i.e. Nepalis), they only have economic crisis but we have to fight together. Other communities are with us and call themselves Gorkhas.’ This points towards the constructed nature of the Gorkha identity, which was responsive to changes in the wider political scenario and made adjustments to its membership as well as cultural content accordingly. Perceptions of discrimination by the state were crucial in constructing the imagery as well as the grievances of the Gorkha.

Because the Darjeeling hills is a multi-ethnic space where people belonging to different ethnic groups have lived and suffered similar economic hardships, these factors have thus led to the formation of a cohesive Gorkha identity despite the multiplicity of ethnic affiliations. Kamal Tamang<sup>147</sup> executive member of the Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh (BGP)<sup>148</sup> however feels that even right from the outset, no thought has really gone into defining who the Gorkha is and draws a line at what he calls ‘hill-people’ which even includes groups like Bhutias and Lepchas. However, the important question that arose was- why identify as a Gorkha and not as a Nepali? Was Gorkha just a replacement term for Nepali? I sought answers to these questions from various individuals in the hills as well as the Duars and their responses showed the

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<sup>146</sup> Interviewed by the author on 24<sup>th</sup> December, 2010 in Darjeeling, West Bengal.

<sup>147</sup> Academic, activist and member of the Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> February, 2011, New Delhi, India.

<sup>148</sup> One of the leading socio-political organizations demanding the separate state of Gorkhaland. Unlike the GJM, the BGP has refrained from participation in elections in the hills. According to their official website, the Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh is committed to the vision of a Gorkha society in India, *recognized and accepted as a dignified, cultured and patriotic society at par with any other civilized modern Indian society* enjoying the full rights and privileges enshrined in the Indian Constitution (emphasis mine).

different ways in which the Gorkha was seen and understood. The following is an excerpt from my conversation with I.B.Rai (Siliguri, 2011) on the identification of the Gorkha.

I: What is the difference between a Nepali and a Gorkha? Do both refer to the same group of people?

R: It is fear that has led to the adoption of the term Gorkha. The Nepalis of India fear that if they say that I am a Nepali, then they might be asked to go back to Nepal or be discriminated against by other Indians. Thus it is because of this fear and an attempt to hide from such questions and situations that the term Gorkha has been used by the Nepali *jati*.

I: How well founded are these fears?

R: There is a Nepali proverb, ‘the tiger outside might not eat you but the tiger in your mind has already eaten you.’ The Indian Constitution is very clear on the position of the Nepalis. We are Indian citizens. We don’t need to hide but I don’t think we trust the Constitution and maybe have not studied it well enough.

I: Can Gorkha be called a *jati*?

R: Land, population, common language are required to be a *jati*. The most important being a homeland...Nepali *jati* needs *bhoomi* (land) to survive. We need land where we can live together, speak our language and celebrate our culture.

I: Do you have any reservations about the use of the term ‘Gorkha’?

R: I have no problem with the word Gorkha. It used to have a military history but a word keeps changing its meaning so even the word Gorkha has now changed.

I: What do you call yourself- Gorkha or Nepali?

R: I call myself Nepali.

The fear that I.B.Rai refers to is also what has become an overused, cliché term in ethnic politics-‘identity crisis.’ Another respondent Maya Dahal<sup>149</sup> explained her need for the Gorkha in order to safeguard her Indian identity which she felt that I as a Sikkimese did not need. I

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<sup>149</sup> Leading member of the GJM’s local women’s wing, interview conducted by the author on 3<sup>rd</sup> January, 2011, Mungpoo, Darjeeling.

asked her what does the Gorkha actually mean, is it a martial class or did it represent only the Nepalis of Darjeeling? She responded, ‘to talk of Gorkha is to talk of *astitva* (identity). No matter where we go in India we are looked at as foreigners. I am sure you have been asked the same question but at least you can say you are Sikkimese. We just want to be known as Indians.’<sup>150</sup>

Most anecdotes of ‘identity crisis’ usually begin on a train or bus journey where Indian-Nepalis are confused with Nepalese citizens or are taunted by the Bengalis as foreigners or immigrants. Taking the same train ‘identity crisis’ situation, I asked Ringit Lepcha (Darjeeling, 2010):

I: How would you explain to a South Indian who a Gorkha is?

R: I would say that there is a *jati* in north-east India which lives under the domination of West Bengal. That *jati* is called the Gorkha.

This definition not only describes the Gorkha as a *jati* but the identity is also derived from an unequal relationship of control and domination of one by the other, thereby externalising the understanding of the Gorkha itself. Despite the difference in method and political aspirations, members of the BGP also held a similar perspective on the issue of identity which conflated race and nationality. Sushil Moktan<sup>151</sup> is one of the executive members of the BGP and a highly respected leader in the Duars. I asked him if Gorkhaland was aimed at resolving the problem of ‘identity-crisis’ faced by the Indian-Nepalis. His response was a resolute yes and he said, ‘when we go to Delhi, they ask have you come from Bhutan. Whether it be Bhandari or Chamling (former and present Chief Ministers of Sikkim), they say the same. If they ask a Naga or a Manipuri, with whom we share similar physical features, where they have come from and they say Nagaland or Manipur then people don’t ask any other questions. Gorkhaland might not solve the economic problems of millions of Indian-Nepalis but if there is a state then they can at least say they are from Gorkhaland. Just give us the label “Made in India” we don’t want anything else.’

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<sup>151</sup> Former member of the Labour Union at Duncan TE, member of the BGP, interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Bagrakot, West Bengal.

Approaches to understanding the Gorkha range from intense internalisation (mostly amongst the garden residents) to one of ambivalence amongst the urban section of the population who are more comfortable and attached with the idea of 'Darjeeling-ness' than with an identity as Gorkhas. Although a miniscule proportion represent this divergence from the mass attachment to Gorkhaland, it nonetheless reflects an important aspect of the socio-economic stratification of Darjeeling and the corresponding relationship between class and an ethnic category. It also highlights the efficacy of the Gorkha identity as a political resource for mass mobilization in front of which all alternative forms of identity are politically impotent.

For those who have never made the social as well as the physical crossover to the estates, there might be room for debate and deliberation over the Gorkha identity but the *bir* Gorkha as a symbol of bravery and power has been deeply internalized by those living on the estates. Despite the fact that half of the labour force on the tea estates is composed of women<sup>152</sup> and images of women plucking tea are used for promotion of the hill station, it is the image of the *bir* and loyal Gorkha which persistent in public imagination and used for political mobilization.

However, increasing popularity and acceptance of the term has also lent a territorial nature to the identity itself by building a conceptual boundary between the Nepalis living in Darjeeling and those in Sikkim, who have always been accused of being indifferent to the Gorkhaland cause. For example in 2009, Bimal Gurung in one of his speeches in Darjeeling was quoted as saying, 'the Sikkim government has been filing legal suits<sup>153</sup> one after the other on us. I will however not let them sit in peace. Sikkim has not spoken on behalf of Gorkhaland.

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<sup>152</sup> According to a study conducted by Sarkar and Bhowmik (1999) in Darjeeling district and Duars the large number of female workers in the plantations did not necessarily translate to the participation in the trade unions owing to low levels of literacy, inferior status in the household as well as workplace which eventually lowered political consciousness.

<sup>153</sup> The National Highway 31A is the only road that connects Sikkim to other parts of the country and thus as a tactical measure to exert pressure on Sikkim to support the Gorkhaland movement, the GJM had been calling strikes frequently along the NH31A against which the Sikkim government had to get a judicial order from the Supreme Court of India. On 29<sup>th</sup> of March, 2011 the Sikkim Legislative Assembly passed a resolution in favour of the creation of Gorkhaland saying that a separate state was a genuine and a legitimate demand of the people of Darjeeling hills. The Chief Minister of Sikkim indirectly hinted that along with the moral support that Sikkim was lending, Gorkhaland was needed to ensure peace and development of Sikkim and uninterrupted traffic on NH31A .

Source: The Telegraph, 20/03/ 2011

[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110330/jsp/siliguri/story\\_13784068.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1110330/jsp/siliguri/story_13784068.jsp).

The Sikkim Chief Minister should realize that he too suffers from an identity crisis in this country which can only be negated with the formation of a separate state for the Gorkhas' (Talk Sikkim, 2011:12). This territorial boundary of the Gorkha identity has complicated the relationship further because in spite of sharing similar ethnic affiliation the Nepalis of Sikkim are treated on par with others (Bengali, Marwaris) from outside the hills. This is best exemplified by the incessant strikes, blockades and threats of violence along the national highway that connects Sikkim to the outside world as they belong to a different political territory.

Ethnic politics depends, to a very large extent, upon the will of the state, which through its recognition or non-recognition of an ethnic group, can grant legitimacy, render prior ethnic divisions more permanent and promote mobilisation of formerly un-recognised groups (Nagel, 1995; Nagel, 1979 in Neilsen, 1985:135; Brown, 1994). Thus, when confronted with a state which considers Nepali ethnic nationalism a threat to its territorial integrity and refuses to officially recognize the ethnic distinction of the Nepalis (as this would legitimize the demand for secession), the GJM chose a strategy of cultural symbolism to accentuate the obvious ethnic boundaries and present Gorkha culture as distinct and deserving of institutional privileges.

Culture is a publicly available platform dependent on symbols that facilitate an understanding of the world. Symbolic forms of culture are the means through which behaviour and outlook is shared within a community as well as with other groups (Hannerz, 1969 cited in Swidler, 1986: 275; Cohen, 1993). The success of disseminating and distinguishing Gorkha culture is heavily dependent on identity symbols, mostly tangible aspects like clothes, customs, and music as representatives of identity. Most of the symbols which are politically significant are overtly non-political, their political efficacy being indirectly proportional to their political forms (Swidler, 1986). Thus as one of the most important identity symbol, clothes act as a non-verbal means of communication and represent cultural values and distinct identities of groups (Sarkar, 2008).

As much as the Gorkha identity is supposed to reflect the culture and tradition of the Nepalis of India, the tangible aspects of this identity is also constructed in response to the Bengali ethnic group. Visible differentiation from the Bengali population is an important source of recognizing co-members of this ethnic group. Once again, it was the GJM which was instrumental in establishing the culture of the Gorkha, which is slightly controversial considering that the Gorkha is an amalgamation of different ethnic groups. Nonetheless, the

Nepali ensemble of *chubandi* (wrapper) and *cholo* (blouse) for women of a particular pattern and *daura suruwal* were chosen by the GJM as the clothes of the Gorkha people. Ironically, these dresses were exactly the same as those worn in Nepal but nonetheless, different from Bengali clothes and as Kamal Tamang (New Delhi, 2011) points out, by initiating cultural propaganda the GJM got their identity politics mixed up. He feels that the Gorkhaland movement is an assertion of ‘Indian-ness’ of the Nepalis rather than that of Nepali ethnicity as it is not ethnicity under threat but the political identity of the Indian-Nepalis. While this perspective does hold logical sway, it has nonetheless been overshadowed by the popular movement which emphasizes more the material aspects of Nepali ethnicity. For example, as a strategy to institutionalise the ethnic difference between the Gorkhas and the Bengalis, the GJM issued a directive in the summer of 2008, popularly known as the ‘Dress Code’<sup>154</sup> making it mandatory for all the ethnic groups to wear their traditional clothes during the month long festival period, which is also the busiest tourist season. This made the hills an active cultural museum and the GJM selected signifiers of Gorkha culture highly visible to anyone who visited the hills. This visual propaganda has proved effective not only in institutionalizing the obvious cultural differences but also in instilling a sense of ethnic bonding that could be instrumental in furthering the homeland movement.

Sunil Rai (Darjeeling, 2010) has an interesting explanation for the ‘culture of the Gorkha’. Acknowledging the multiplicity of ethnic groups that are subsumed into the category of Nepalis, he says, ‘the Gorkha culture is an amalgamation of all the other Nepali ethnic groups. All these different ethnic groups are the roots of the tree which is the Gorkha’. He further elaborates the necessity for visual symbols, ‘If I go to South India, because of how we look, our Mongoloid features, we might be mistaken for Chinese or they might call us Manipuri *bhaiyas* (brothers) but if I say I am a Gorkha then I should be recognizable/distinct visually through my clothes also’.

The Gorkhaland movement spearheaded by the GJM, like most ethnic movements, also utilised pre-existing identities which may be re-imagined and reintegrated in order to solidify the collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001:297). The present day Gorkha unity and identity is a product not only of the collective memory of home and migration but also of the

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<sup>154</sup> Refusal to wear the dress resulted in their faces being blackened by GJM activists.

Source: The Telegraph, 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2008

[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081015/jsp/siliguri/story\\_9968368.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1081015/jsp/siliguri/story_9968368.jsp)



internalisation of the colonial construct of the '*bir*' Gorkha. Thus, the clothes, traditional dances and the cultural processions performed two parallel functions, ethnic distinction from the majority Bengali as well as portrayal of unyielding patriotism towards the Indian state. The Gorkhaland movement captures the essence of what Laswell (1927) defines as the functions of a cultural propaganda, which is the presentation of a culture in a manner that generates favour, converts the hostile, attracts the indifferent and prevents negative assumption, in effect, these were attempts to increase the value of the Gorkha as a valid ethnic resource capable of bringing changes in the lives of the Nepalis of Darjeeling.

Nonetheless, in spite of its merit and de-merits the visible representation of Nepali identity performed the latent function of reviving and instilling a sense of ethnic pride in the community, which is evident in the currency the word Gorkha has gained amongst Indian-Nepalis all over India as a means of identification and differentiation from the citizens of Nepal. Thus, attempts to change the perception of others, can also lead to the change in the perception of the self, transform cultural representation, leading to a change in collective identity itself and stronger inter-group boundaries than prior to the movement (Polletta and Jasper, 2001).

#### **4.2 (ii) *Choosing the Gorkha***

A product of imperialism, the construction of the Gorkha can be attributed to the process of 'making up people' (Hacking, 2006:23) whereby through stereotyping, influencing perceptions etc people and their identities are created and seen in a certain sense that did not exist before. As Pemble (2009: 371, 375) says, the Gurkha was neither invented nor discovered by the British, he was nevertheless an invention or a discovery of imperialism. He would not have existed without the Empire and by the time the British Empire in India came to an end the legend of the Gurkha was fully grown. According to Kishore Pradhan,<sup>155</sup> editor of a leading Nepali daily and a noted historian, 'we (Nepalis) are originally a peasant community but the British never knew us as agriculturists. They saw us only as fighters. Thus whatever identity was given by the British, we have adopted that as our only identification, defined ourselves by it and by calling ourselves Gorkha we are reinforcing that identity.' While some may see the martial legacy of the *bir* Gorkha as making Calibans out of Indian-Nepalis- ruthless, without sense or sensibility and just out to fight (Kamal Tamang, 2011), the idea of a martial race has been not only accepted and imbibed by the Nepali community in India but has also been put to

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<sup>155</sup> Interview conducted by the author on 20<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Siliguri, West Bengal.

political use. The demand for Gorkhaland has thereby completed the process of reification of a colonial construct. The Gorkha is thus forever, ‘a hostage to a racial discourse, a representation of the ambivalent, unequal relationship that the people of Darjeeling share with their colonial masters.’<sup>156</sup>

This ambivalence is reflected in the term Gorkha itself as the answer to who or what the Gorkha is can be different, depending on the epistemological background of the question asked. The answer also varies according to the reference point and in the contemporary context, the emphasis is not on what the Gorkha is but on what it is not. Thus, the Gorkha is not a Bengali or a citizen of Nepal but is a construction which calls for the ironic acceptance of a term which is associated with Nepal. Owing to this unequal relationship, the imagery and the concomitant identity which was given by the colonizers has never been challenged but rather been imbibed and strengthened.

However, like the larger Nepali identity which was formed under the leadership of the urban, educated elite<sup>157</sup> the ‘Gorkha’ also took shape and form in the imagination of the masses through the language and literature of the elites. Apart from Indra Bahadur Rai’s ‘*Aaja Ramita Cha* (Today there is a spectacle)’ published in 1961 there are no other major Nepali literary works that engage with life and society in the plantations while on the other hand those representing different aspects of colonization, the *bir* Gorkha or urban Darjeeling run into hundreds. This lacuna in literature from the plantations and the importance in the struggle for identity was also acknowledged by the *Sahitya Akademi* (National Academy of Letters), New Delhi, the foremost association for the development of Nepali language and literature. The Academy organized the first ever seminar on literature on tea estates where the participants emphasized the importance of the tea estates in the fight for the recognition of the Gorkha identity in India and thus deserving place as a special genre in Nepali literature.<sup>158</sup> Apart from their actual interaction with those who had joined the British and later Indian army, the majority of those living in the plantations, so crucial to the sustenance of this identity had no actual contribution in the construction of this identity. However, even in spite of lack of any active

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<sup>156</sup> Bhaskar Golay, Nepali scholar, interview conducted by the author, 22<sup>nd</sup> January, 2011, Siliguri, West Bengal.

<sup>157</sup> See Chalmers, 2003.

<sup>158</sup> Source: Himalaya Darpan, 24/09/2012.

contribution to the creation of the Gorkha identity, the plantation society has received and embraced it completely.

#### **4.2 (iii) Sightings of the Gorkha**

The theory of ‘martial races’ might have evolved in the battlefields of the East India Company but it has persisted as an ethnic group and acquired political significance in Darjeeling, where the majority of supporters belong to the working class in the tea gardens. As this imagery of the brave, loyal, patriotic Gorkha took hold of the masses, the elites were further instrumental in giving political direction to this identity through repeated demands for the rights of the Gorkha to the British authorities. It is in the plantations, an imperial legacy, where the achievements in war and recognition as *bir* have surprisingly become representative of a community which is agricultural in its occupation.<sup>159</sup> Amongst these the most prominent proponents of this are Subhash Ghising and Bimal Gurung, leaders of the Gorkhland movement (both have their origins in the kamans) who have been effective in evoking the *bir* (brave) Gorkha as the basis for a separate state.

Musing on the Gorkha identity, one of the editors of the recently published *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation*<sup>160</sup> says that the imagery of the Gorkha is inscribed in the mindsets of the people from one generation to another. He points towards the inter-generational quality of the Gorkha identity where the same symbols, the same ‘repertoire of contention’ is performed one generation after another. Apart from literature, the symbolic reproduction of this identity takes place on a daily basis, for example through miniature *khukuri* which are worn as brooches by men or on the Nepali topi (cap), as insignia of the local police, political parties and as graffiti on public spaces but probably most effectively through popular

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<sup>159</sup> Excerpts of a speech by Bimal Gurung, the leader of the GJM on 21/ 03/2009 in Kamlimpong highlight that bravery and sacrifice, the ultimate trait of the Gorkha is deeply internalized and reproduced- ‘we are not Pakistanis, we are not Chinese, we are Hindustani..the media should cast (sic) our news fairly...we have given blood for this country..when different countries have attacked this country Ashok babu (former member of the Legislative Assembly and staunch opponent of the movement) have you held an AK47 and gone into the battlefield? Were you even able to hold your chest out (for the bullets)? We have already given proof of that by letting our chests shatter into pieces in order to save this country...what is your proof?... We have been dedicating and sacrificing our lives for this country. The state must remember this, it must remember that we have shed blood for this country, not water.’

Source: [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pI5fYUNs\\_Ck](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pI5fYUNs_Ck), (Accessed 21/20/2012).

<sup>160</sup> *Gorkhas Imagined: Indra Bahadur Rai in Translation* is a collection of I.B.Rai’s most famous and loved stories translated in English edited by Anmole Prasad and Prem Poddar. The collection was released in 2009.

culture.<sup>161</sup> In 2009 Madan Tamang leader of the Gorkha League was brutally assassinated in broad daylight. His assassin had attacked him with a *khukuri*, the weapon associated with the Gorkha and thus lead prominent hill scholars (like Bidhan Golay, Rajendra Dhakal) to wonder about the political as well as the symbolic implication of the assassination and the degree of embeddedness of the Gorkha identity.

Apart from enhancing group collectivity, the image of the brave Gorkha also negates the feeling and the colonial representation of Nepalis as ‘coolies’. This highlights the importance of framing of grievances and issues by political elites. While almost all political leadership comes from the plantations which then reiterates and strengthens the Gorkha identity, the political aspiration of this leadership is limited. According to Vijay Prasad,<sup>162</sup> author and one of the leading GJM intelligentsia, this plays well into the hands of the Indian state which outsources regional problems to local ‘warlords’ who aspire for political and economic control of their personal fiefdoms. This was evident for over two decades during the rule of Subhash Ghising who took advantage of the change in the political structure that had emerged out of the regionalization of politics that switched power from the hands of the national parties to regional parties.<sup>163</sup>

The Gorkha thus becomes the representation of those who have been colonised and dominated and highlights the overlap of ethnicity with class. Although a colonial construct, the Gorkha has acquired a meaning that represents not only those engaged in the military but rather the entire Indian-Nepali nation. The Gorkha identity derives its importance as a base for the construction of a social history and the image of the *khukuri* wielding Gorkha is deemed more symbolic of a proud community rather than that of a subservient plantation worker. Maya Dahal (Mungpoo, 2010) reaffirms the bravery of the Gorkha, ‘We are brave. It is something we all know, we are born with this knowledge. Our sons from *kaman–busty* have been shedding their blood for the country by fighting in its wars but there is no respect for this blood.’

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<sup>161</sup> Local rock band *Mantra* attained fame with songs like ‘Bir Gorkhali’ which celebrates the identification of the self as Gorkha, while the song, ‘Nepali ho’ by the Kathmandu based band 1974 A.D which stresses on the military achievements of the Nepali *jat* became an anthem in the hills.

<sup>162</sup> Excerpts of a joint interview with Prem Poddar, conducted on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010, Kalimpong, West Bengal.

<sup>163</sup> Rajesh Dhakal, Nepali scholar, interview conducted by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010, Kalimpong, West Bengal.

Those ridden by poverty and lack of control become empowered through the brave and valiant Gorkha making it an essential tool in the politics of identity. However, the Gorkha has been undergoing changes and in its present incarnation, as promoted by the GJM, the Gorkha has adopted Gandhian measures to fight for Gorkhaland. A constant reminder of the ferocity of the Gorkhaland movement is the violent agitation of 1986 when Nepalis were up in arms against each other and then against the state. As Gautam Tamang<sup>164</sup> (Mungpoo, 2010) says, ‘We are brave but previously bravery meant to fight, kill or be killed. Now we are showing our bravery in different fields of life.’ Kamal Tamang elaborates this point of view, ‘Gorkha is not just a *khukuri* wielding soldier. In Assam there are the dairymen Gorkha, in Darjeeling there are tea workers who are Gorkhas. They are present in all fields and so to keep talking about Gorkhas as a martial race is nothing but stereotyping and used by people when it suits them. I don’t see myself as a Gorkha who is not afraid to die. I am scared to die.’

Bishnu Prasad Sharma (Bagrakot, 2010) is however more reserved in his opinion of the Gorkha, ‘we have been hearing about this (the *bir* Gorkha) since we were children, we are brave but we are weak, we do not have the education, strength and hence no morale. What *birta* (bravery) will the Gorkha show?’

The contemporary understanding of the Gorkha has evolved over numerous generations, finally crystallising in the movement for a separate state, which can thus be read as a manifestation of the disempowerment of the people. In an ironic situation, outside of the hills, the word Gorkha is usually synonymous with stereotypes such as gate-keepers or watchmen (*bahadur*). Representing ‘*Birta* (bravery) on the one hand and chowkidars (watchmen) on the other’ the Gorkha identity has nonetheless been used as a medium of representation and empowerment in the hills. The awareness of the larger social connotations of the word Gorkha can only come with experiences in the plains of mainland India which again only increases insecurities of the socio-political legitimacy of Indian-Nepalis. Thus in another complex turn, experiences of discrimination in mainland India reinforces the use of the term Gorkha as a means of claiming Indian citizenship.

More than seventy percent of the population in the hills and the Duars is dependent directly or indirectly on the tea industry. This therefore raises the question of the growth of ethnicity rather than class as a basis for collective action. Considering the infiltration of the

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<sup>164</sup> Local resident of the Cinchona estate interviewed by the author on 4<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Mungpoo, Darjeeling District, West Bengal.

CPI in the tea estates since the early 1940s, the existence of oppressive living and working conditions of the tea labourers should have resulted in a class based movement. Instead class action is completely eclipsed by an ethnic movement in the hills of Darjeeling despite the overlap between class and ethnicity. In spite of a large work force in the tea gardens, economic underdevelopment and political disempowerment is voiced through the assertion of ethnic identity rather than class. Thus when popular politics necessitates the mobilisation of numbers and the political strength of any party is determined by its clout in the *kamans* (tea gardens), thereby becoming key sites of political contestation and rhetoric which reinforces ‘fossilised identities’ like that of the Gorkha (Golay, 2006).

While for some ethnic prejudice and stories of ‘identity crisis’ might begin and end on these train rides, for most Nepalis living as minorities in different parts of the country, ethnicity has become a perennial source of insecurity. Thus, while in some contexts the Gorkha identity is used to negotiate with the state for better developmental policies, in a wider context it is aimed to resolve the larger questions of the insecurities over Indian citizenship. The Indo-Nepal Friendship Treaty<sup>165</sup> and the flight of the non-tribal population from North-eastern India as well as the case of the Bhutanese Lhotsampas are all cited as examples of the fate of all the Nepalis in the future. While these concerns are well-founded to a certain extent, they have been politically manipulated and taken to the extreme. Amidst fears of ethnic backlash and social boycotts, the Nepalis in eastern Duars who are a minority group, were supportive of the movement for an ethnic homeland as they felt that this was the only way of ensuring their legitimacy to belong in India and that even if they were not a part of the proposed Gorkhaland, they would still be able to show that they belonged somewhere.<sup>166</sup> However for the Nepalis living in the Duars, their insecurities are not only related to eviction from their lands but also of cultural erosion through assimilation. As Khadga Bajay<sup>167</sup> (an eminent retired Nepali journalist from eastern Duars) said, ‘there are no Nepali medium schools, only Bengali and Hindi in spite of Nepali being the second state language. Nepali children are therefore forced to learn Hindi or Bengali and are gradually losing their language as well as their culture. Political backwardness has led to the lack of understanding the benefits of a smaller state which

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<sup>165</sup> Attached as Annexe

<sup>166</sup> Krishna Khadga, Ical entrepreneur and resident of Banarhat, interviewed by the author on 15<sup>th</sup> January, Banarhat, Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal.

<sup>167</sup> Interviewed by the author on 14<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Banarhat, Jalpaiguri District, West Bengal

is linked to educational backwardness that is promoted by the state. Because the government and the elites want to maintain status quo they have promoted liquor and not education. It has become difficult to walk with our heads held high and organising cultural programmes has also become difficult. We do not get any holidays to celebrate Bhanu Jayanti and even wearing a Nepali *topi* has become difficult. While we are expected to know *maachar-bhaat* (fish rice, typical Bengali cuisine) but the Bengalis do not know our *gundruk* (dried radish leaves) or any other Nepali food. We do not need any conversions- we will all become Bengalis. I don't need just a state, I need a homeland. I want Gorkhaland.'

### ***Conclusion***

An embodiment of the grievances of the Indian-Nepali, the Gorkha identity has been accepted as representative of the majority of Indian-Nepalis spread across India and as the most effective way of negotiating with the state. The entrenchment of the Gorkha identity begins as a historical project which is accentuated by the political movement for Gorkhaland and thus in its present use it aims to serve three fundamental causes. First, apart from providing an ethnic identity, the Gorkha shields the insecurity of the Nepali community which has developed owing to generations of colonisation and disempowerment at the hands of not only the British but also under the (mis) administration of the Bengali state as well as Subhash Ghising who promoted two decades of underdevelopment and mis-governance.<sup>168</sup>

This situation has been accentuated further by the lack of growth and development of the redundant DGHC, which was unable to promote either infrastructural or human resource development. Bhaskar Golay<sup>169</sup> points to the failure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century elites who did not encourage cultural modernisation that would have enabled the working class to effectively bridge the social gap between different classes. This has led to parochial frameworks of understanding themselves and thereby heightened the inferiority complex experienced and exhibited by Indian-Nepalis as equal participants in the society at large. Second, bravery and sacrifice in the battlefield is persistently highlighted by political elites as well as the general masses as one of the most important characteristics of the Gorkha. Valor, sacrifice and death

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<sup>168</sup> Rajesh Dhakal, Nepali scholar, interview conducted by the author on 30<sup>th</sup> December, 2010, Kalimpong, West Bengal.

<sup>169</sup> Nepali scholar, lecturer at North Bengal University, interview conducted by the author, January 22<sup>nd</sup>, 2010, Siliguri, West Bengal.

for Mother India is celebrated and contributes to the display of patriotism and loyalty towards the Indian state<sup>170</sup> in a bid to replace the negative image of the community as mercenaries and immigrant.

*Mobilizing the Gorkhas in Siliguri during a strike called by the GJM*



Finally, the Gorkha as an ethnic group with its own distinct cultural features performs the important act of ‘othering’ the community from the mainstream, dominant Bengali population, which in turn justifies the sense of ethnic discrimination experienced by the Nepalis

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<sup>170</sup> One of the most important poets to have emerged from Nepali literary scene is Agam Singh Giri who in his last poem *Yuddha ra Yoddha* (War and Warrior), describes the Nepali as a martial but maligned race. A part of his poem as reproduced in Indra Bahadur Rai’s essay on Indian Nepal Nationalism (1994:179-80) expresses Giri’s feeling towards the label of ‘mercenaries’ and the unjust treatment of Nepalis in India:

*‘O warrior  
 Your son is yet to be born ,  
 He shall be then a part of your life,  
 Allow him not to be wouDED  
 Spilling blood for others;  
 Forbid him to sharpen his khukuri  
 To fight other men’s battles,  
 To add shie to others’ existence;  
 History will only brand him a murderer,  
 Let him not be accursed by all  
 Or consigned to insults and injuries.  
 We are in the midst of a war.  
 We have fought and have somehow survived.  
 There is a cry for fear in our heart.  
 War, not understood,  
 Is starkly visible in our eyes.’*



living in West Bengal. Ethnic politics revolving around the Gorkha is thus a combination of all these factors.

Those disempowered by poverty and lack of control become empowered through the brave and valiant Gorkha making it an essential tool in the politics of identity. Choosing the Gorkha brings with it a history which is very specific to those Nepalis living in West Bengal. Yes, the Gorkha identity also caters to those Nepalis living outside but it is the economic and political discrimination that provides the basis for political mobilisation and the concomitant ethnic movement. The case of the Gorkha highlights the importance of political actors in framing ethnic grievances but at the same time emphasizes the impact of the wider political economy and history on the formation of an identity. Although the state becomes the target for political action, Gorkha and the grievances however are a product of a much older origin-imperialism. In comparison to the Nepal case study, political mobilisation around the Gorkha identity not only highlights how socio-economic grievances can take an ethnic form but that ethnicity itself is constantly undergoing a process of constant evolution. Contrasting the Nepal case which saw a range of political actors, the movement for Gorkhaland is maneuvered completely by a single party, the GJM which has made Gorkha identity the only identity available.

This partially answers the question regarding the motivation to choose one identity over another because it would be a fallacy to disregard the agency of the people who do believe and support this identity. The discussion above highlights the historical and political motivations involved in the formation, relevance and use of this identity, which has now become a part of the social memory and history specifically of generations of Nepalis living in Darjeeling district. Darjeeling and east Nepal are similar cases with regard to their demand for development and a separate state based essentially on ethnic identity. This in effect links them to Sikkim, which is seen as the epitome of development, at least in the eastern Himalaya and a model which both these movements aspire towards.

Like the case of the Limbus of eastern Nepal, the Nepalis of Darjeeling also perceive (may be well founded) their social and economic backwardness as a result of their ethnicity as well as the policies of the state which are biased against them. This has therefore led to a reconstruction of their identity and the reframing of their grievances within an ethnic framework that enables a platform for a vociferous demand for access and control over resources which the Gorkhas of Darjeeling claim as belonging to them. The case of the Gorkhas of Darjeeling highlight the connections between ethnicity, state and politics and how each

facilitate in the construction of the other which consequently contributes to a variation in the articulation of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya.

### Locating Sikkim



Source: [grandadventuresindia.com](http://grandadventuresindia.com)

## ***Chapter 5: Accessing ethnicity in Sikkim- the state, ethnic groups and the politics of recognition***

### ***Introduction***

The myth of state formation in Sikkim emphasize the ‘blood-brotherhood’ of three different ethnic groups- Tibeto-Sikkimese or Bhutia (*Lho pa*), Lepcha (*Mon pa*) and Limbu (*gTsong pa*), locally referred to as 'Lho Men Tsong Sum'. Ethnic diversity has been a fundamental aspect of Sikkimese history. The monarchy and the elites belonged to the minority Bhutia and Lepcha groups who towards the latter half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, ruled over a diverse amalgamation of ethnic groups from the neighbouring Himalayan kingdom of Gorkha. This ethnic diversity and the consequent demographic imbalance between the different groups reflected in the economic division of the society. Eventually as a result of internal<sup>171</sup> and the external pressure exerted by India (keen to safeguard its frontiers after the humiliating defeat of the Sino-India border conflict of 1962) Sikkim joined the Indian Union on the 16<sup>th</sup> of May, 1975.

The boundaries of different ethnic groups are most visible when contrasted against each other. In this context the Nepali ethnic group in Sikkim exists largely only in relation to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities and increasingly so only in a political context with the blurring of religious and cultural boundaries as more groups are adopting Buddhism and its related cultural practices akin to the Lepchas and Bhutias. Inter-ethnic differences and insecurities have most often been the stable foundation of all identity based politics. However this political tradition altered significantly after the General Elections of 1994. One of the most prominent outcomes of the General Elections, apart from the overthrow of the biggest political party, was the gradual dis-integration of the Nepali group, forcing a re-imagination of the identity of the Nepalis of Sikkim.

Although not openly discussed in Sikkim, the history of Nepalis of Sikkim, which is fraught with stories of migration and economic subservience combined with the ambivalent, often precarious position of the Nepalis in other parts of India, forms the *macro-habitus* of the

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<sup>171</sup> The *Kazis* were the landed elite who dominated and controlled all commercial activities which not only challenged but also eventually led to the gradual atrophy of the power of the Chogyal. This situation was further aggravated by the political infighting between the pro-Chogyal and anti-Chogyal political parties that had emerged after devolution of power and the limited democracy that had been introduced by the Chogyal in 1953.

Nepalis of Sikkim. This *macro-habitus* is important in the positioning of the Sikkimese-Nepalis vis-a-vis Nepalis from Nepal and Darjeeling. At the same time it also influences the position of Sikkimese-Nepalis in Sikkimese society and politics.

The politics around the Nepali identity in Sikkim is rooted in both economic as well as transcendental insecurities and the present chapter is an examination of the political processes that facilitate the choice of a particular form of political representation over another. The Sikkim case study shows how the state and its policies (mostly of affirmative action) increase the value of ethnicity by promoting it as a political resource that is essential to be a recipient of the patronage structure that has been institutionalised by the state. This chapter discusses the role of the state in the construction and maintenance of structures that promote ethnic identity as political identity, especially amongst those ethnic groups that combine to form the Nepali group. While confronted with multiple insecurities related to identity and economic sustenance, simple recognition as a Nepali does not have the same advantage as being a member of being a Scheduled Tribe, Most Backward Class or even Other Backward Class. This reduces the appeal of the general Nepali category over the other available categories thereby leading to a concerted effort to re-construct or re-invent an ethnic group in accordance to guidelines given by the state. Following the Darjeeling and Nepal case studies, the Sikkim case study also reveals the instrumental and politically constructed nature of the Nepali ethnic group and the use of ethnicity as a political resource.

This final case study aims to analyse the revival and assertion of ethnic identity over the meta-identity of being a Nepali. Ethnic revivalism in Sikkim has strong parallels with that in Nepal but unlike in Nepal, the different ethnic groups (within the Nepali category) in Sikkim are not battling economic and political discrimination based on their ethnicity. Ethnic revivalism has become a safe, state sponsored mechanism through which to access the state and its resources. However, it also has to be admitted that ethnic revivalism goes beyond mere instrumental rationality, thereby complicating the motive for the reassertion of ethnic culture. What is important and interesting is the role played by the state in facilitating this process. The central argument of this chapter is that the instrumental use of ethnic identity has, to a very large extent, been controlled and guided by the state, affecting the choices and modes of ethnic representation. Not only has this led to identity flux but in the wider context of the thesis, the Sikkim case study contributes to our understanding of the intricacies of the process that lead to the assertion of ethnicity as political identity.

Of the different ethnic groups within the Nepali group, the majority have chosen specific group identities (like Rai, Limboo, Tamang etc) as a means of group identification and negotiation with the state. Thus, following the overarching research question, the aim of this chapter is also to analyse the attraction towards and assertion of ethnic affiliation over other forms of social and political associations.

The chapter is divided into two sections. **Section One** will discuss the features of poverty, dependency and unemployment which make ethnic categories that coincide with socio-economic groupings more attractive. This section then ultimately focuses on how the participation of the masses contributes to ethnic politics. It also analyses how the lack of access to the state through conventional bureaucratic means has made the ethnic approach more viable. Like the Nepal case study this chapter also focuses on ethnic associations as intermediaries between the state and the rural masses and highlights their emerging role as political actors in Sikkim. **Section Two** will discuss the role of the state in the politicisation of the Nepali ethnic group. It will look at the direct as well as the indirect ways in which the state has enabled the revivalism of ethnic culture. However, the state can only cater where there is a willing market. Thus in Sikkim socio-economic reservations and other schemes are highly attractive owing to the poverty and unemployment that exist in Sikkim but are masked by claims of development. The chapter finally concludes by analyzing the merit of ethnic revivalism in political negotiation with the state and how even though it may not bring economic benefit to all, it is nonetheless appreciated for the emotional support and a sense of collective ethnic heritage that it provides.

This chapter is based on fieldwork conducted in Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim, Soreng, Hee Pechrek village, Chumbung village in West Sikkim and Namchi in South Sikkim. Fieldwork in Sikkim was conducted over November and December, 2010.

### ***5.1 Historicizing ethnic politics in Sikkim***

After the abolition of the monarchy in Sikkim in 1975, two prominent figures have shaped the trajectory of development and institutionalised few remnants of the monarchy-authoritarian rule and the investment of power in the individual. Between 1979- 2012 there

have been only two, full-term Chief Ministers in the state,<sup>172</sup> both of whom have enjoyed absolute majority in the State Legislative Assembly during their terms. Whilst promoting a sense of political stability (strikes and lockdowns are unheard of in Sikkim unlike neighbouring Darjeeling or Nepal), it has led to the concentration of power – economic and political- in the hands of a single person and a particular political party. While there is very little political contestation on the basis of political ideology, the 1994 General Elections marks the official endorsement of ethnic politics in Sikkim. However, this is not to assume that ethnicity had not been a factor in elections prior to 1994 and the consolidation of power by the Sikkim Democratic Front, the main challenger to the government led by Nar Bahadur Bhandari.

As discussed in **Chapter One**, ethnicity has played an important role in the socio-political history of Sikkim where traditionally, the local population had been divided into the land owning and the agriculturist classes which also corresponded to ethnic distinctions. Revenue collection in the kingdom of Sikkim was divided into 104 estates out of which sixty-one were leased out to the *Kazis* and *thikadars* who were assigned to pay a fixed sum to the state. These *Kazis* and *thikadars* leased out these lands to peasants under different terms. The landlords enjoyed enormous magisterial power relating to civil and criminal matters. The amount of rent to be levied was fixed on ethnic lines and the Nepalis had to pay higher rent than the Lepchas and Bhutias. This system was abolished in 1956 by the Chogyal Tashi Namgyal (Chakrabarti, 2012:92,93). Socio-economic stratification of the society was expressed categorically through land and revenue laws. Nepalis were considered as non-hereditary subjects in comparison to the Bhutias and Lepchas. This resulted from the Revenue Order no.1 of 1897 which is still enforced in Sikkim and prohibits the alienation/transfer of Bhutia-Lepcha land to other communities and gives the Bhutias access over Lepcha land (ibid: 94).

The Sikkim Subjects Regulation Act of 1961 was promulgated to define the criteria for recognition of the subjects of bonafide residents of Sikkim. This was also used to express distinction between the Lepcha-Bhutia and the Nepali communities (the Tsongs/Limboos were initially treated at par with the Bhutia-Lepcha subjects but were later coupled with the Nepalis in 1974). According to Gurung (2011:171), the Regulation was significant not only because it

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<sup>172</sup> Nar Bahadur Bhandari (1979-1994) and P.K.Chamling (1994-present). However, there were two other caretaker governments also. B.B Gurung was the Chief Minister for thirteen days in 1984 and Sanchaman Limboo was Chief Minister for six months in 1995 after the downfall of Bhandari.

categorically recognized the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Tsongs as the original inhabitants of Sikkim but this also confirmed the ‘outsider’ status of other groups. Ethnicity has therefore been a crucial (albeit detrimental) in determining the social, economic and political status of the Nepalis in Sikkim.

As discussed in earlier chapters, the Nepali category was composed of not only the different ethnic groups which had migrated to work as agriculturists but also the Limboo/Tsongs and the Magar ethnic groups, whose indigeniety to Sikkim is either obliterated from or at least not often highlighted in the history of Sikkim (Dorjee, 2012: 65).<sup>173</sup> In the early 1990s this socio-political dichotomy was complicated further by the gradual splintering of the Nepali group as the Limboos<sup>174</sup> and Tamangs became eligible for reservation as Other Backward Classes (OBC) under the recommendations of the Mandal Commission in 1994. The then government, led by N.B. Bhandari was apprehensive about the recognition of Limboo and Tamang groups as it heralded the disintegration of the Nepali group (Gurung, 2012:77). The denial of this reservation became one of the important bones of contention that helped swing the votes in the 1994 General Elections in favour of his opponent, P.K.Chamling.

Vehemently against the recommendations of the Mandal Commission, Bhandari gained a reputation for evoking communal sentiments. In one of his infamous and therefore memorable speeches, he proclaimed, ‘when a fox is diseased he becomes mad and when a *matwali* is diseased, he becomes an OBC’ (*Chaaya*, 1998:13). Seeds of ethnic differentiation were thus sown by Bhandari himself whose public diatribes against different ethnic groups alienated the electorate. Bhandari lost the vote of confidence in the State Assembly in 1994 and the new government comprised all those who had defected to the new party headed by

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<sup>173</sup> Dorjee (2012:63) points that oral tradition and the inconsistent tradition of recording history has led to the complete reliance on colonial records for authentic, unbiased sources of history. He suggests a fresh enquiry of the accounts because ‘incomplete and unexplained perceptions of how things continue to influence decisions that impact the social life of communities to this day....While some communities might not have received universal recognition as ‘Sikkimese’, others have begun to believe the stereotypical colonial depictions painted about them.’ This critical stance and interrogation of common identities is especially important especially now when colonial stereotypes regarding race and ethnicity have found more political favour.

<sup>174</sup> The Limbus of Nepal call themselves Adivasi/Janajatis and claim indigenous rights over eastern Nepal, in Sikkim the same ethnic group is spelt as Limboo, considered as one of the indigenous groups of Sikkim and recognised as one of its STs.



Sanchaman Limboo. Immediately in June, 1994 the new government recommended the recognition of seven communities from among the 'Sikkimese of Nepali origin' for recognition as OBCs. Consequently Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu Magar, Rai, Sunwar and Tamang were declared as OBCs in Sikkim (Sinha et al, 2005:22). Those groups who were to constitute the OBCs of Sikkim represent the largest electoral population (forty percent) and thus by voting for a member of their ethnic community, they benefitted from being recognized as the OBCs at the state level (see Chakraborty, 2000). After SDF's victory in the 1994 election, which was so precariously dependent on the votes of those ethnic groups who now belong to the OBC and MBC category, reservation politics was inevitable in Sikkim. This change in political support from Bhandari to Chamling highlights the potency of ethnicity when used as a political resource. However, the potency of this resource was only realized when there was a chance for structural changes (in the form of a new government) and only when there was a real, material benefits attached to it which would then enable the formation of new patronage ties, leading to those material benefits.

However, ethnic politics in Sikkim is neither simple nor straightforward and P.K.Chamling, although the architect of ethnic politics (among other things like hazardous hydroelectric dams and religious tourism) institutionalised ethnicity as a valid political resource, cannot be fully credited for ethnic revivalism and the concomitant politics around it. Although his government has been the catalyst as well as the medium through which ethnic politics has been legitimised, the lure of socio-economic categories and reservations like MBC or OBC also lies in the security that these identities provide to those groups who were either late entrants into Sikkim or their historic presence in Sikkim has not been acknowledged in the state sponsored construction of history.

The pro-democracy movement of 1975 has been framed in Sikkimese political history as the rise of the Nepalis against the minority Bhutia-Lepcha nobility. Not only does this framing ignore other socio-economic causes of the movement (extractive state, exploitation of the agriculturists) as well as political opportunism on the part of other Bhutia-Lepcha elites (see Datta-Ray, 1984) but shifts the blame and the burden entirely on the Nepalis of Sikkim. While there may be many ways of portraying a certain historical event, the social impact of this 'ethnic rising' framework has led to a permanent scarring of the Nepali community. It has resulted in them always being on the defensive, fearful and apologetic for the downfall of the monarchy, thereby leading to a perennial sense of insecurity. Also, because migration (most specifically of the non-Mongoloid, caste groups like Bahuns and Chettris into Sikkim took

place much later than compared to other areas (starting in the middle of 19<sup>th</sup> century), the fear of being labelled as ‘outsiders’ and ‘migrants’ is still a pressing fear heightened by the instances of expulsion of Nepalis living elsewhere. In this situation socio-economic categories like ST, MBC or OBC provides recognition and an alternate identity as Sikkimese, these categories become a *praman* (proof) of being Sikkimese especially at a time when anti-Sikkimese sentiments are running high, as will be discussed later in the chapter. Thus, while instrumental motives might be the primary driving force behind ethnic politics, transcendental benefits can also play a decisive role in the choice of a particular identity over another.

The presence of the Bhutia-Lepcha community, the history of occupying a lower social position and the strength of a numerical majority have given shape to the Nepali identity in Sikkim thereby highlighting the socially constructed nature of this group. Political change has been one of the biggest precursors of the alteration in the internal dynamics of the Nepalis in Sikkim, owing to which the identity of this group can now be said to be in a flux. Whilst asserting the identity of a Sikkimese-Nepali vis-a-vis the Gorkha identity which is prevalent in neighbouring Darjeeling, the Nepalis in Sikkim are now facing the challenge of defining themselves within Sikkim. This identity flux amongst the Nepalis has also been brought about because of internal pressures that the Nepali ethnic groups in Sikkim were undergoing. A Nepali monthly magazine *Chaaya* (1998: 12-14) questions the rise of ethnic associations and points at the dominating role of Nepali culture-

‘the Nepali *jati* in Sikkim has made no effort to preserve and develop the language, culture and tradition of the groups which come under the Nepali group. The circumstances so highlight the fact that the upliftment of the language, culture and tradition of other groups would have a positive impact on the Nepali group as a whole but this has been completely neglected. No effort has been made to promote and preserve ethnic culture of the different communities. Thus, these ethnic groups have been forced (*badhya*) to take the initiative and form associations. Therefore it is out of necessity that has led the deviation away from a *mool*/main group and the assertion of exclusive rights.’ Thus internal, cultural factors can also be seen as a contributing factor that has made different ethnic groups claim (rather re-claim) their culture.

While the hegemony of the Nepali language and Hindu traditions might be one of the factors that have resulted in ethnic politics, it is the policies of affirmative action and the material benefits provided by the state, which is the most important driving force in

determining the political identity of the people as well as electoral outcomes. For example, a comparison of the manifestoes of the SDF and Sikkim Pradesh Congress Committee prior to the 1999 General Elections shows that the primary agenda of the leading parties were reservation of seats for Nepalis, Tsongs and Sherpas in the State Assembly, inclusion of Chettri, Bahuns and Newar in the OBC category, inclusion of various MBC groups in the ST list and protection of Revenue Order No.1.<sup>175</sup> This is a clear example of how ethnicity is viewed as a political resource not only by the political parties but also the people themselves because these issues would not have arisen had it not been raised by the people themselves. Thus ethnic politics in Sikkim is a dynamic, two-way process where the people are not mere recipients of the policies and ideologies put forward by the political elites. They are, in effect, active creators of their own ethnic as well as political identity.

However, a purely instrumental approach on the part of the state or of the ethnic groups themselves would be an insufficient justification for identity politics in Sikkim. The state engages in ethnic politics as it leads to a convenient creation of vote banks and is also a method for the equitable distribution of resources. On the other hand, reasons for accepting and supporting ethnic politics by the Sikkimese-Nepali can also range from gaining benefits through reservations to reviving and reliving their ethnic heritage. Thus, a more balanced approach to ethnic politics is required in order to understand it in its entirety.

***(ii) Socio-economic grievances, ethnic solutions-factors that necessitate the ethnic approach***

Highlighting the achievements of ‘Sikkim: Small Wonder’ (India Today, 2009), the article read:

‘The metaphor for change in Sikkim couldn’t have a more telling example than the main street, the Mahatma Gandhi Marg Road in Gangtok. Once a thoroughfare chocked with vehicles and commercial activity, it is today a splendid, tiled promenade where tourists walk around listening to channelled music...Sikkim is being helped by the Government of Singapore on town development and a Swiss University on rural projects. Singapore’s urban nuances and Switzerland’s rustic impetus- *these form the core of Sikkim’s vision*’ (emphasis mine).

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<sup>175</sup> *Sikkim Express*, ‘SDF and SPCC(I)’S manifesto out’, September 4-10, 1999.

This excerpt not only reflects the truth of the developmental thrust in Sikkim but is also representative of how infrastructural growth in Gangtok and its conversion into a hybrid between Singapore and Switzerland obstructs a critical engagement with the socio-political situation of the state. This description of Sikkim (or rather Gangtok) shields the fact that in Sikkim more than 19.33 percent of the population live below the poverty line<sup>176</sup> and 40.91 percent of the population have a monthly income of less than Rs. 5000 (State Socio Economic Census [SSEC], 2006: 18, 20). Given that poverty in Sikkim is highly regionalised (highest in the western district followed by north, south and finally east)<sup>177</sup> this has a negative impact on the rural poor. According to the Census of 2001, there are a total of 128, 843 households out of which 109, 955 or 85.3 percent are in rural areas. However it is the capital and other district towns that are the beneficiaries of most of the development as visible through the affluent lifestyle of the residents of Gangtok.

According to the 2006 State Socio-Economic Census conducted by the Department of Economics, Statistics, Monitoring and Evaluation, Government of Sikkim (2006:183) a large section of the population- 16.80 percent- are dependent on cultivation as a means of earning their livelihood.<sup>178</sup> Of the total 211, 211 workers in the state, 46.26 per cent are farmers thereby making Sikkim predominantly an agricultural economy. Although the agricultural sector has seen a rise in the total food grain production, since 2000-01 a large proportion of the production of major crops has either fallen or stagnated owing to not only the lower productivity of the

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<sup>176</sup> The State Socio-Economic Census 2006 has based its definition of categories like poverty line and below poverty line on a combination of methods like Income Perspective, Expenditure Perspective and Basic Needs Perspective. To measure the socio-economic status of a household, their assets, properties like land, income and household monthly expenditure were taken into account (SSEC, 2006:7).

<sup>177</sup> According to the SSEC (2006:21) the highest number of BPL households are in the western district (26.54 percent), south (24.38 percent), north (18.65 percent) and east (13.45) percent.

<sup>178</sup> Table 6. Distribution of workers by nature of activity

Activity	Number of Persons
Farmer	97714
Agricultural wage labourer	8365
Non-agricultural wage labourer	16851
Regular Salaried State Government	29603
Salaried Private Sector	11459
Business	12538
Self Employed	14934

Source: SSEC(2006: 182)

soil but because of diversification of land use from subsistence to commercial agriculture, horticulture etc (Chakrabarti, 2010: 24; Khawas, 2010: 161).

Thus, decline in the growth of agricultural production (both subsistence and commercial) has had a major impact on livelihoods as well as rural economy. Reminiscing the time when pork was Rs.7/kg, Yogesh Rai of Chumbung,<sup>179</sup> west Sikkim immediately associates inflation with the decline in the agricultural produce in his field. ‘I tell my children these things and they say that I am lying. There was a time when we used to grow so much maize that we could not even carry it but now no matter how much we try, no matter what new technologies we use, it is no good. The amount of maize we grow is only sufficient to feed the hens for a year. Production has decreased but the prices have reached the sky. We grow a little bit of ginger and oranges but if the *madhesh ko chacha* (uncle from the plains) does not send us food, we might face starvation.’ His father who is almost eighty years old adds in agreement, ‘the land was sufficient for our livelihood, we grew everything we needed on it. The only thing we had to purchase was salt and after eating maize rice for months, eating rice was like a luxury; it was ‘*sarkari khana*’. Look round us right now, we have nothing. No matter how hard we try the land does not produce half as much as it did before. It is almost as if by magic that we are able to live. All the villagers are going on about their life as if by some magic. When you see us we dress and eat well but only we know what the real situation is. Agriculture has decreased tremendously and if there is a strike in Siliguri then there will be mayhem here. The only respite being that we don’t have to pay our rent.’

Contrasting this situation of agricultural decline is another village in west Sikkim where the majority of the population have diversified their agricultural practice from subsistence to the commercial plantation of cardamom. Kamal Subba<sup>180</sup> talks about the prosperity that cardamom has brought to the village which has encouraged further diversification of land. However, this has increased the dependence on the government fair price shops for the provision of food and other supplies.

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<sup>179</sup> Agriculturist, interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, Chumbung, West Sikkim.

<sup>180</sup> Government employee and resident of Hee Gaon, interviewed by the author on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

*BPL and APL rice at 'madhesh ko chacha's' shop: price board at a local ration shop in West Sikkim*

GULAB CHAND.B.DASS SORENG BAZAR		
ITEMS	RATE	STOCK
RICE BPL	4-00	175 KG
RICE APL	5-00	200 KG
M. OIL	69-00	200 KG
K. OIL	18-65	70 KG
MAS. DAL	49-00	60 KG
MUNG. DAL	98-00	20 KG
RAHAR DAL	70-00	20 KG
CHANA DAL	33-50	40 KG
DALDA	52-00	50 KG
SUGER (F/S)	35-00	200 KG
SUJI	16-00	20 KG
SALT	X	X
ATTA F/S	14-50	200 KG
MAIDA F/S	15-50	600 KG
SUGAR PKG	23-95	X
RICE F/S	19-00	700 KG
DATE 11-11-2010		

Bhim Kanchan<sup>181</sup> is one of the farmers who has benefitted from the commercial plantation of cardamom. When asked if he was financially secure, he answered indirectly, 'I cannot say that there is no money in this village. In some places people are sitting on stacks of money because the price of cardamom has gone up. However even those who do not grow cardamom in this village are doing quite alright...either one or more than one of their family members are working in the public sector.' This was also confirmed by Sancha Limboo<sup>182</sup> who says that the economic condition of the people in the village has improved- 'everybody does play with money'-but he also attributes the expansion of cardamom farming as one of the most important causes of the decline in the production of rice and other agricultural products. Apart from environmental factors like disease, pests, rainfall etc one of the crucial factors that has

<sup>181</sup> Agriculturist and a resident of Hee Gaon, interviewed by the author on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>182</sup> Agriculturist and a resident of Hee Gaon, interviewed by the author on 14<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

affected the agricultural sector overall has been the financial support and investment by the state. Considering sectoral and sub-sectoral plans, allocations for the first to the ninth plan, agriculture and its allied activities which are the mainstay of the people have received on an average twenty per cent of the total plan outlay, reaching as low as 13.6 percent in the eighth plan and 17.1 percent in the ninth plan (1998-2002). The direct implication of this being that the government invests less in the sector which has the potential to employ the maximum number of people (Sikkim Human Development Report, 2001).<sup>183</sup>

‘Mission- Poverty Free Sikkim 2013’ was launched in 2010 by the state government which aimed at the complete eradication of households living below the poverty line. Under this mandate the government has launched numerous programmes and facilities to the rural poor that target not only food insecurity but also livelihoods and rural infrastructure. For example, the Department of Animal Husbandry caters to demands for free chicks for poultry farming, milching cows, loans for building yak sheds, piglets, polypipe, sickles etc which are distributed at a subsidised rate. The Rural Development Department oversees projects like the *Mukhya Mantri Awas Yojana Kutcha House* (Chief Minister’s Rural Housing Mission) campaign, which is being implemented to provide *pukka* houses for over 6000 ‘identified people’. In Sikkim poverty has sought to be remedied through the provision of goods and services by the state thereby encouraging dependency. Lama (2001:38) whilst discussing what maybe be deemed a regional trend highlights the tendency amongst people to believe that ‘development is government, government is development’. This leaves the onus of development primarily on the government making citizens believe that development is the prerogative of the government only and therefore enabling the state to wield an enormous amount of power over the people.

Sikkim has a population of 600,000 people approximately (2011 Census) but in contrast to other north-eastern states with bigger territories and higher population, receives one of the largest shares of the central Annual Plan (Rs.1400 crores for 2011-2012).<sup>184</sup> The 2009-10 Report released by the Comptroller and Auditor General of Sikkim states that only 28.62

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<sup>183</sup> Human Development Report 2012 was under preparation during the time of writing and the statistics presented here are also used by the state government.

<sup>184</sup> ‘Northeast Echoes’, The Telegraph, 17/10/2011  
[http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111017/jsp/northeast/story\\_14623761.jsp](http://www.telegraphindia.com/1111017/jsp/northeast/story_14623761.jsp) (Accessed: 03/04/2012).

percent of the revenue receipts come from the state's own resources (comprising taxes as well as non-taxes) whereas the share of Central transfers (comprising the state's share in central taxes and duties and grants-in-aid) from the Government of India comprised 71.38 percent. Given the lack of substantial industries or large scale export of agricultural goods, Sikkim's economy is driven by the tertiary sector (trade, hotels and transport) contributing over sixty-nine percent to the total Gross State Domestic Product (GSDP),<sup>185</sup> while the primary sector contributes around twenty-five percent. Sikkim, along with Mizoram and Nagaland has per capita income higher than the other north-eastern states but much of the income generated in these states was from public administration (18.5 per cent in Sikkim compared to the national average of 6.3 percent). This emphasises the overwhelming dependency of the population on the government for generating income and lack of productive economic activity in the primary, secondary and tertiary sectors of the economy

While the contribution of agriculture to the Gross State Domestic Product (from 48.7 percent in 1980-81 to 18.81 in 2006-07) has been continuously declining, the dependency on agriculture for livelihood and sustenance has not. The state produces large quantities of maize but the staple diet in the hills is rice which therefore leads to the importation of food grains from outside the state. This situation is compounded by the increasing population. Although the number of live births is lower than the national average, the projected population of Sikkim is 700,000 people by the year 2016, which would further intensify food scarcity in the state.

In order to meet the present demand for food, the state imports and distributes food and other essential items through its Public Distribution System (PDS). Under the Targeted PDS introduced in 1997, the government aims to provide rice at a highly subsidised rate to Below Poverty Line families (BPL)<sup>186</sup>-providing thirty-five kgs of rice at Rs. 4 per kilo every month.

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<sup>185</sup> GSDP refers to the market value of all final goods and services produced within a country or a state in a given period of time.

<sup>186</sup> According to the SSEC, 2006, the following are the criteria for assessing BPL status of the people of Sikkim. Thus households **not** to be considered for BPL are:

Households having any member as government employees including work charge

Households having muster roll member with any other member employed in other sector or trades

Households having any member as government contractor of Class I and II

Households having any member who has an income over Rs.3000 per month

Households having Pucca structure

Households having paddy or cardamom or orchards or floriculture land of 2.5 acres or above

Households having barren or other lands over 5 acres

Households having agriculture/horticulture/animal husbandry production of more than Rs. 60,000 per year, having more than six cattle

Households having more than ten goats , sheep, yaks, buffalo, horses



Also under this scheme are over ten thousand beneficiaries receiving thirty-five kgs of rice free of cost, all expenses borne by the state (Chakrabarti, 2010:24).

However in a contradiction of positions, development in Sikkim is usually criticised and praised simultaneously. While the dependency on central government funds is always pointed to as its weakness, connectivity, infrastructure, BPL facilities and other *sarkari* assistance are lauded in the same breath. Infrastructural development and connectivity that is visible in the rural areas of Sikkim, at best masks the poverty which is pre-dominant in the state owing to decline in agriculture, unemployment and the concomitant dependence on the state for the provision of the basic necessities.

*( iii) Experiences with the welfare state*

Nonetheless, experiences with the welfare state vary within Sikkim. When asked about the assistance that people received from the state some respondents praised the *sarkar* for the roads and connectivity but most of the answers were in the negative. As Pem Dorjee's<sup>187</sup> mother says, ' who says the people of Sikkim are rich, the people of Sikkim are poor, they are not rich. We face hardship in everything, the roads are not good, we have money but we still face hardships. Schools are running without any Principal, the local teachers are loose (sic) and as a result the children are getting spoilt.'<sup>188</sup> This therefore shows the level of dependency and expectations from the government ranges from the economic to the social. Poverty, decreasing agricultural returns has thus placed the state at the centre of the lives of the Sikkimese people who become embroiled in a vicious circle of dependency, which is then used for political mileage by political parties.

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Households having TV, fridge, washing machines, vacuum cleaner, microwave, geyser, generator, inverter, computer, DVD, VCD, oven, rice cooker camera, telephone, mobile

Households having more than one fan, more than one sofa, more than one almirah, more than two pressure cooker, more than one sewing machine

Households sending their children to private schools

<sup>187</sup> Agriculturist and resident of Singling, West Sikkim, interviewed by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> Novemeber, 2010.

<sup>188</sup> The rural areas of Sikkim are better off compared to rural areas of Nepal and Darjeeling. Therefore I found this comment very interesting as it highlights the relative aspect of poverty as well as grievances.

The village of Singling in West Sikkim is predominantly Tamang in its ethnic composition and Hangu Bahadur (Singling, 2010) a fifth generation agriculturist was frank about the benefits that he received from the state:

Q. What assistance do you get from the government?

R. They gave us corrugated sheets, built toilets, gave LPG as well as pigs but the pigs died. *Sarkar lay dindai cha, khandai cha/* the government is giving and we are eating.

While Hangu Bahadur may have been a recipient of some of the benefits handed out by the state Binita Tamang (Singling, 2010) and her sons from the same village talk of the lack of assistance from the government, ‘we have been living here for generations and have always relied on *kheti* (agriculture) which is not always enough as we have to support two sons who live outside. We do not get any assistance from the government. During elections they distribute pigs, cows but only the smart and those who are associated with the Party’s women’s wing get it. People like us do not get it.’ This experience was also reiterated by Phul Maya Tamang<sup>189</sup> who recounts how she was able to get some corrugated tin sheets as payment for her participation during pre-election rallies. Sharing his bitterness at the partiality of the government, Sancha Limboo (Hee Gaon, 2010) said, ‘people who were poor during the reign of the former CM have remained so. The poor should be given facilities and then only can they match the rich, but if only people at the top win the poor will always remain poor. They leave the distribution of various things to the political representative and thus only a few chosen people get it.’ Political party, elections and pigs were persistent themes that emerged from all the conversations, highlighting the fact that in rural Sikkim the only denominator that was useful was political connection.

The system of personal re-distribution of public goods is further strengthened by the administrative structure or the Panchayat system which is also based on elections between different parties.<sup>190</sup> However, the problems ailing the Panchayati Raj Institution in Sikkim are

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<sup>189</sup> Agriculturist interviewed by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>190</sup> Under the two tier system of democratic decentralization Sikkim is divided into four Zilla Parishads at the District level, which is also the Apex body followed by 163 Gram Panchayats at the village level. The Sikkim Panchayat Act, 1982 aimed at establishing the Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI) as an instrument of village level self-government and was instrumental in bringing adult franchise to the state as well as enabling the nomination

many as relayed by the Report on Village Development Action Plan for Sikkim (2009).<sup>191</sup> While the majority of the problems related to the absence of horizontal coordination, faulty vertical coordination, overlapping responsibilities, lack of transparency, the Indo-Swiss Report also highlighted the ‘design of the political institution’ as one of the major impediments. Problems accruing from personal favours, divergence of funding to projects that were not on the list or lack of respect towards the decision of the Gram Sabha were also listed by the Report. It raises concerns about the role of the MLAs at the Block level and the elected Zilla Panchayats at the District level. The failure of the political and/or of the elected representative to encourage greater participation as well as debate and discussions regarding the needs and policies is highlighted by Chettri (2008) also. He further discusses how the Gram Panchayats were usually participants only at the implementation level and had no say in the formulation of the schemes and were further confronted by public apathy. This situation is aggravated by the fact that the Gram Panchayats are solely dependent on the state government for all their projects. Repercussion of this dependency was further emphasized by the Report which states that since there is a lack of local revenue generation and no charges were collected for the services provided by the government, local services have no opportunity cost and thus without a tax counterpart, local residents have an illusion that these services are free. Thus, the Panchayats form an important link in the distribution chain, one which is controlled by the bureaucrats, who they themselves have no room to manoeuvre in the face of political pressure.

***(vi) Unemployment and increasing insecurity***

Apart from poverty, the severity of unemployment is also quite intense both in the rural and the urban areas. According to the SSEC (2006: 14) 64.48 percent of the total population are under the age of 29. Thus what can otherwise be considered as a positive economic indicator has proven to have a destabilising effect on not only the economy but also the political situation in the state as rising unemployment as well as under employment has become the arsenal of opposition parties.

Unemployment is compounded by the problem of the educated unemployed. Awarded the ‘Best in Primary Education among small states’ by a leading national magazine India Today

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of the ST, SC and women to Gram Panchayat levels. Since 2006 Block Administrative Centres headed by the Block Development Officers have been created to reinforce decentralisation (Chettri, 2008).

<sup>191</sup> This Report titled, ‘Strengthening Gram Panchayat- Planning and Budgeting in Sikkim’ was prepared by the Indo-Swiss Mission to Sikkim with assistance from the Government of Sikkim.

in 2010, Sikkim has a high literacy rate (82.20 percent, Census 2011) and approximately twenty percent of the Annual Budget is dedicated to education.<sup>192</sup> The state is thus inundated with well qualified unemployed or underemployed youth who are represented by the All Sikkim Educated Self-Employed and Unemployed Association. Although the major aim of this association is to articulate the grievances of the unemployed, in recent time it has also been at the forefront of ‘safeguarding the interest of the Sikkimese youth’ whose socio-economic rights are apparently being threatened by outsiders.<sup>193</sup> When Sikkim joined the Indian Union in 1975, the ‘Old Laws’ of the kingdom were protected under Article 371F of the Indian Constitution which validates the use of a separate document called the Sikkim Subject Certificate as a means of identifying genuine Sikkimese citizens. Thus, along with proof of Indian citizenship, a Sikkim Subject Card or a Residential Certificate is essential in order to seek employment, purchase non Bhutia-Lepcha land or claim any other governmental benefits within Sikkim. Increasingly in Sikkim the ‘insider-outsider’, ‘sons of the soil’ arguments are finding voice and representation through numerous associations as well as individuals.

The coming of hydro-electric plants as well as other private investments which have created employment avenues in Sikkim has intensified the stress on an authentic Sikkimese identity. These issues have also attracted the attention of All Sikkim Democratic Labour Front (ASDLF), a part of the ruling SDF party which is aimed at protecting the Sikkimese worker’s interest and to oppose the discrimination with regard to employment in the private sector.<sup>194</sup> Seeking to ensure the rights of the Sikkimese labourer, the ruling party through the ASDLF called a general strike in April 2011, where unlike in Darjeeling, protest in any form especially a strike is usually not common in Sikkim. As unemployment is becoming increasingly associated with migration of non-Sikkimese people, usurping local jobs and opportunities, the boundaries of Sikkimese identity is bound to be constricted and its definition more politicised.

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<sup>192</sup> Source: Sikkim Now!, 26/06/2012.

<sup>193</sup> In October 2010, the All Sikkim Educated Self-Employed Association submitted a memorandum to the state government urging them to start the ‘purification process’ of Sikkim Subject by which it meant to purge out those residents of Sikkim who held invalid or fake Sikkim Subject Certificates. Earlier in June, 31,180 individuals were reported as holding fake Sikkim Subject cards.  
Source: Sikkim Express, 26/10/2010.

<sup>194</sup> Source: Now, 30/03/2011.

Unemployment thus remains not only a socio-economic problem but also has political repercussions.

Unemployment is also aggravated by the desire to be employed in the public sector. Although this sector employs only 5.09 percent of the total working population (SSEC, 2006:183) the desire to work in the public sector is so great that very often the ratio of applicants to a limited number of government positions can be very high. While the Sikkim Subject Certificate acts as a systematic filter against non-Sikkimese candidates, the competition between those holding Sikkim Subject is also very intense. A stagnant agricultural sector combined with steadily declining industrial activity has severely limited employment opportunities outside the government. Public administration has by default become the most propelling force behind economic growth. This is a point which was also emphasised by the Chief Minister at the launch of the 'Mission- Poverty Free Sikkim 2013' - 'There is no dearth of employment opportunities in the state since a lot of people from outside the state earn their livelihoods by working here. The main cause for the so-called unemployment is the youth's total dependence on government jobs only for their bread and butter instead of having respect for dignity of labour and opting for self-employment.'<sup>195</sup>

Increasing unemployment, apart from the obvious economic impact has also had repercussion on the insecurity of the Nepali population in Sikkim. While on one hand there are tangible benefits to be had by belonging to one of the socio-economic categories, on the other, being bonafide ST, OBC or MBC also requires Sikkim Subject Certificate, which is therefore another way of establishing a legitimate Sikkimese identity. Thus, economic as well as socio-political insecurity plays right into the hands of political agents, who are supported by the state. Ethnic identity is not only related to tangible benefits but has also now become a proof of belonging, of being truly Sikkimese. The recent entry of private companies has also only benefitted unemployed youth of certain areas whilst the problems of those in villages like Chumbung and Singling have remained the same. However as Yogesh Rai (Chumbung, 2010) said, 'the government has been throwing various schemes like a goli (football) but our brothers and sisters have to be able to catch it.' In order to be able to catch this metaphoric *goli* there are two pre-requisites- political connection and/or money and in the absence of both, belonging

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<sup>195</sup> Source: Zeenews.com, 22/09/2010

[http://zeenews.india.com/news/north-east/chamling-launches-project-to-make-sikkim-poverty-free\\_656876.html](http://zeenews.india.com/news/north-east/chamling-launches-project-to-make-sikkim-poverty-free_656876.html) (Accessed: 10/11/2011).

to the socio-economic categories of ST, SC, OBC and MBC but most preferably the ST category.

Although based on the notion of decentralised bureaucracy, the distribution pattern of public goods is highly politicised because it is the political representative, either the MLA or the member of the Panchayat, who is finally responsible for the re-distribution of goods and services which is used to maintain allegiance to the party. In this context the emergence of official ethnic associations fulfils not only the cultural vacuum experienced by the sub-ethnic groups but can also be considered as an alternate mode of negotiation which dispenses with the need to follow the well trodden path of party politics. Headed by government officials, ethnic associations then become a medium through which different sections of the population can lobby with the government without incurring the wrath of the state.

### ***5.2(i) Accessing the state: the ethnic approach***

Based on the welfare model, the Sikkimese government has undertaken the role of the prime distributor of resources, services and opportunities, more aggressively after the abrogation of the monarchy in 1975 and the installation of a democratically elected government, which is responsible to the electorate. Post-1975 the total population was divided into Scheduled Tribes, Scheduled Castes and the General category. While the Bhutia and the Lepcha groups were automatically inducted into the ST category the remaining Nepali groups barring those who belonged to the SC category were categorised as General (like the Marwaris and Biharis who are considered as ‘outsiders’ in Sikkim). One of the fundamental changes in this distribution of population and resources came post 1994 with the introduction of the OBC category, then the MBC<sup>196</sup> and the Primitive category. This re-distribution system uses socio-cultural factors as a guide to the rights and benefits of groups and individuals. Under this, the different socio-economic categories and the ethnic groups within these categories are:

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<sup>196</sup> Sikkim Government Gazette Notification No.308 dated 17/09/2003.

<b>Socio-economic category</b>	<b>Ethnic Groups</b>
<b>Primitive</b>	Lepcha
<b>Scheduled Tribes</b> <sup>197</sup>	Bhutia, Limboo, Tamang, Sherpa
<b>Most Backward Classes</b> (created in 2003)	Rai, Gurung, Magar, Bhujel, Mukhia, Dewan
<b>Other Backward Classes</b>	Bahun, Chettri, Newar
<b>Scheduled Castes</b>	Kami, Damai, Sarki
<b>Others</b> <sup>198</sup>	

These categories determine the degree and type of benefits that an ethnic group or an individual is entitled to. For example, although there are poverty alleviation and development schemes that all citizens falling below the poverty line can apply for (viz. financial assistance in building houses under the Chief Minister's rural housing scheme) there are provisions within these schemes that make allowance for positive discrimination to certain socio-economic groups like the ST or the SC (Government of Sikkim, Social Welfare Department website)<sup>199</sup> thereby enhancing their appeal over other categories.

While it is difficult for the state to achieve equal distribution of resources, the situation has become even more difficult for those at the receiving end as increase in population, prices and aspirations had made eligibility for public goods more competitive. With the decline in agricultural production and other allied industries (Khawas, 2012:190) rural areas, which are experiencing economic decline and increasing unemployment, are increasingly dependent on the government which implements schemes like the *Jawahar Gram Samridhi Yojana* (Jawahar Rural Alleviation Programme) aimed at strengthening the village infrastructure through the

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<sup>197</sup> The parity system<sup>197</sup> which had been established by Chogyal Tashi Namgyal in 1953 led to creation of the Bhutia-Lepcha seats in the State Council. However, parts of this system is still retained and in Sikkim the Bhutia-Lepcha community, although it belongs to the ST category, still contests elections and has reservations under the Bhutia-Lepcha category (BL). This is an anomaly particular to Sikkim which is protected by Article 371F of the Indian Constitution<sup>197</sup> and thus in the Sikkim State Assembly there is reservation of seats for the BL community but not for ST, much to the frustration of other ST groups like Limboos' and Tamangs'.

<sup>198</sup> The category 'Others' refers to 'plains people' originating from various parts of the country and residing in Sikkim, who are still referred to as 'Indians' by the locals.

<sup>199</sup> Source: Social Welfare Department, Government of Sikkim  
<http://southsikkim.nic.in/Department/Social%20Justice,%20Empowerment%20&%20Welfare/welfare%20departmentprogram.htm> (Accessed 09/01/2012).

creation of durable assets. The Welfare Division of the Sikkim Social Justice and Empowerment and Welfare Department is 'entrusted with the responsibility of socio-economic and educational development of Scheduled Castes, Scheduled Tribes, Other Backward Classes and Minority Communities. The division implements educational development schemes, such as pre-matric and post-matric scholarship schemes for SC/ST/OBC/MBC/Minority.<sup>200</sup> The Welfare Division is also guaranteed grants from the Consolidated Fund of India under Article 275(1) of the Indian Constitution<sup>201</sup> to meet the cost of schemes undertaken to ensure the welfare of STs. According to the Department of Social Welfare all revenue blocks with more than thirty per cent tribal population have been declared as Intensive Tribal Development Project which implies more investment in infrastructure and development than in a non-tribal block. Sikkim ST, SC and OBC Development Corporation Limited has also been set up in order to provide financial assistance to all backward sections of the society at a low interest rate.<sup>202</sup> The special central assistance to tribals aims to bring about a more rapid economic development amongst the tribal groups and focuses on demand based income generation programmes. Activities under this include construction of green houses, distribution of milking cows, distribution of improved seeds and agricultural tools and equipment, training to farmers/agriculturists. The government also provides vocational training in tribal areas. These benefits also extend to the employment section where there are reservations as well as age and

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<sup>200</sup> Source: Government of Sikkim, Welfare Division  
([http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Sikkim/Economy/Annual\\_Plans/2001-02/35.asp](http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Sikkim/Economy/Annual_Plans/2001-02/35.asp) (accessed 31/12/2012).

<sup>201</sup> Relevant excerpts from the Article are:

- (i) The grants are provided to the States on the basis of ST population percentage in the State to the total tribal population of the Country.
- (ii) The funds are released to the State Governments against specific projects for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes and strengthening of administration of tribal areas from the year 2000- 2001. A part of funds are also utilised to establish Eklavya Model residential Schools to provide quality education to ST students from class VI to XII.
- (iii) The grants are provided to the States on the basis of ST population percentage in the State to the total tribal population of the Country.

Source: <https://constitutionexplorer.stanford.edu/?q=singlenode/204> (Accessed 09/01/2013). Full version of the Article has been attached as Annexe.

<sup>202</sup> Source: Government of Sikkim, Welfare Division  
([http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Sikkim/Economy/Annual\\_Plans/2001-02/35.asp](http://www.neportal.org/northeastfiles/Sikkim/Economy/Annual_Plans/2001-02/35.asp) (Accessed 31/12/2012).



marks relaxation for the different categories the highest of which is the ST status<sup>203</sup> and the pre- and post-matric scholarships are once again only open to ST/SC and OBC.

This therefore shows that socio-economic incentives are embedded within these categories, making them at once attractive to the electorate and hence an important basis for the formation of a strong political base.

Table 4. Percentage of reservation in employment according to ethnic category

	<b>Scheduled Tribe</b>	<b>Scheduled Caste</b>	<b>Most Backward Class</b>	<b>Other Backward Classes</b>	<b>General Category</b>
<b>Percentage of total population</b>	37.39	6.66	23.46	23.20	9.29
<b>Percentage of Reservation in education and employment</b>	33	6	21	14	26

Source: Notification no. 98, 15/11/2003 issued by the Department of Personnel, Administrative Reforms and Training.

Benefits of affirmative action are most apparent in the overall employment sector. Out of the total number of workers in the state, the highest number of workers are from the ST category followed by the OBC, MBC, Others and SC. Although instrumental to the meteoric rise of the

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<sup>203</sup> According to Notification no.103, 25/11/2003, issued by the Department of Personnel, Administrative Reforms and Training, different age limits were prescribed for different groups. While ST and SC were allowed age relaxation of five years, MBC and OBC groups were given a relaxation of four years. For example in an advertisement for the post of Under Secretary had different age bars as well as numbers of seats for the various socio-economic categories:

Category	Age	Number of seats	Percentage of population
ST(Limboo and Tamang)	35	4	15.92
SC	35	2	6.66
BL	35	5	20.86
MBC	34	5	23.46
OBC	34	5	23.20

Source: Sikkim Express, 22/10/2012; State Socio-Economic Census (2006:50).

SDF to political power<sup>204</sup> the domination and consolidation of political power by a single party for the past seventeen years has lowered the dependency of the party on the *matwalis* of Sikkim for political success. Nonetheless, they still comprise the largest section of the electorate but are also the least represented in government services and/or educationally marginalised. For example, according to the State Socio-Economic Census of Sikkim (2005-06: 195), the Rai ethnic group is one of the largest ethnic groups in Sikkim, constituting 13.52 percent of the total population. However, only 10.98 per cent of the total Rai population is employed in the public sector as compared to the 18.28 per cent who are employed as agricultural wage labourers. This situation can be contrasted with that of the Bhutia ethnic group who like the Rais, constitute 13.08 per cent of the total population but represent 21.13 per cent of the public sector and only 9.25 per cent are engaged as agricultural wage labourers. According to the Census, the position of the Limboo ethnic group was even worse. They represented 9.74 per cent of the total population of the state but only 6.70 per cent were employed in the public sector while 14.84 per cent of the Limboos were employed as agricultural wage labourers.

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<sup>204</sup>According to the Election Commission Report quoted in the magazine *Chaaya*, in 1993 the ethnic composition of the Nepali category clearly highlights a large *matwali* group. This group benefited the most from the change in the government.

Table 3: Nepali ethnic groups in Sikkim 1993

<b>Ethnic Group</b>	<b>Total Number</b>
Newar	8487
Bahun	18,265
Chettri	23,489
Limboo	<b>18,208</b>
Rai	<b>26,682</b>
Gurung	<b>12,778</b>
Tamang	<b>11,319</b>
Magar	<b>5,118</b>
Thami	<b>51</b>
Mukhia	<b>998</b>
Bhujel	1119
Scheduled Caste	10,651

Table 5. Distribution of government employees according to different welfare categories

Categories	Scheduled Tribes	Other Backward Classes	Most Backward Class	Others	Scheduled Castes
Percentage of workers	37.22	23.69	23.58	9.17	6.34

Fig.2 Source SSEC, 2006:183 <sup>205</sup>

Employment in the public sector also follows a similar pattern as the largest number of persons employed as regular salaried workers belong to the Bhutia, Chettri, Bahun, Rai, Lepcha, Limboo, Gurung, Pradhan and Tamang ethnic groups. This therefore highlights that the highest benefit in terms of reservation comes through the ST category as this group has the highest representation in the public sector in terms of proportion to their population.

Most of the Nepali sub-groups, on the other hand, belong to the MBC category and although there are specific benefits that come attached with these groups there are a few other problems with it- the first and the most fundamental problem with this category (MBC) is that it holds no value outside the state. This brings no added advantage to those aspiring to study or work in the public sector as they will still have to compete in the large national category of OBCs. Second, movement from the OBC to the MBC category has not brought significant economic benefits to the group as the concessions that they receive is less than the ST category; third, the number of groups in the MBC list is far more than those in the ST list and thus, the available pool of resources has to be divided amongst a larger number of people. Given these de-merits, the most important demand that has arisen in the present context is that of being included in the Scheduled Tribe list, which guarantees higher reservations, inside as well as outside the state.

With the entrenchment of affirmative action, the connection between ethnic identity and politics is self evident. It represents a new form of patronage system where the state acts as the primary patron and ethnic groups, who are beneficiaries of affirmative action, are the clients. Thus, in contrast to Nepal and Darjeeling, it is this overarching incentive structure that is promoted by the state that has given ethnic politics in Sikkim its particular distinctive form.

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<sup>205</sup> All figures are quoted from the SSEC 2006 Report which is the latest available figures and that used by the state government in all its policy formulations.

## *(ii) Becoming Tribal*

It is clear that the ST category, the one with most benefits attached to it has become the goal and aspiration of all the ethnic groups, the upper caste Chhetri and Bahuns included. This aspiration has been made achievable on the part of ethnic groups by the national policy on tribal groups that necessitates the essentialization of culture. The criteria used to identify the STs show no appreciable break from the criteria defined by the 1931 Census Commissioner J.H.Hutton. It is still based on primitive characteristics, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, 'shyness' of contact with the community at large and 'backwardness' (Kapila, 2008: 122). According to Sengupta (1988: 1004), the national discourse on tribal communities is still dominated by definitions and imaginations of head-hunting, primitive hunters and gatherers (also see van Schendel 2011).<sup>206</sup> This imagery has also filtered into the imaginations and representations of ethnic groups in Sikkim. For example, in the Sikkimese context, an executive member of the Gurung Association described the Gurungs as 'docile, shy, god-fearing and isolation liking.'<sup>207</sup> The description of the Khas ethnic group by Kharel and Basnet (2008:48-49) is also constructed around characteristics expected by the national discourse. They write, 'In general the Khasas (Chhetri/Bahuns) are simple, obedient and hard working. They do not hesitate to undertake activity of any nature. Their traditional meditation (sic) is known as *Jhankri*. He worships sprits (sic) of all kinds... Few Chhetris and Matwali Chhetris worship the *Mastha* (tribal nature of God) alone and do not know or care about any Hindu deities or festivals.' The ethnographic report submitted by the Gurung association to the Social Welfare Department describes them in a similar vein, 'the Gurungs are economically backward, illiterate and an unsophisticated class of people who are liable to get easily deceived by shrewd and calculating people...' This report even goes further to distance itself from any attachments

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<sup>206</sup> The description of the Bhujel ethnic group in the booklet, 'Ethnography of the Bhujel hill tribe' published by the Akhil Bharat Bhujel Sangh also highlights the general direction of ethnic revivalism- 'the tribe consists of innocent people who are confined to themselves and hardly bother anything or anyone. They maintain a friendly and healthy relationship with others...*Even though they have mediocre intelligence they are very humble and respectful to the elders.* They are also very protective of the weak ones. They seem to be simple forest dwelling people and many of the common terms have to do with hunting, gathering and fishing. The religion and culture of these *backward people* (emphasis mine) are close to extinction and influences of other social groups have been encroaching on their way of life.' However, to establish this cultural distinction the booklet elaborates numerous rituals (marriage, child naming ceremony, death rituals) which ironically are not only shared by other ethnic groups but also have strong resemblance to Hindu practices.

<sup>207</sup> Executive member of the All Sikkim Gurung (Tamu) Association interviewed by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> Nov, 2010, Gangtok.

with Hinduism by decrying that Gurungs have often been described as ‘Backward Hindus’ which was bound to ‘lead to the extinction of Gurung religious beliefs, traditions, culture, and lifestyle and obliterate all distinctions between castes and tribes and as some selfish communities want to amalgamate them into the Brahmanic caste system’ (Gurung et al, 2005:23, 24).

All of these reports and descriptions come from groups who practice or till very recently have practised Hindu customs and traditions. Thus, instead of different characteristics contributing to the creation of a ST list, it is the ST list itself which creates and maintains a historical image that in turn determines the criteria for enlistment as an ST (Xaxa, 1999).<sup>208</sup> Not only are groups from very different social and political backgrounds identified as tribes<sup>209</sup> but their classification is also riddled with generalisations. The attempt to create a cohesive tribal category subsumes different and often contradictory cultural characteristics under the same ST category. An ethnographic report commissioned by the state government and led by scholars like A.C.Sinha, T.B.Subba (2005: 80) concludes that foundations of Animism or Bonism and a super-structure of Hindu and Buddhist cultures were found in all the groups under the Kirata label. It continues,

‘They were basically worshippers of ancestors, deities related to clans, household, land, forest, river, etc through the mediums of their own shamans and with the sacrifice of flowers, crops, birds and animals.....the essentially egalitarian, tribal communities having their own language, culture and traditions began to be known as Nepali caste Hindus, which was certainly a desirable identity for them for the past couple of centuries in view of the higher social status it accrued , but it is not longer (sic) an enabling identity in the wake of other peoples like the Lepcha and Bhutia receiving benefit of their tribal identity in terms of jobs and other constitutional protection.’

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<sup>208</sup> Apart from the STs there were also certain groups, considered as more marginalised amongst the tribals and were included in a new category called Primitive Tribal Groups and the criteria fixed for their identification was pre-agricultural level of technology, very low level of literacy and declining or stagnant population (Bijoy et al 2010:15).

Thus, when high profile recommendations make direct allusions to the material benefit of being ST, not only does it encourage ethnic groups to aspire for ST status but at the same time, it also leads to the reification of the image of tribes as hunter, gatherers and animists. This makes these categories even more controversial as majority of the members of ethnic groups do not follow such lifestyles or religions which then weakens their argument of economic deprivation or backwardness as a result of cultural practices. Nonetheless, this trend amongst the ethnic groups directs towards the active re-construction of the cultural symbols (language, rituals) in order to fit the image of a tribe that has been created by the central government, which views tribal groups from an essentialised, parochial and condescending perspective. Ethnic revivalism in Sikkim therefore represents the core elements of the thesis rather starkly. It shows that the Nepali ethnic group is constantly in the process of re-inventing itself as per its socio-economic requirements thereby highlighting its dynamic, socially constructed nature. This re-invention may be spurred on by (mostly) instrumental motives on the part of ethnic groups but has been facilitated entirely by the state which values ethnic identity for its political value (as a reliable vote bank). Assertion of a particular form of ethnic identity is therefore only a part of the larger political process which is based on the politics of re-distribution in which belonging to any socio-economic category other than the general Nepali category brings more political or economic benefits.

### *(iii) Structures supporting ethnic politics*



The state (as represented by a particular political party) is the supplier of the benefits accruing from affirmative action and as a result is also the recipient of continued political support from the electorate. The state supports this incentive structure by giving benefits (ranging from reservations to milching cows) directly to different groups and indirectly through its support of ethnic association. Over the past ten years Sikkim has seen an unprecedented growth in the number of ethnic associations representing Nepali ethnic groups both big and

small.<sup>210</sup> The state as a political agent has led to the creation of a social framework which is more conscious and receptive to ethnicity and its cultural markers than it has ever been before. This in effect has placed a degree of political agency in the hands of different ethnic associations which at one level implement governmental policies and on the other, probably the most important level formulate their agenda within the guidelines given by the state and use that to negotiate with it.

While a few of the ethnic associations (Limboo, Rai, Gurung) existed prior to 1994, owing to the direct assistance of the government, the state has seen a prolific growth in the number of ethnic associations since the 1994 General Election (Gurung, 2010: 248-49). Highlighting the role of *gaon-samaj* (village community) in the role of cultural preservation, Arjun Tamang of (Soreng, 2010) says, ‘it is the duty of the community to preserve language and culture. The government is not going to do it for you. We have to start small associations in the villages and do it ourselves’. Even the Limboo Association started as a small club before it grew into one of the biggest Associations in Sikkim and highlights the fact that ethnic associations have been existed in small, non-formal forms in Sikkim. Increasing state support called for registration and other formalisation of these associations thereby necessitating the active participant of ethnic elites adept at Gangtok bureaucracy (at least relatively) and securing the maximum benefits for a particular ethnic group.

Most ethnic associations usually originated as voluntary language schools in rented rooms and in spite of governmental support, they still have to be self-sufficient in many ways. By way of example the General Secretary of the Mukhia Association<sup>211</sup> says that owing to the lack of a Mukhia communal *bhavan* (hall), dance practice for different cultural festivals still takes place on the Association President’s terrace. Financial and institutional support by the state is thus crucial for bigger projects like language and script development, cultural exhibitions in the state as well as outside. This link between politics and culture, especially at the local level is inevitable as explained by Rajesh Tamang, member of the Tamang

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<sup>210</sup> According to the Commission for Review of Environment and Social sector, Policies, Plans and Programmes (CRESP)Report (2008, Annexure F) eighteen ethnic associations submitted their memorandum and ethnographic report out of which fourteen of these ethnic groups belonged to the Nepali group. The ethnic groups are: Bhujel, Chhetri-Bahun, Damai, Tamang, Gurung (Tamu), Kami, Kirat Khambu Rai, Limboo, Mangar, Newar, Sannyassi, Sarki, Sunuwar and Thami.

<sup>211</sup> Member of the Mukhia Association, Sikkim, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2010, Gangtok, Sikkim.

Association in Soreng (Khadga Bazar, Soreng, 2010)<sup>212</sup>- ‘if we want to build anything or we require anything else for the community, then we have to hobnob around the MLA or the Minister, without whose help it cannot be done’. This point was also reiterated by a member of the Limboo Literary Association, K.Limboo<sup>213</sup> who said that the Association had to ensure that ‘they remain in their (the state’s) good books’. This requirement to ‘hobnob’ and remain in the ‘good books’ of the area MLA or Minister shows that the form and content of ethnic identity is monitored by the state and ethnic associations have to act within that boundary. Thus, while ethnic identity might be a product of social construction, it is one that has been constructed under the watchful eye of the state.

All ethnic associations function and negotiate within the framework that is set by the state and submitting memorandums, organising meetings and bureaucratic lobbying has emerged as the most effective ways of interacting with the state. Unlike in Nepal ethnic associations in Sikkim share a positive relation with the state, where there are official mechanisms like the Department of Culture and Tourism that promote as well as financially support ethnic diversity. In Sikkim ethnic associations do not have to negotiate with the state for recognition or socio-political space. It is rather a request for a share of the privileges that is being provided to other groups with similar cultural features. This is in contrast to the situation in Nepal where historical domination and discrimination has fostered a confrontational attitude towards the state. In Nepal ethnic associations are still not accepted as legitimate participants in the reconstruction of the country. They are viewed with suspicion and as competition to the traditional political pattern.<sup>214</sup> Thus, the mode of appeal to the state also differs from that of appeasement in Sikkim to that of opposition to the state and its elites in Nepal. Most of the ethnic associations in Sikkim are elite and urban based as they are headed by civil servants who

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<sup>212</sup> Interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, Soreng, West Sikkim.

<sup>213</sup> Interviewed by the author on 16<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, Soreng, west Sikkim.

<sup>214</sup> For example, after the breakdown of the Constituent Assembly in July 2012, the Janajati leaders are weighing the option of forming a political party of their own. The two day conference organised by NEFIN declared that ‘since the existing parties in Nepal were Brahmanical, patriarchal and controlled by upper caste supremacists’, it was a historical necessity to set up an inclusive party based on principles of human rights, social justice, equality and equity, and ethnicity theory’. Although a representation of frustration with the political system such declarations by ethnic associations are considered as a source of potential threat to the established order. Source: *The Hindu*, 25/07/2012.



are aware of the various bureaucratic mechanisms needed to lobby effectively and cordially with the state. The increasing receptivity of the state highlighted through its socio-economic policies has led to a change in the demands of the established associations from that of socio-economic benefits to political representation (as in the case of the Limboo and Tamang Associations) and the demand for the declaration of all MBC categories as ST. Effective lobbying by the ethnic elites, who are usually well placed within the governmental bureaucracy, has led to the state directing two separate commissions, the Sinha Commission in 2004 and the Burman Commission in 2009 in order to determine the statutory status of the ethnic entities in Sikkim.

These demands for political reservations also highlight the transition of ethnic demands from socio-cultural to political demands expressed through the associations.<sup>215</sup> These developments also raise important questions regarding the Nepali ethnic group in Sikkim. While major ethnic associations like the Limboo, Gurung have already started disassociating themselves from the Nepali community and emphasizing more on the Sikkimese identity smaller groups are soon to follow suit. For example, on 16<sup>th</sup> February 2011, *the Sukhim Yakthung Sapsok Songjumbo* (Sikkim Limboo Literary Society) made an appeal to the Census Directorate to give careful consideration to the correct enumeration of Limboos in Sikkim. The memorandum handed by the association to Sikkim Express, a local daily stated, ‘it has been reported to our association that some of the staff of Census (sic) filled forms themselves in some of the columns and were reluctant to write Limboo, Yooma religion<sup>216</sup> and Limboo language for the Limboo community of Sikkim. It has to be brought to your kind notice *that we are not Nepali or Nepali citizen. We are Sikkimese Limboo strongly rooted with the land of Sikkim because we were here prior to the establishment of the Namgyal dynasty as religious king of Sikkim in 1642* (emphasis mine).’ Statements and declarations of indigeneity by

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<sup>215</sup> For example, the Limboo-Tamang Joint Action Forum has been especially pertinent in promoting its demand for political reservation in the Legislative Assembly, placing memorandums to the Chief Minister but also to the President of India in 2008. This has been possible not only because of their combined strength but also because individually they are well organized associations with a network of members who are highly placed in the governmental bureaucratic network. While the primary demand of most of these associations relates to the attainment of Scheduled Tribe status, those who have already been declared as ST now aspire for the proportionate political representation in the state legislature.

<sup>216</sup> Yumaism is a Henotheist or Kathenotheist religion which believes in only a single goddesses Tagera Ningwaphuma, the creator, preserver and sustainer of life. Yumaism believes in the ‘biogenesis theory of life’ wherein life is created only through life with the blessing of the goddess Tagera Ningwaphuma (Yuma). The mortal human beings have to survive with the judicious use of all living and non-living objects that were created for his survival (Subba, 2011:150-51).

established ethnic associations therefore exert more pressure on other ethnic groups to emphasize their own unique culture as tribes and their belonging to Sikkim at the same time. The booklet ‘Ethnography of the Bhujel Hill Tribe’ published by the Akhil Bhujel Sangha of Sikkim is a case in example of an ethnic group who are introduced to the reader as one which has been living in Sikkim since time immemorial and comprise a linguistic minority. This is an important maneuver in staking a claim not only on a share of the material benefits but also on the social history of Sikkim as one of the ‘original’ people of Sikkim.

Apart from the instrumental use of ethnicity to qualify for affirmative action, these associations also hold the key to the articulation of ethnicity for their own members. Members of ethnic groups, especially in urban areas rely almost completely on ethnic associations for the definition of a particular tradition or its cultural significance. Nepali has been the dominant language of communication in the hills<sup>217</sup> and thus development of ethnic languages and literature was high on the priority list of ethnic associations. In 1995, the state government included Newari, Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sherpa and Tamang languages as official languages of the state along with Nepali, Bhutia, Lepcha and Limboo. Not only is language and script essential for cultural preservation but it is also important for recognition as ST and therefore access to the benefits from the state.<sup>218</sup>

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<sup>217</sup> Hiltz (2003: 76) notes that in 1967 English was the official language in Sikkim where people spoke three distinct languages –*Denjongke* (a Sikkimese dialect of Tibetan), Lepcha and Nepali but in fact Nepali was the unofficial lingua franca. Bhutia and Nepali boarding school were started in 1889 and 1906 respectively and with the establishment of the Apatan Sahitya Parishad in 1947, language and literature was fully developed making Nepali a lingua franca in Sikkim. The Government of Sikkim through the Sikkim Official Language Act, 1977 recognized Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha as the Official Languages of Sikkim on 17<sup>th</sup> October 1977 (Subba, 2011:168, 171).

<sup>218</sup> For example, according to the ethnographic reports and memorandum submitted to the Burman Commission in 2008 those ethnic groups (Rai, Gurung, Sunuwar, Thami, Dewan, and Bhujel) who were aspiring for the ST status had to answer specific questions pertaining to specific ethnic language and dialect.

*Songs of love and life sung by local Limboo artists from west Sikkim*



A small survey<sup>219</sup> conducted as a part of data collection at Soreng High School revealed the increasing receptivity towards ethnic languages. Students were not shy to speak their languages and considered their ethnic languages rather than Nepali to be more useful in the future. Ravi Rai<sup>220</sup> who conducts Rai language classes in his house explains that the motivation for his students which ranges from genuine interest to learn the language to seeing it as an asset for future employment prospects as language teachers. Once again the ethnic associations have been at the forefront of language revival. Based on the language survey conducted in 2005-06, Turin (2012:138) comments on the growing interest in their ethnic languages especially as a part of their school curriculum. Interestingly he points out,

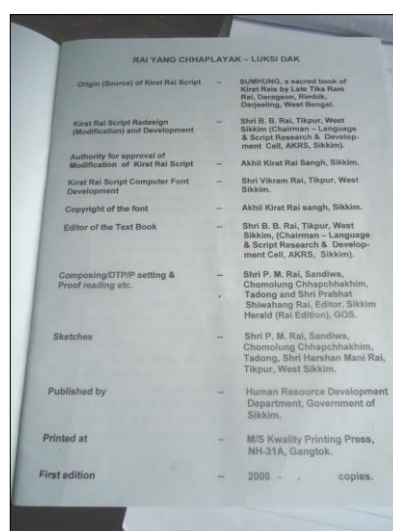
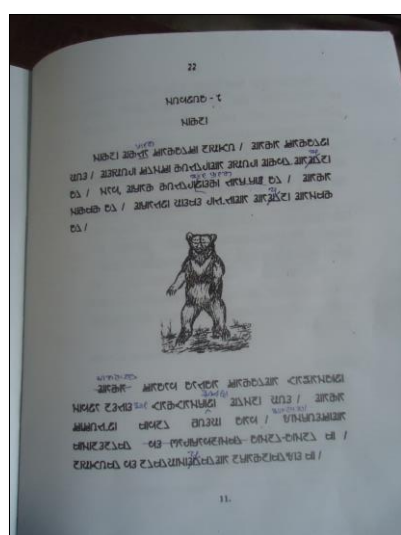
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<sup>219</sup> A small language survey was conducted amongst students of Soreng High School, West Sikkim. Limboo and Tamang students from classes IX and X were selected for the survey. A questionnaire was distributed which had ten, simple multiple choice questions. A total of eighteen students participated in this survey.

<sup>220</sup> Active member of the Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh, interviewed by the author on 23<sup>rd</sup> November, 2010, Gangtok, Sikkim.

‘...we should not assume that the students who opt for these classes are actually being taught language in order to use it, or that they are being steeped in the performative skill that true competence entails. Rather, they are learning heritage, culture, history and ancestry through the prism of language. In fact, these students are learning ‘belonging’, because the utility of such languages to young Sikkimese are now as markers of belonging rather than vernaculars of daily use. It is precisely because these languages now have primarily emotional and symbolic value rather than strategic and practical importance that the Government of Sikkim can afford to teach them’. While the primary motive may be to learn ‘belonging’, learning an ethnic language improves chances of employment in government schools as language teachers. Despite the diversity in the motives of the students, the government as well as the associations that are promoting ethnic languages, the trend of teaching and learning ethnic language is continuing unabated. Thus, apart from reservations, ethnicity can also enhance the life chances of individuals by promoting alternative forms of employment thereby raising its value as resource amongst people who are looking at different ways to access the state.

*Story of a bear in the Bantawa (Rai) language, published by the Human Resource Department, Government of Sikkim*



#### (iv) Claiming agency

Even if the state has facilitated ethnic politics by providing an overarching framework and institutional support, control over the cultural aspects of ethnicity and its usage resides in these ethnic associations which exert great control in bestowing recognition to some cultural elements over others and thus promoting their own approved form of ethnic identity. For example, the Rai ethnic group has over twenty-three different dialects out of which Bantawa was chosen as the official language by the Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh (AKRS) in 1996 and a script was developed by 1998.<sup>221</sup> Bantawa is taught in all government schools and books, magazines are also published in this language. On 15<sup>th</sup> July 2012, the AKRS started a language school in east Sikkim with the aim of promoting the Bantawa amongst its Rai members.<sup>222</sup> In another instance, on 18 July, 2012 the Sikkim Tamang Buddhist Association organised an International Tamang language and literature seminar where the members of the association refused the addition of new words from Tibetan grammar in the *Tamyang* (Tamang dialect) but on the other hand, a total of 490 new Tamang words were listed that came up in the process of text book writing (Sikkim Express, 2012).<sup>223</sup> This therefore exemplifies the control exerted by ethnic associations over legitimate markers of ethnicity. Thus experiencing Rai-ness or Limboo-ness and understanding cultural items and their significance is controlled by ethnic associations, who with their ‘grass-root/village’ connections are considered the source of cultural authenticity. Ironically, these very ‘grass-root/village’ connections are reduced to mere recipients of the decisions taken by the ethnic associations which are based in urban areas.

For example, the Bhujel Association which was formed in 1995 represents a total of 3500 people and unlike the Limboo Association which was formed in 1972, they are in their ‘exploratory phase’. It is only very recently that they have been able to compile details about

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<sup>221</sup> Like the Limboos, the Rai ethnic group is also based on an oral transmission of knowledge and therefore lack any previously known script. The AKRS therefore adopted a script which had been derived from the Kirat script, and is very similar to the Limboo script (Rai, 2008:48).

<sup>222</sup> Source: Northeast Today

<http://www.northeasttoday.in/our-states/sikkim/class-for-learning-rai-language-begins-in-sikkim/> (Accessed 23/07/2012).

<sup>223</sup> Source: Sikkim Express, 18/08/2012

[http://www.sikkimexpress.com/archives/19%20July/page\\_2.jpg](http://www.sikkimexpress.com/archives/19%20July/page_2.jpg) (Accessed 23/07/2012).

their language and culture.<sup>224</sup> Likewise, the Mukhia Association represents a tiny fraction of the population (1200 persons), the majority of who live in rural areas and attribute the formation of their association to the government of Sikkim. As Bhim Mukhia<sup>225</sup> explains, ‘most of the people in the villages are very poor or are agriculturists, they cannot run an organisation and thus we have to take the responsibility.’ However with the onus of responsibility also comes that of expectations, a point reiterated by Deepak Bhujel (Gangtok, 2010), ‘we have handed over some responsibilities to our rural counter-parts but without us they cannot do it. They are down trodden, engaged in hand to mouth existence and they constantly expect the association to help them get jobs.’ This expectation from an ethnic kin was also related by Bhim Kancha (Hee Gaon, 2010) who narrated how a Subba bureaucrat from his village had helped ethnic members (*afno manchay*) from his village get government jobs.<sup>226</sup> Thus in a system which favours either the rich or the politically connected, it is ethnicity that has become one of the essential means to ensure the socio-economic aspirations of the common man and woman, to whom the benefits of the welfare state does not trickle down. Once again, this highlights the increasing association of ethnicity with material benefits but within the framework approved by the state.

Emergence of ethnic politics can be understood against the background of two different trajectories of development; increasing relative poverty and the growth of the affluent class, standard of living, especially in the capital Gangtok. Thus in an environment where political connections and money are the pre-requisites to be participants in the welfare state that Sikkim claims to be, the creation of socio-economic categories and the concomitant rise of ethnic associations enable an alternate, albeit flawed attempt at negotiation with the state which has only worked to benefit a small section of the total population.

Apart from political patronage which blocked access to public goods, most of the respondents had not heard or were unsure of their rights and benefits that came with the categories that they belonged to. They had heard of the schemes but were not sure of what these schemes were for sure or how they could avail it. Understanding ethnic culture and the

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<sup>224</sup> Member of the Akhil Bharat Bhujel Sangh (All India Bhujel Association), interviewed by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2011.

<sup>225</sup> Executive member of the Mukhia Association, Sikkim. Interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> December, 2010, Gangtok, Sikkim.

<sup>226</sup> Limboo agriculturist interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, Hee Gaon, west Sikkim.

concomitant benefits has thus become restrictive as it is now dependent upon education as well as the exposure and the opportunity to use it. While questions of quotas baffled older men and women, Dawa Tamang<sup>227</sup> a fifteen year old boy attending Soreng High School (West Sikkim) was more aware of Tamang culture (as promoted by the association) and the benefits of being an ST. Speaking almost non-stop, Dawa elaborated on his knowledge, 'I first became aware of our dress at the *Adivesan* (General Convention) where I saw all the important people wearing the dress. I don't have one but I know what it looks like and I borrowed one to wear during *Bhasa Diwas* (Language Day) celebrations in school.... I also learnt in school about the scholarships that we as ST have. As soon as the teachers hear from the Department, they let us know. I know that there is a 'Golden Scholarship' also and we need to show our marks, our domicile, income certificate etc to get it.' Education therefore has become central in understanding as well as using the benefits given by the system. Thus when asked if people at the grass root understand the benefits of belonging to a certain category, Shweta Rai <sup>228</sup> herself a Panchayat member believes that even if one person from the family is educated they would be able to benefit from the system.

Attainment of ST status has however not altered the economic status of the people. However this once again comes with a caveat as class plays a very important role, '*class lay kasailai choday ko chaina* (class has spared no one)<sup>229</sup> and thus it is usually those who are already at a better position than those in the rural areas who are more able to reap the benefits of the system. When asked about the benefits of being a Scheduled Tribe, Arjun Tashi, an executive member of the Tamang Association in Soreng<sup>230</sup> responded, 'Whatever benefits they must be getting, it must be in Gangtok, we have heard you get this and that, low interest rates on your loans but we have not looked into it'. Illiterate or those living in the rural areas, removed from education and activities of the ethnic associations are thus unable to participate in this ethnic revival as they cannot contribute to the process of cultural production nor can they take advantage of the benefits. Despite these experiences, ethnic politics has become the norm and probably the only means of accessing the state in Sikkim. This process is based largely on the framework of

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<sup>227</sup> Interviewed by the author on 18<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>228</sup> Interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>229</sup> Retired Head Master of a local school interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>230</sup> Interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> Novmeber, 2010, West Sikkim.

redistributive politics that has been established by the state and ethnic associations (which are also supported by the state) are its primary agents. The state as well as ethnic groups themselves have recognized the value of ethnicity as a political resource that can be used as a negotiating tool. This in turn has informed and shaped the cultural imaginings and political demands of ethnic groups, thereby leading to an assertion of identity that is different from that in Nepal or Darjeeling.

**(v) *Culture for culture's sake***

As discussed in an earlier section of this chapter, wholly instrumental motives cannot present a holistic picture of ethnic politics in Sikkim. Interaction with different communities in the hills of western Sikkim as well as with other respondents revealed a feeling of cultural erosion amongst them. Whilst discussing traditional Limboo dance, Shyam Limboo<sup>231</sup> shared his sense of cultural loss:

Q: Do people still perform the *Dhan Nach*?<sup>232</sup>R: People in my generation might know but the young ones don't. *Dherai harayo*/ it has disappeared to a large extent but if we are forced we can get old people to come and dance.

Q: Don't the young ones want to learn how to dance?

R: When they need to show in some cultural programmes or somewhere, they learn for two three days and they dance. It is not like the olden days, there is no time these days. We used to dance at almost every given any occasion but that system is not there anymore.

Q: So did you also dance?

R: Yes, I even travelled to the other side of the hill to dance but now that *zamana* /age, time is gone. These days they say disco, even in weddings they play this music and dance. There is no chance of performing the *dhan-naach*.

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<sup>231</sup> Limboo agriculturist, also worked part-time as a manual labourer, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> November, 2010.

<sup>232</sup> *Dhan Naach* is a form of dance that is performed by both male and female Limbus usually during harvest time (as the name suggests) but is also performed during other festivals and inpromptu at fairs or gatherings.



This interaction helps us understand that the ongoing sub-ethnic cultural revivalism in Sikkim functions on two, seemingly inter-related levels. While on one level it may serve the purpose of securing reservations and benefits for the ethnic elites, on another level and for the majority of those living in rural areas, unable to access the benefits of affirmative, it fulfils the cultural vacuum created by a domineering, homogenous Nepali identity which stifled other sub-ethnic identities. Thus, for people like Shyam Limboo, the revival of *Dhan Naach* albeit performed on stage is still a welcome change than the prospect of it being completely extinct. Raj Rai (Chumbung, 2010) views this cultural revival as a much needed and positive development for the Rai community. ‘We did not celebrate the Rai festival *Sakewa* before; it is *only after the present government* came into power that we have started celebrating it. In this the Akhil Kirat Rai Sangh (AKRS) has played an important role as they have increased the *jan chetna* (public awareness) amongst the Rai community and has been successful in making *Sakewa* not a cultural festival but also as an exhibition of our *jatiyeta* (community) and thereby bringing all our people together.’ Bhim Kancha (Hee Gaon, 2010) whilst emphasizing the role of the village community in building a *samuhik manghim* (communal Limboo temple) also appreciates the efforts of the government, ‘at least the government has built a big *Manghim* in Martam and we are able to celebrate our festival *Chasok Tongnam*. The festival has been declared a state holiday and to be able to celebrate it is a matter of *garv/pride*.’ Very soon Hee Gaon will also be on the tourist/pilgrimage trail as the government has already started construction of a mega statue of one of the most revered Limboo educationist and philosopher Te-Ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe.<sup>233</sup>

Declaration of ethnic festivals as state holidays is considered as a sign of importance and prestige amongst the various ethnic groups. While the festivals of larger ethnic groups like the Rai, Limboo, Gurung, Newars etc have been declared as State holidays,<sup>234</sup> smaller

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<sup>233</sup> Te-Ongsi Sirijunga Xin Thebe was a Limboo linguist from Limbuwan who spread the Limboo language and script amongst the Limboos of Sikkim and Nepal. According to local Limboo legends, his mission was considered dangerous by the Tibetan authority in Sikkim and was killed in 1741 at Martam, West Sikkim. Te-Ongsi/Teyongsi in Limboo means reincarnation and he is considered as the reincarnation of the Sirijonga, the Limboo king of Limbuwan (Gurung, 2011:128).

<sup>234</sup> Apart from National holidays declared by the Central Government and other previously declared state holidays (like Dasain, Diwali, Losar) Sikkim’s list of holidays extends to include new festivals like the Newar festival of *Indrajatra*, Limbu festival of *Teyongsi Sirijunga Sawan Tongnam*, the Magar festival of *Barahimzong* and *Tamu Lochar*, the festival of the Tamang ethnic group (Source: Almanac of Sikkim published by Sikkim Government, 2013).

associations are yet to have their festivals declared as State holidays. This has led to not only the celebration of different festivals but also the (re)discovery of new ones. Here again, while cultural revivalism might fill in the traditional vacuum the role of the state is well recognized and lauded by even those who have not received any tangible benefits as such. Thus the state might work to preserve ethnic culture and tradition, it simulatenously also links them to ethnic politics by catering to their cultural needs and thereby increasing its positive image.

In this context the cultural connection with Nepal is highly important as most ethnic groups either bring cultural performers and shamans from Nepal to show and teach ethnic members in Sikkim or the ethnic elites themselves travel to Nepal in order to establish connections with their cultural counterpart in Nepal<sup>235</sup> (Mukhia and Bhujel Associations, Gangtok 2010). Since the government provides a framework around which various groups have to define themselves (clothes, religion and rituals, food and kinship patterns), this has led to the essentialisation of culture, a process which has ironically restricted access and understanding of ethnic culture of those at the grassroots. Interaction with cultural elites in Gangtok usually revealed that various cultural aspects were unknown to even the ethnic elites of smaller associations. In the rural areas on the other hand, conversation on specific ethnic cultures and traditions in Limboo, Rai and Tamang villages (larger, well established groups) drew some hesitation and long silences. This can be attributed to the generations of inter-mixing of cultures in the hills and the erosion of cultural traits especially of those groups who had migrated from neighbouring regions, thereby making pure, unadulterated cultural practices impossible. Interacting with Raj Rai (Chumbung, 2010) showed that there was a lack of knowledge regarding cultural features even amongst the older generation:

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<sup>235</sup> Member of the Mukhia Association, Sikkim, interviewed by the author on 13<sup>th</sup> Dec, 2010, Gangtok, Sikkim. This point was also reiterated by a member of the Bhujel Association, interviewed by the author on 10<sup>th</sup> November, 2010.

Q: What is the Rai dress called?

R: We don't know..*chaubandi* maybe...it is modified *fariya*...I don't know what it is called because of the *sari* which is worn these days. In the earlier days it was only *fariya* and *chaubandi*. Because of lack of awareness we don't know.<sup>236</sup>

When the same question was asked to Hangu Bahadur Tamang (Singling, 2010) - 'I have seen the dress but it has come out only recently. In the olden days it was only *daura-suruwal*. The association has brought out the dress but I don't have the dress. I have the Tamang *topi* (hat) though.' Birmati Tamang (Singling, 2010) had never seen the Tamang dress till very recently much akin to Raj Rai (Chumbung, 2010)- the first time he had seen the Rai dress was at the Namchi Mahautsav,<sup>237</sup> which he feels is a very positive initiative on the part of the state, 'Government is trying to preserve culture and these exhibitions are very good because it keeps our culture (*jeudo-jaagdo*) alive. We must have our own identity. I had never worn it myself as it is not used daily but I came to know of the dress during the Mahautsav.'

*Learning to be Limboo: exhibits at the Limboo stall, Namchi Mahautsav*



<sup>236</sup> Interviewed by the author on 12<sup>th</sup> November, 2010, West Sikkim.

<sup>237</sup> A state sponsored cultural extravaganza held at Namchi in South Sikkim. This event is held across three days with the aim of showcasing the ethnic diversity of Sikkim (or at least the material aspects of it).

Nonetheless, *matwali* ethnic elites have been criticised by the upper caste Chhetri-Bahun community members for splitting the Nepali community as now it is only these two groups which are considered as Nepalis in Sikkim. This is quite ironic given that the book ‘Khasas of Sikkim’ (Kharel and Basnett, 2008) published by *Akhil Sikkim Chhetri Bahun Kalyan Sangh* (All Sikkim Chhetri Bahun Welfare Association) describe the Khas as members of a different tribe consisting of two caste groups- the Bahun and Chhetris belonging to the higher caste while other caste groups like Damai, Sarki, Kami, Majhi belonging to the lower caste. Thus, by re-defining their caste identity and controlling the membership to the group, fragmentation is as much an internal process that has been brought about by the very same ethnic groups that are resisting it externally. However interaction with one of the leading ethnic elites<sup>238</sup> in Gangtok shed some light on their approach towards ethnic politics:

Q: Do you sense that there is a fragmentation of the Nepali community?

R: I don't think there is a fragmentation as such. I run an association called the Association of Ethnic Communities. We have all these meetings. Why? Because everybody is interested in their culture and tradition....Other intellectuals also asked me whether we are going fifty years back, in the twenty-first century we are talking about *chulo-dhungo*/ stone hearth and other rituals but this is cultural revival. This cultural revival has led to interest in culture and brought about unification (of different ethnic members) which we never had, we never had an association of ethnic communities before.

Although material benefits of these categories are mostly utilised by those who have money and political connection, it however does provide some respite to the ordinary man. Although they might be mere recipients of ethnic culture and its symbols handed down to them from Gangtok but ethnic revivalism nonetheless finds support because it restores a sense of lost tradition, which is inevitably linked to identity, individual as well as communal. Whether fragmentation, revival or both, the assertion of ethnic identity has had a serious repercussion on the social and political realm of the Sikkimese-Nepali. As different groups rise to claim their tribal status, the nuances and expression of ethnic identity will get further refined resulting in further institutionalization of ethnic categories as political categories.

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<sup>238</sup> Interviewed by the author on 28<sup>th</sup> January, 2011, Gangtok, Sikkim.

## *Conclusion*

In Sikkim ethnic identity has become the primary means through which to access the state and its resources. The Nepali ethnic identity is under re-construction in response to the changing political environment as well as demands of the people. The origin of the Nepali ethnic group lies in the political exigencies of a particular period in its history and hence, this contemporary reconstruction of the group can be understood as another attempt to mould itself in accordance to the needs of history. However, in the Sikkimese context this development has been facilitated by the state through the institutionalisation of dependency on it and creating very narrow modes of access. This in turn has led to the emphasis on harnessing the potential of ethnicity as a political resource in order to partake in the re-distribution of desired goods and services.

The centrality of ethnic groups as dependable political bases also highlights an important aspect of state formation in the Himalayas. Highlighting Migdal's 'state in society' approach, Sikkim presents an ideal representation of the importance of ethnicity for the sustenance of the state and the existing socio-political order. In this process, the state provides different incentives and motivations to the people to engage in ethnic politics, thereby changing the nature of the society overall. The emergence of ethnic association or the shift of demand from cultural to political rights highlights the unabated revival of ethnic cultures. However, whether it be initiated by the state or ethnic associations themselves, access and control over resources is seen as fundamental to the continued existence of culture.

However the Sikkim case study also confirms that ethnic politics or the reasons why an ethnic group chooses the political assertion of one identity over another cannot be understood by focussing solely on the ethnic group in question. Ethnic groups in Sikkim are situated in a system which promotes dependency on the state. Rise in population and increasing cost of living with a lack of revenue generation avenues thus necessitates the turn towards ethnicity, the form and content of which is endorsed by the state and supported by the people who partake in it. Nonetheless, as discussed in the case study, the revival and celebration of ethnic culture is also welcomed for its transcendental benefits especially in an increasingly 'Indian-izing' environment through media as well as personal experiences in different parts of the country.

In Sikkim there is no single image or a cultural reference that can now be used to distinguish the Nepalis from the other ethnic groups like Bhutia or Lepchas. Thus, in contrast

to Darjeeling, where cultural attributes have been utilised to create a single, homogenous identity, what is visible in Sikkim is the contrary. The Nepalis in Sikkim, unlike former times where there was a recognizable set of cultural markers as well a set of identifiable political aims, have chosen to emphasize different ethnic attributes thereby contributing to the variation in the political articulation of ethnicity in the eastern Himalaya. Once again, like the two cases of Darjeeling and Nepal, the Sikkim case study contributes to the overall aim of the thesis which is to highlight the important matrix of politics, economy as well as social norms and perceptions that have gone to re-mould the Nepalis as Gorkhas, Adivasi/Janajati or Scheduled Tribe and to situate their grievances, insecurities in a contemporary and relevant context. The Sikkim case study highlights the use of ethnicity as a political resource both by the state as well as the ethnic groups themselves. The case study also displays how over-arching structures that are supported by the state not only facilitate ethnic politics but also dictate its form to a certain extent. Thus, in keeping with the main theoretical and structural framework of the thesis, the Sikkim case study illustrates that not only is ethnicity a valued political resource but the form that this political process can and does take varies according to the structures (political, economic and social) around it.

### Part 3: Understanding and Analysing Ethnic politics

#### Chapter 6: Analysis of the case studies

Significant variation exists in the cultural and political articulation of the Nepali identity in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. This varies from differences in political actors and their engagement with the surrounding socio-political environment (in the three contexts) as well as on the account of different motivating factors which are a result of their *habitus*. The aim of this chapter is thus to consolidate, compare and analyse the various factors that bring about this diversity in ethnic politics. These differences also enable a comprehensive explanation of the following research questions:

1. Under what conditions does an ethnic identity influence the political choice of groups and individuals?
2. Why do these groups choose specific ethnic identities over other forms of identification and representation?

This chapter seeks to analyse certain crucial, common aspects that emerge from the case studies which influence and encourage not only the assertion of ethnic identity from an array of other identities like class, gender but also a specific version of it in the place of the meta Nepali identity. In this section I contend that the primary factor that affects this is a sense of ‘incentive’ and ‘dis-incentive’ which is attached to one identity over another. Political efficacy in granting better access to the resources controlled by the state emerges as one of the most important factor in guiding ethnic politics. While the instrumental factor is evident in all the three cases it is the ‘incentive’ or ‘dis-incentive’ structure established by the state that ultimately determines identity construction in the region, thereby highlighting the socially constructed nature of the Nepali ethnic group.

All three cases are located in developing, democratic countries where the elected government, its bureaucratic mechanism and other extensions play an important role in determining the life chances of those who live within its territorial boundaries. However, in spite of the apparent similarities in geography, historical and cultural connections, the cases also present different factors that have promoted a variation in the articulation of ethnic politics as well as the attempt to establish new patronage links in order to access the resources held or controlled by the state.

For example, the role of the state is of vital importance in all three cases but the Sikkim case study highlights the immense involvement and capacity for social engineering that the Sikkimese state indulges in thereby facilitating ethnic politics in the state. On the other hand, politics revolving around the Gorkha identity highlights the impact of political and economic structures in which the Nepalis of Darjeeling District are located. Analysis of the Gorkha identity therefore reveals the role played by economic structures, both historical as well as contemporary, in the sustenance and manifestation of ethnic grievances while the case of Limbu politics in east Nepal shows the significance of certain moments, political opportunities and the change in external structures that facilitate ethnic politics. Ethnic identity is therefore seen as instrumental in the attainment of socio-economic goals for the Nepalis. The form and content of this ethnic identity is however determined by the incentive or dis-incentive structures that have been institutionalised by the state and thus, the flexibility of the Nepali ethnic group reveals that it is socially constructed in accordance to the needs of the ethnic groups in a particular period in time.

This chapter is divided into two sections. **Section One** discusses the importance and entrenchment of the state as well as the influence it can have on the articulation of socio-economic grievances. It also establishes how practices of bureaucratic and political clientalism have been institutionalized as a part of the state thereby reducing access to the state and its resources. In an ironic situation, the expansion of state activities has made the state more exclusive thereby restricting access to those who are not party to the new patronage system. In this situation ethnicity has emerged as an obvious resource which can be utilised to access and negotiate with the system. Thus while the tradition of expectations and rewards remain unchanged, it is only the actors and the environments in which they act that have changed. While Section One discusses the structures that have normalised ethnic politics, **Section Two** uses examples from the cases to extend the argument and seek out particular factors that have led to the use and variation in use of ethnicity as a political identity. This section isolates four different factors that influence the choice of groups and individuals to engage in identity politics as well as the particular form that it might take. The four factors are:

1. Ideological framework guiding state-ethnic relations
2. Political Opportunity Structure (POS)
3. Elites and Grievances
4. Framing and Participation



These factors however can only be utilised with a caveat. Although all four factors are important, they might not be present in all three cases in equal measure and a particular factor might be more prominent in one case than in another.

## Section One

### 6.1 State and Ethnic Grievances

#### (i) *The Developmental State*

The state is not an invisible, mysterious entity orchestrating the lives of its citizens from an abstract space. Rather, through its official representatives and policies it becomes a lived experience thereby lending dynamism to the study of its relation with other aspects of the society. States do not exist in isolation either but are embedded in international and regional socio-political systems which play a key role in the re-drawing of multiple lines between the state and its environment in accordance with the challenges that it faces (Jessop, 2007:7). In his seminal article, *Politics as a vocation*, Max Weber (1948: 77-78) described the state as an interpersonal relation between men,

‘the state is a human community that successfully claims to the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force as normal within a given territory...politics means striving to influence the distribution of power, either amongst the states or among groups within a state... Thus the state is a relation of men dominating men, a relation supported by the means of legitimating violence. If the state is to exist, the dominated must obey the authority claimed by the powers that be’.

This description of the state not only gives it a rather subjective character but also situates it in the centre of power relations between groups and individuals. Thus, the power to manoeuvre between different groups is the power of the state. It derives its power from the functions that it provides for the people and it is from this functionality that the state derives the potential to exploit (Mann, 2003: 120). Although different states might be similar in their functions (re-distribution of goods and services, security, infrastructure) they can take numerous forms. From a structural-functional perspective, states can be distinguished between ‘open’ and ‘closed’ on the basis of the ease of access to the political system i.e depending on the possibility of access to formal institutions like the legislature, bureaucracy, judiciary. This is however contingent on the function of its territorial centralization and the degree of separation of powers between the formal institutions (Kitschelt, 1986:58).

The conventional understanding of development or mainstream development has typically meant a strengthening of the material base of the state, mainly through industrialization or other business ventures. This implies that development can be equated with modernization which has a deterministic base (Hettne, 1993:128). The three case studies therefore show different aspects of the developmental state, which has been defined by Leftwich (1995:401) as ‘states whose politics have concentrated sufficient power, autonomy and capacity at the centre to shape, pursue and encourage the achievement of explicit developmental objectives whether by establishing and promoting the conditions and directions of economic growth or by organising it directly, or a varying combination of both.’ He further makes the valid point that the developmental state must be understood politically as developmental plans, institutions may be calculated to achieve the maximum wellbeing of the citizens but their objectives are usually political. This means that institutions may be regulated by rules, structure and formal interaction but they are filled with people whose ambitions, norms, behaviour and expectations have a serious impact on the potential of both the developmental projects of the state and the political longevity of political institutions. Fundamentally, political actors ranging from political parties to members of the civil society have always influenced the shape, thrust and pace of development, with political objectives (viz. maintaining vote banks, securing legitimacy) usually prevailing over rational, economic decisions. For example, grants and concessions given to the newly formed GTA by the West Bengal government is simply a political investment rather than an economic one in order to maintain peace and douse demands for separation.<sup>239</sup>

Some of these processes are inherent in ‘modern development’ and adaptation is the rational response (Hettne 1993: 131). This can be observed in the three cases where not only has the state widened its developmental and social welfare agenda but at the same time it has played a crucial role in the politicization of ethnic groups by making concessions and creating favourable conditions for a particular group to predominate over another or by making some cultural feature more valuable than others.

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<sup>239</sup> In 2011, immediately after Trinamool Congress’s historic victory in the West Bengal General Election, Mamata Banarjee, the new CM paid a visit to Darjeeling to quell the demands for Gorkhaland. While doling out a large economic relief package she said, ‘Darjeeling problem has been solved... only development is my magic formula. I believe in carrying out development work everywhere and I have promised the GJM leaders that our government will leave no stone unturned to develop the hills’.

Source: The Economic Times

[http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-06-07/news/29629923\\_1\\_darjeeling-issue-darjeeling-problem-gorkhaland](http://articles.economictimes.indiatimes.com/2011-06-07/news/29629923_1_darjeeling-issue-darjeeling-problem-gorkhaland) (Accessed: 04/12/12).

Through the public re-distribution system, its commitment to the safety and welfare of its citizens, provision of infrastructure and development, the state plays an influential role in the lives of its citizens. As the prime distributor of economic and political benefits, the state can effectively create and manipulate insecurities and the power structure of the society. This also implies that in spite of cultural or historical similarities, the state building experience of every state will vary based on the redistribution strategies that it employs in accordance to the ethnic heterogeneity of the population (Brown, 1994). While there might be structural impediments that obstruct access to the state, the prevailing norms of behavior between people and the state plays a crucial role in framing expectations and approaches towards the state. In their description of the social systems in South Asia, especially in Hindu kingdoms, Phadnis and Ganguly (1989:61) remark, 'Broadly stated, the unifying factor of such an order was *its hierarchically structured social system along a moral code explicating mutual obligations* and at the same time preserving plural identities therein. In due course, such pluralities did acquire their specificities and distinctness in various regions but without subverting the core of the social system (emphasis mine)'. Thus, elaborate systems of hierarchy and patronage have informed and constructed the worldview and everyday understandings of relations with those holding power and authority.

Under modern democratic systems these relations have taken new forms and while the patrons might have changed, the clients remain the same certainly in the context of the three cases, whether they be the tea garden workers in Darjeeling, the Limbu agriculturist in east Nepal or the Gurung civil servant in Sikkim. Although traditional patrons still hold relevance in different fields, under the welfare regime the state is the new patron before whom everyone is a client and their position vis-a-vis the state has remained unaltered. In all the three cases the modern state has been founded on a relation of historical inequality between different groups of people who were distinguished not only on the basis of ethnic differences but also on their access to material wealth. This inequality, whether it originated in the feudal relations in Sikkim and Nepal or in the exploitative colonial capitalism in Darjeeling, has been deeply internalized by all sections of the society, Nepalis as well as others. This has led to the

institutionalization of historical inequalities and anxieties that have now gone to form the *macro-habitus*, which in turn are the bases of political movements.<sup>240</sup>

Extensive fieldwork in the three areas helped me understand that ethnic politics cannot be understood only by analyzing the activities (or inactivity) of the state in relation to ethnic grievances, rather a holistic analysis has to acknowledge the interaction between different 'fields'. While the prominence of the 'political field' had not diminished, its boundaries had nonetheless been trespassed by the 'cultural field' in all three cases, which could be attributed to the importance of the emergence of a new set of political actors who had previously only belonged to the field of cultural reproduction. As discussed in the case studies, politics in the three areas needed to be legitimized by social actors who could authenticate and justify demands for cultural preservation, recognition, development and assistance by the state. Thus as ethnic politics becomes more dependent on material culture and symbolism, the need for political actors with social recognition within particular ethnic groups will increase, thereby highlighting a greater transference of social capital to economic and political capital. However, the increasing interaction of politics and culture has led to a higher social position of those individuals who hold important roles in the cultural field.

Choices and motivations to act are deeply determined by the *habitus* or dispositions, which are the product of the social environment in which an ethnic group is located along with the influence of the wider, external political and economic structures around them. Thus, a broad over-view of state-ethnic relations in the three cases reveals two different trends. While a positive, symbiotic relation of mutual dependency exists between ethnic groups and the state in Sikkim, which channels ethnic issues/problems into packaged, pre-formulated solutions, a contrasting, uneasy and mostly antagonistic relation exists between the state and different ethnic groups in Nepal and Darjeeling. The nature of this relationship has an important impact on the way ethnicity is understood and expressed in public forums. This relationship not only defines the perceptions and expectations of all the actors involved but in the case of the eastern Himalayas, it even provides a fertile ground for the growth of identity based politics.

At the risk of supposing that individuals and groups can choose which identity to make meaningful and that ethnic identities are thus a representation of these choices, this thesis makes two contentions. First, the choice of ethnicity as a political identity might be driven

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<sup>240</sup> I use the word 'movements' with caution here as all three cases are not equally representative of political movements which are generally understood as collective action with a specific purpose. While Darjeeling and Nepal do highlight these aspects quite prominently, it is rather diffused in Sikkim.

primarily by instrumental motives but non-instrumental, emotive motives may also be an important factor in the choice of a political identity. Second, these choices are rather a combination of numerous instrumental and impulsive factors, the boundaries of which are liminal and therefore intersecting. Thus, norms of political behaviour, the role of contacts and networks, what people expect to gain from engagement in politics, all these elements constitute the micro-foundations of political culture and set limits to what is achievable and types of developmental efforts can be planned and implemented (Rudd, 1999:237).

Legitimacy is an important aspect of popular democracy which the state has to ensure in order to retain power as well as prevent social conflict. For example, plans to construct a hydro-power station in Rathong Chu in north Sikkim, one of the most sacred sites in Sikkim, was challenged by religious bodies in Sikkim, thereby leading to its withdrawal in a bid to maintain socio-political harmony and the legitimacy of the ruling government (Arora, 2006:74). However, legitimacy can be contested and as the cases of Darjeeling and east Nepal highlight, historical experiences of discrimination or disparity are used to frame contemporary grievances. Poverty and socio-political backwardness are a legacy of the subservience and discrimination meted out to a particular ethnic group by the ruling strata of the society- whether they be the colonisers in Darjeeling or the Rana Prime Ministers in Nepal and it is this subservient position that is being challenged by ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya.

However, realignments of the economy from either subsistence to commercial or from agricultural to industrial or service based also have an impact on access to social, political and economic institutions which in turn affects the way different groups interact with the state as well as with each other. Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal are all undergoing development (in terms of infrastructure, rise in living standard) at different speeds. Sikkim is inundated with hydro-electric projects and generous financial aid from the central government which has led to manifold increase in the standard of living, consumerism and inflation. Darjeeling which is adjacent to Sikkim is undergoing grave socio-economic problems owing to the neo-colonial practices of not only the tea companies but the state itself (exhibited through the lack of investment in infrastructure or human resources) thereby encouraging a sense of relative deprivation. Thus in both Darjeeling and Sikkim pressure, responsibility and power are centralized in the state. Nepal, one of the poorest nations in the world, is emerging from a decade long insurgency which not only ravaged its feeble economy but also handicapped the (negligible) development efforts of the state. Although the state is dependent on donor aid for the majority of its developmental programmes, non-state actors have not been able to eclipse the role of the state. Dependency and expectations for equitable distribution of resources,

especially for non-tangible goods like reservations, equal opportunities, legal rights, national recognition cannot be ignored as they can only be ordained by the state. Although the, ‘unrealistically optimistic expectations that characterizes the state as an agent of change and development’ (Evans, 1992: 141) might have subsided owing to the deficiencies and failure of state-led projects as well as the inclusion of non-state actors, whether it be the overpowering presence of the state in Sikkim or the stark absence of it in Darjeeling and East Nepal, the primacy of the state in the lives of its citizens cannot be underestimated.

***(ii) Bureaucratic and political clientalism***

It is these relations of expectations and delivery in the developmental state discussed above that have opened up spaces for political clientalism, defined by Lemarchand and Legg (1972:151) as ‘a more or less personalised, affective and reciprocal relationship between a set of actors commanding unequal relationships and mutually beneficial transactions. The greater the volume of transactions, the greater the diversity of political resources handled through clientalism’. Powell in (Lemarchand and Legg, 1972:155) describes clientalism as the ‘rural problem solving system’, a mechanism through which rural societies adapt themselves to socio-political change and traditional patterns of behaviour. Governments directly intervene in the ethnic struggle by the way they distribute public works, education, employment and patronage. The influence of this new set of patrons is exemplified by an example given by one of the respondents from east Nepal who considers political elites as more influential than traditional elites (landowners, lineage elders). Bishal Limbu,<sup>241</sup> a youth member of one of the Limbu regional parties in east Nepal, knew that subscribing to a political party was more useful than paying homage to the traditional patrons (like landlords or village heads) who were not ‘politically connected’ and therefore less useful in the event he ran into trouble with the police or needed help with the local administration which is dominated by members of the upper caste group. This is similar to the situation in Darjeeling where the local residents are poorly represented in the state bureaucracy and thus have to resort to political patronage or the support of the local party member to endorse their demands. This is particularly so in the tea gardens where there is a proliferation of trade unions which are linked to local as well as national parties. Their success lies in their ability to exert pressure in the form of strikes in the hills or through political lobbying. In Sikkim political domination by the Sikkim Democratic Front has

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<sup>241</sup> Bishal Limbu was one of the key respondents during fieldwork and this comment emerged during one of our conversations in Ilam.

built a culture of political loyalty towards it. If in essence everyone is a party supporter then seeking patronage of just the party leaders become insufficient. Thus, while political patronage is of vital importance, single party domination has somehow nullified its effect, leading people to seek patronage of government officers and bureaucrats. Those without the patronage of the local MLA or a well-placed officer have their chances of attaining government employment or other subsidies from the government greatly reduced.

Thus, patronage (through political, economic or moral support and closely associated with corruption) is one of the forms of everyday politics which has been normalized and accepted. While the modern state, following Weber, can be described as 'legal-rational' (political executive, permanent and professional structures to implement policies) the ethos of the ruling, modernizing elite dominating the political settlement may be more feudal than modern (Whaites, 2008: 5). The role played by the state and the wider-political economy therefore enables a generalisation of the ways in which people attempt to navigate the new economic and political structures, leading to the rapid development of two, often complementary phenomena- bureaucratic clientalism and party patronage.

One of the most important extensions of the state is its bureaucracy through which the efficiency of a state can be monitored and measured to a certain extent. This aids in the formation of attitudes and perceptions towards it and therefore the modes that ethnic groups choose to negotiate with. Weber (1948:224,228) bestows great importance upon bureaucracy in the efficient functioning of the state. He writes,

'Bureaucracy inevitably accompanies modern mass democracy in contrast to self-government of homogenous units. This results from the characteristic principle of bureaucracy, the abstract regularity of the execution of authority. The process of bureaucratization in the state administration itself is a parallel phenomenon of democracy. The *demos* itself, in the sense of an inarticulate mass never governs larger associations but is rather governed and its existence only changes the way in which the executive leaders are selected and the measures of influence the *demos* or members from its midst are able to exert upon the content and direction of the administrative activities by supplementing what is called "public opinion". Thus, democratization does not necessarily mean an increasingly active share of the governed in the authority of the social structure. This may be a result of democratization, but it is not necessarily the case. Bureaucracy is the means of carrying 'community action' over into rationally ordered "social action". Therefore as an instrument of societalizing relations of power, bureaucracy has been and is a power instrument for the one who controls the bureaucratic apparatus.'

Thus in a situation where the state is at the center of all policies and negotiations influencing the life chances of those living within a particular demarcated territory and its bureaucracy is its most important extension, then not only are executive members (who are also usually elected representatives) but also the bureaucrats themselves who can be seen as wielding influence and power in society. Thus, bureaucrats can also be deemed as ‘modernizing brokers’ where the bureaucrat, much like traditional patrons or political bosses, might have clients and constituencies who are the beneficiaries or recipients of public services. This system of bureaucratic ‘connection’ or patronage has become a fundamental impediment in the developmental process, often determining the life chances and opportunities of individuals and groups. Such a system is also known as ‘bureaucratic polity’ a political system in which power and participation in national decisions are limited almost entirely to the employees of the state, particularly the officer corps and the highest level of bureaucracy (Jackson, 1978:3 in Leftwich 1995: 402). All three cases highlight the important role played by the bureaucracy in grant or denying access to the resources controlled by the state and is therefore an important institution that influences identity politics.

Often complementing this system is political patronage (or party patronage). According to Weingrod (1968:383) the importance of party patronage increases with the expansion of the state in the society and as political parties themselves become more linked with state structures. Greater involvement with states structures is important because it is only with the capture of the state that the political parties will be able to deliver on their electoral promises (whilst at the same time being able to recoup their electoral investment through corruption).<sup>242</sup> The expanding developmental state also implies new projects, organizations and other avenues which increase the scope for social as well as economic advancement of individuals and groups, which are often infiltrated by political actors. Explicitly visible in Sikkim, Darjeeling and Nepal, political patronage has a massive influence in controlling the delivery of public goods and services.

Poverty shortens an individual’s time horizon and maximizes the effectiveness of short-run material inducements and thus incentives, material or symbolic, become formidable

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<sup>242</sup> Transparency International’s Corruption Perceptions Index (2011) ranks countries/territories based on how corrupt their public sector is perceived to be. Their country/territory’s score indicates the perceived level of public sector corruption of a scale of 0-10, where 0 means that a country is perceived as highly corrupt and 10 means that a country is perceived as very clean. According to this index, India scored 3.1 and is ranked 95 and Nepal scored 2.2, ranking 154 out of the 182 countries in which it conducted the survey.

Source: Transparency International  
<http://cpi.transparency.org/cpi2011/results/> (Accessed: 09/10/2012).



weapons in building coalitions and/or social engineering (Lemarchand and Legg, 1972: 158). This helps breed 'machine politics' which was a type of political patronage system common in urban American cities in the 1920's but has been effectively used by scholars like James Scott (1969) to study the political practices in developing polities. According to Scott (ibid: 1143) the 'machine' is not the disciplined, ideological party held together by class and common programs that arose in continental Europe, nor a charismatic party. The machine is rather a non-ideological organization interested less in political principle than in securing and holding office for its leaders and distributing income to those who run and work for it. It relies on what it accomplishes in a concrete way for its supporters, not on what it stands for.

This is almost the exact nature of political parties in the eastern Himalaya, where it is difficult to distinguish the agenda of one party from another whose main emphasis is on the capture of power. Even the emergence of regional parties in eastern Nepal, which is a relatively new phenomenon, the multiplicity of ethnic based parties with similar agenda (self-determination, ethnic federalism) makes it hard to distinguish one from the other making explicit its instrumental characteristic. This increases the relevance of the argument that identity politics in the region is more focussed on seeking access rather than the destabilization of the established political system. In machine politics a party emphasizes those inducements which are appropriate to the loyalty pattern among its clientele and responding to its environment, the machine is skilled in both the political distribution of public works through 'pork-barrel' legislation and in the dispensation of jobs and favours through more informal channels (ibid:1147). This is characteristic of ethnic politics in the three cases which highlights that the end of all political mobilization is the control, access or re-distribution of resources. Ethnic politics has also resulted in what is known as 'ethnic branch stacking' which refers to the practice of recruiting people of ethnic background, usually from particular ethnic groups, according to concentrations in the particular electorate and often from groups who are seen as traditional rivals of another factions stackees (Zapalla, 1998: 383) and without which, ethnic politics would not be possible. This is evident in all the three cases where political support and membership has been sought through the evocation of ethnic affiliations, whether it be the Gorkhas, Limbus or as seen in the case of Sikkim, even a particular socio-economic category (like the OBC, ST, MBC).

Political and bureaucratic clientalism has become an important part of the political, social and economic negotiation of groups, especially minority groups at a time where the width and scope of state activities have increased drastically. This developmental thrust is also characterized by decreasing access to it owing to the complex bureaucratic norms or simply

because of people's lack of 'connections'. Even political dissent or the expression of grievances can only be afforded by those who hold some sort of power or 'connections' without which there can be no hope for any fruitful resolution of the problem. This is again complicated by the widespread culture of impunity which is practised on the back of support lent by leading political parties. Impunity on a daily basis, a rampant phenomenon in South Asia, especially in politically unstable border regions, aggravates problems further. Impunity in all its forms has weakened the ability of the masses to engage in any negotiation with the state and expect a satisfactory and fair outcome. The state has become more exclusive, limited to people with either political or bureaucratic connections which debar different groups of people from political participation, as evidenced in the case studies. This has thus prompted the instrumental use of ethnicity as a means to gain access to the system.

Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya is not aimed at destabilizing the institutional structures in place but rather in expanding its participation. In a reversal of roles aptly captured by Melluci (1989:80 in Pieterse and McAllister, 1996:32) it is the ethnic groups and not the state, as a functional administrative machinery, that have become extractive by using cultural rights as their political weapon to redress historical injustices. Past inequalities and grievances thus become an important component in securing rights and privileges for the future. While ethnicity itself can be considered an independent variable, ethnic politics is highly dependent on the approaches to it by the state and other political actors within that political environment. As is visible in Nepal, ethnic demands which were once considered antithetical and detrimental to the integrity and the core unity of a nation-state are now entertained as legitimate demands by the state (Hangen, 2007). The formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988 can also be deemed as recognition of the Gorkha community by the West Bengal government and the establishment of DGHC a conciliatory move. One of the implications of this has been that now not only does the state accept ethnic groups but it also initiates and legitimises ethnic politics by the creation as well as recognition of other groups.<sup>243</sup>

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<sup>243</sup> While this is explicitly visible through the ethnic revivalism in the all the three cases, recognition by the state has also been strongly demanded by the Lepcha ethnic group who are recognized as indigenous to the eastern Himalayan region. The Lepchas of the Darjeeling Hills have been demanding the setting up of the Lepcha Development Council for the protection of their language and culture, adequate representation in the State Assembly and the Parliament and the incorporation of Lepcha language in the schools. This therefore highlights that mere social recognition of ethnic difference and boundaries has no concrete relevance for ethnic groups unless it is validated and supported by the state.

Source: Darjeeling Times

<http://www.darjeelingtimes.com/main-news/entertainment/63-event-a-gossips/4605-lepchas-demand-lepcha-development-council.html>

As this section highlights there is an inverse relation between the increasing importance of the state and access to it. Thus, against this background the case studies show how the engagement of ethnic groups with politics is but an attempt to access that very system, to partake in the distribution of public goods and services and therefore be an active participant rather than passive recipients. The variation in the political articulation of ethnicity of the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya is not simply a result of the geographical location of the Nepalis but rather an amalgamation of numerous factors which will be discussed in detail in the following section.

## ***6.2 External factors facilitating ethnic politics***

### ***(i) Ideological framework guiding state-ethnic relations***

The state plays a central role not only in the determination of an identity but also in the degree of success of a particular ethnic group in achieving its goals. This relationship may seem to be a direct consequence of local/regional factors, but a closer inspection reveals the important role played by international or national discourses. The evolution of ethnic rights and standards has had an impact on the conduct of politics in South Asia. Given the increasing pace of globalization and the interconnectedness of economies and peoples, international organizations like the United Nations Organization can strongly influence the framework around which a country's state-minority relations are organized. By creating incentives and structures it can influence whether an assimilatory or an accommodating<sup>244</sup> model is to be adopted by the state and how ethnic groups can position themselves. The UN draws distinctions between different groups on the basis of their demands which could range from civil rights to equality, and from right of access to resources to self-determination. This functions as an important guideline for states when they formulate their domestic policies. They must concur with international norms but these norms must not conflict with their national agenda (Kymlicka, 2007). South Asian states with their diverse minority groups face complex issues in their definition of minorities as well as the application of legal safeguards for those minorities (Kingsbury, 1998).

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<sup>244</sup> An accommodatist approach entails some form of territorial autonomy combined with official language and customary rights, institutional pluralism and the integrative approach focuses on civil rights and non-discrimination. The former seeks to accommodate diversity through minority-specific institutions, while the latter seeks to integrate all citizens on a non-discriminatory basis into national institutions (Kymlicka, 2007: 1).

India and Nepal present an interesting contrast in the national approaches to minorities and their impact on ethnic groups. Minorities in India are officially classified on the basis of caste, tribal affiliation or religion. The application of the term ‘minority’ does not reflect the numerical status of the group so much as the claim that the groups in question suffer from some disadvantage in comparison to the rest (Bajpai, 2000: 1338). Officially, the concept of indigenous peoples<sup>245</sup> as adopted and used by the UN is seen as inapplicable in India as ‘all its peoples are indigenous’, having emerged from colonialism at the same time. The Indian state thus categorises its ethnic/indigenous minorities as Scheduled Tribes (ST) in order to accommodate and administer specific constitutional privileges, protections and benefits for those considered historically disadvantaged (Bijoy et al, 2010: 14). Thus, in Sikkim and Darjeeling the national discourse on ethnic/indigenous groups follows an integrationist approach. This has institutionalized affirmative action, which thus forms an important part of understanding the rights and benefits attached to an ethnic category, with the ST status being valued over all the other statuses. While pre-independence India had a basic framework of recognising ethnic diversity, in the erstwhile kingdom of Nepal it was only after the restoration of multi-party democracy in 1990-91 that the Nepali state made slight concessions towards different ethnic groups. Ethnic groups identify themselves as ‘Janajati’ which applies to peoples with a distinct language, culture, social structure, oral or written history and horizontally distributed territory in contrast to ‘caste’ groups (Gurung et al 2006: 1). The unitary, centralized state follows an accommodationist approach which has only aggravated socio-economic grievances further. The state as the prime distributor of resources has become the point of appeal for arbitration and appeasement and the labels of Scheduled Tribe (in India) or Adivasi/Janajati (in Nepal)<sup>246</sup> reflect efforts made by the state or the ethnic groups themselves to use ethnicity as a political resource and partake in the redistributive system. Thus, based on national guidelines either of accommodation (as in Nepal) or integration (in

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<sup>245</sup> Although there is no official definition of Indigenous Peoples but according to the UN Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues a modern understanding of the term based on certain key criteria like self-identification at the individual level, historical continuity with pre-colonial or pre-settler societies, strong link to territorial and surrounding natural resources, distinct language, cultures and beliefs, form non-dominant groups of society and resolve to maintain and reproduce their ancestral environments and systems as distinctive peoples and communities (Bijoy et al, 2011).

<sup>246</sup> According to respondents in Nepal Adivasi was understood as meaning indigenous while Janajati broadly meant ethnic groups. Thus in an ethnically demarcated Nepal, a particular ethnic group could be an Adivasi or indigenous in a particular area and a Janajati in another. For example, the Limbus would be Adivasis in the proposed Limbuwan and Janajati in neighbouring Khambuwan.

India), different stakeholders (ethnic associations, political parties, interest groups) mould their agendas and activities around the state.

Relations between the state and ethnic groups in Sikkim can be deemed as positive based on the stark absence of political confrontation between the two, unlike in Darjeeling and east Nepal. In Sikkim multiple ethnic identities have flourished owing to the guidance and resources that have been provided by the state. Not only has the state helped in the establishment of newer ethnic associations, encouraged the development of language and literature but also tolerated, if not encouraged, lobbying with the state for ethnic rights, albeit within a framework accepted by it. The other two cases, however, represent antagonistic relations between the states and ethnic groups, which has led to an assertion of an identity which is either considered illegitimate (viz Gorkha, which is seen as a variation of Nepalese nationalism, threat of the creation of Greater Nepal)<sup>247</sup> or the Limbu identity which is deemed as inferior to the upper caste groups (ritually, which translates to both social and economic status). Systemic ethnic discrimination is one of the most important grievances and therefore the strongest mobilizing factor in both Darjeeling and east Nepal. Whether promoted by the state or against it, the repertoire of contention remains the same but depending on the nature of relation between the state and those contesting against it, the mode of appeal and negotiation also differs, ranging from that of appeasement (of the ethnic groups by the state and vice versa) in Sikkim to that of opposition to the state and its elites (*Parbatiya*, high caste Hindus in Nepal and the Bengalis in Darjeeling) by ethnic groups and their associations. This leads to a variation in the political processes involved in mobilization of ethnic groups as well as the identity that is chosen to be made meaningful in a bid to access resources controlled by the state.

### ***(ii) Political Opportunity Structure***

According to Eisinger (1973:12) the political environment, which is a generic term used to refer to different aspects and elements of formal political structure, imposes certain constraints on or opens avenues for political activity. Thus, the manner in which groups in a political environment behave is not simply a function of the resources that they command but also of the openings, weak spots, barriers and resources of the political system itself. This

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<sup>247</sup> A hypothetical extension of the present boundaries of Nepal to areas which had been briefly occupied by Kingdom of Gorkha in the 17<sup>th</sup> century. See 'Looking for Greater Nepal', Himal South Asian, March 1993 for discussion on the geo-politics of Greater Nepal.

concept, also now known as Political Opportunity Structure (POS), has been defined by Sidney Tarrow (1998:18) as-

‘the consistent-but not necessarily formal, permanent or national-dimensions of the political environment which either encourage or discourage people from using collective action. The concept of political opportunity emphasizes resources external to the group unlike money or power- that can be taken advantage of even by weak or disorganized challengers....the most salient changes in opportunity structure result from the opening up of access to power, from shifts in ruling alignments, from the availability of influential allies and from cleavages within and among elites.’

Although widely used as an analytical framework in the study of social movements and political protests, POS provides only partial insights in the study of ethnic politics as it focuses more on collective action than on individuals or everyday forms of politics, which are so crucial to the understanding of identity based politics. While it is important to analyze the form and content of ethnic movements, it is also very important to understand the opportunity structures that propel these movements. Thus a comparison of the POS in the three cases contributes partially to our understanding of the variation in the political articulation of the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya.

In Nepal, political transition was been ushered by the Maoist insurgency, the demise of the monarchy and the promise of a new Constitution. All of these factors have contributed to making the assertion of an ethnic, rather than the state endorsed national identity, feasible and enabled the pursuit of economic, social and political equality. Although the agenda of major parties still dominates debates and discussions in the country, it is an achievement in itself that the ‘ethnic question’ is at least being discussed at the national level. While transitional politics might have provided a fertile ground for Limbu nationalism in Nepal, in Darjeeling, it is the change of leadership (from Subhash Ghising to Bimal Gurung), endorsements from national leaders (like Jaswant Singh)<sup>248</sup> and other homeland movements in India, especially the Telengana movement which have revived and strengthened the demand for Gorkhaland further. The stronger the movement, the deeper is the infiltration of identity. This has become the only effective vehicle of political action obliterating caste, class or gender as efficient bases of

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<sup>248</sup> The rationale behind electing Jaswant Singh (a veteran politician from the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP), a national, right-wing party) from Darjeeling during the 2009 Lok Sabha elections was that of national exposure of the Gorkhaland cause. The BJP was also seen as more sympathetic towards demands of smaller states as the states of Jharkhand and Uttarakhand had been formed under the BJP government (both in 2000).

collective political action. Thus, the Gorkhaland and the Limbuwan homeland movements have provided the necessary political motivation that has led to the spread and strengthening of the respective identities. This re-alignment of old political and institutional structures (as seen in Nepal) and the introduction of new political agents who have revitalized ethnic demands can thus be seen as encouraging the assertion of one identity over another. In Sikkim on the other hand, the change in the political sphere through the electoral victory of an ethnically disposed political party led to a change in attitude and aspirations of the majority of Nepalis of Sikkim. The SDF favoured socio-economic categories (OBC, MBC) as a means of social classification along with reservations and subsidies which were instrumental in increasing the appeal of ethnic distinction over the homogenous Nepali category. As the Indian state introduced more reservations and subsidies for various groups, especially the Scheduled Tribes, ethnic identity became more attractive as a platform from which to access the state. Because the state favored the ethnic diversity within the Nepali group it encouraged the active membership of senior bureaucrats in ethnic organizations,<sup>249</sup> which was previously frowned upon and deemed communal. In Sikkim the most influential political opportunity structure has been the state apparatus itself which has not only made ethnicity a political choice but converted ethnic identity into socio-economic categories thereby increasing its instrumental value. Thus, where the structure of the government is potentially more responsive to an electorate by providing opportunities for formal representation for different segments of the population, the structure of opportunities is relatively open and vice versa.<sup>250</sup>

The three case studies also show that the shift in the POS has not only legitimised ethnicity as a political resource but also diversified the means of political assertion, thereby expanding the democratic base. The past decade has witnessed a marked increase in the activities of those groups which previously remained either politically dormant (in Sikkim) or marginalized from political and economic domains (east Nepal and Darjeeling). Whilst

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<sup>249</sup> The Chief Minister of Sikkim gave a statement in July 2012 saying, ‘Government job is service to people. If any government employee wants to politics (sic) then they are free to resign from government service. I will approve the resignation without any delay’. This however also shows the narrow and rather convenient understanding of politics in the state.

Source: Sikkim Express, 19<sup>th</sup> July, 2012

<sup>250</sup> Kanchan Chandra’s (2000) study on the rise of the Bahujan Samaj Party (BSP), a caste based political party in the Indian heartland of Uttar Pradesh is an excellent example of POS. In this case study the external decline of the Congress party, the ‘representational blockage’ of the low castes within the Congress party itself and the increase in an educated, articulate class who then sought alternate forms of political representation is linked to the rise of the BSP as well as Dalit politics in India.

discussing ethnic mobilization Varshney (2003:87) makes an argument that ethnic mobilization for political action might not be the same as ethnic co-ordination for social and economic activities owing to different motivations and alliances between different fields. This analytical distinction between motivation for political action and motivation for socio-economic movement is negated in the three case studies where ethnic movement is motivated by a combination of political, social and economic rationale. This is also indicative of the overlapping of issues as well as identities that an individual can lay claim to and shows that an ethnic identity is a product of not only the social but also the cultural and political environment in which it is located and thus is actively constructed by the individual.

In the politics of ethnicity, various aspects of culture come to acquire great significance because shared beliefs, language, myths come to form what Swidler (1986: 273) calls a 'toolkit'. From this 'toolkit' groups and individuals may use different elements in varying combinations to solve different kinds of problems. This has an impact on the strategies of action or the persistent ways of ordering through time. According to Bourdieu (1977) cultural pattern provides the structure against which individuals can develop particular strategies, which in turn depends on habits, moods, sensibilities and views of the world. According to Hannerz (1969:186-88 in Swidler, 1986:277) culture is not a unified system that pushes actions in a consistent direction. Rather, it is a 'repertoire' from which actors select differing pieces for constructing lines of action.

More importantly even if opportunities are objective and external to the actor, it is the actor's desire together with his belief about the opportunities which explains his actions. Thus, the nature of perception of a particular situation or opportunity is crucial because the actor may not be aware of all the opportunities available or may overestimate some aspect of the available opportunities (Elster, 1989: 13 in Kriesi, 2004:68). In the three cases, the ideological orientation of the state along with the POS has enabled the Nepalis of the eastern Himalaya to use ethnicity as a viable resource for collective action. The different approaches towards ethnic minorities in India and Nepal and the available political structures have also led to differences in how the Nepalis located in these three areas approach or perceive their set of opportunities. Although these factors may not be wholly sufficient as an explanation of the political variation within the Nepalis, they nonetheless do contribute to a holistic understanding of it.

### **6.2 (iii) *Elites and Grievances***

In likeness to Spencer's (2002: 94) study on Sri Lankan nationalism which highlights the problem with the use of the term 'elites', the three case studies also highlight the same



experience where ‘while the invocation of a clear group or stratum is probably deeply misleading, the kinds of cultural processes attributed to this group are real enough’. Shore (2002: 4) suggests that rather than using concepts and theories around the study of elites as fixed or tangible social science categories they should be treated as ‘heuristic devices’ and with caution and using qualifying adjectives to describe them. Ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya complicates the understanding of elites. Here they do not conform to the typical notions of elites as exclusive groups, a social category by themselves but in fact ‘operate as agents in a process of democratic inclusion’ (Spencer, 2002: 94) and it is through their cultural capital that they are able to frame grievances, generate awareness and mobilise people. Individuals or groups can be termed as elites as long as they either use directly or are in a position to influence very strongly the exercise of political power (Bottomore, 1966: 11). In this thesis those who formally represent ethnic groups (whether it be ethnic associations, individuals, members of ethnic parties) or act on their behalf can be called elites to the extent that they are agents of negotiation with the state and guide or influence the socio-political agenda of the ethnic group.

Nedelmann (1987:183) defines political mobilization as a three-fold development of a social relationship between the individual and the parties. It comprises the processes of interest formation, community building (affective dimension) and then employing means of action (instrumental dimension). Political mobilization is defined as the ‘actor’s attempt to influence the existing distribution of power and dichotomises elites into two categories- political parties and other established interest organizations on the one hand and the government or the state on the other hand. Following this dichotomy, mobilization can be said to be the development of processes of interaction between at least three types of actors- unorganized individuals, organized intermediary actors (or elites) and the state. While elites play an important role in defining the framework of grievances to the people as well as the state, discounting the agency of the average individual in these negotiations would be grossly limiting. Therefore, in order to understand the politics of contention it becomes important to balance the delicate relation between the elites, intellectuals and ordinary individuals.

In Sikkim and Nepal patronage of the landed elite used to play an important role in the feudal society who often held multiple roles as tax collectors, arbitrators of legal and domestic cases etc. Nonetheless, changed socio-political circumstances have led to different expectations from elites who now command influence over different and often intersecting fields. For

example, a member of the village Panchayat could be a reputed shaman, a landlord and an active party member all at once or there could be different individuals influential only in specific fields and therefore with limited social capital. However, ethnic politics has brought to the fore those categories of people who were earlier considered as unlikely sources of power, influence or in other words, social capital of relevant value. This category of new elites, unlike traditional elites do not form a separate class which is then dependent on the masses for survival nor are they distinct from the people whose interests they represent. However in spite of this organic evolution of elites, there is the existence of hierarchies within these groups.

Each case study provides a rich variation in the types of individuals who are involved in the construction as well as politicisation of ethnic identities. Ranging from rural vanguards in eastern hills, to politicians, ethnic activists and ethnic bureaucrats these individuals play an important role in the framing and articulation of ethnicity. However it might be useful to generalize them into three different categories- ethnic elites, bureaucratic elites and political elites. While almost all the categories function within their respective fields, it is usually a combination of elites that foster the articulation and manifestation of ethnicity. Their motivations are highly diverse, ranging from preservation of culture to reservation of seats in the legislature, from purely instrumental to simply cultural. It is imperative to evaluate the individuals and groups who are actively involved in politics. However, following Zald (1996: 269), it is equally important to recognize the contribution of 'moral entrepreneurs' - journalists', ministers, community leaders, writers who attempt to define the issues, invent metaphors, attribute blame and define tactics. These moral entrepreneurs are, however, not present in equal measure in all the three cases which affects the framing as well as public discussion of ethnic grievances.

In Nepal, assertion of the Limbu identity is being championed primarily by ethnic and political elites whose very emergence is a reaction against bureaucratic elitism which is ethnically biased and has saturated every institutional organ. The Limbuwan movement is spearheaded by the KYC whose members are also affiliated to national as well as regional parties and thus have an opportunity to present the case of the Limbus to upper caste party members who, more often than not, are regional party Presidents. Although their influence within the political parties might be questionable (given the party's proverbial whip) but they have had some success in leading the national parties to acknowledge the ethnic issue, at least at the regional level. Limbu ethnic elites range from individuals like Ram Thebe, teacher at

Ilam multi-campus, an active member of the NGO INSEC,<sup>251</sup> and Pradeep Limbu who is a lawyer in the local court, President of the KYC( at the time of fieldwork) to young members like Asha Tumbapo, social worker and spokesperson for women's rights. These elites hold great cultural capital amongst the Limbu community and move effortlessly between different 'fields', whether it be the political or the social. Their ethnicity is the primary resource that gives them socio-political efficacy as the Limbus rely on them not only to negotiate with the state on their behalf but also to make their own culture legible to them. Ethnic activists are influential mobilizing agents who through their activities as the member of the KYC have been fundamental in supporting the cause of not just the Limbus but of the indigenous community overall. The KYC been successful in framing the backwardness of the Limbu community as a result of state-led Hindu domination which has deprived (*vanchit*) them from all fruits of development. It has also succeeded in the revival of Limbu culture and tradition through its emphasis on literature development, cultural performances, vernacular newspaper and local radio. This has led to an enhanced sense of cultural identity amongst the Limbu community. Simultaneously and almost by default, it has reminded` them of their economic and cultural subjugation under the Hindu monarchy. Since the KYC does not engage in electoral politics, this vacuum has been filled by the Limbuwan parties. These parties through their strikes, processions and sit-ins have been successful in displaying the political strength of the Limbu community and have given a public shape to the demand for Limbuwan. Transitional politics in Nepal has also enabled traditional party-based elites to reinvent themselves as champions of the ethnic cause which has also catapulted them to the negotiating table within national parties. The KYC along with the Limbuwan parties partake in an antagonistic relationship with the state and have therefore been successful in creating a discourse which reflects this.

On the other side of the border in Darjeeling, the present political situation reveals an intense process of internalisation of the Gorkha's valour and sacrifice primarily by the political elites comprising of grass root party members, academics and literary figures. These political elites ensure percolation of the arguments and imagery associated with the Gorkha to the community through the village *samaj* or the local community council who make political participation a social obligation. However, the form and shape taken by the Gorkha identity can be attributed not only to the party members who are at the forefront of political mobilization and therefore most visible but also to other individuals or moral entrepreneurs-writers,

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<sup>251</sup> Informal Sector Service Center (INSEC) is a human rights organization in Nepal.

musicians, artists and journalists who work and sustain this identity on a regular basis. The construction of the Gorkha also calls upon the resources of the members of the local intelligentsia who are well versed not only in the history of the area but also in relevant law, especially constitutional law which is important for this particular juncture of the movement. As discussed in the case study, mobilisation of popular sentiments is situated outside of the urban area, most commonly in the tea and cinchona estates. Therefore, the role of local mobilisers like trade union, youth leaders and women activists in these areas cannot be disregarded as once again, they are the holders of much social capital and thus successful in reinforcing the debates and arguments of indifference and ethnic discrimination meted out by the West Bengal government towards the Gorkhas. While writers and other artists engage with the people on a creative level, it is the political elite, who are engaged in popularising this image to the other members of the society through fiery speeches and other ‘ethnicity-building’ activities like *phul-pati* and *shobha yatra* (cultural processions related to Hindu festivals of Dasain and Tihar). These processions are organised with the support of local clubs as a grand display of Gorkha culture in the hills as well as in Siliguri, an extremely contested site between the Nepalis/Gorkhas and the Bengalis. The Gorkhaland movement, like most ethnic movements, also utilised pre-existing identities which may be re-imagined and reintegrated in order to solidify the collective identity (Polletta and Jasper, 2001). Participation in the movement was compulsory during the initial stages of the movement (between 2007-2009) and recruitment was based on pre-existing social networks and self-interested ‘reputational concerns’, which makes solidarity a reasonable expectation (Chong, 1991, cited in Polletta and Jasper, 2001:290; Fireman and Gamson, 1979, cited in Polletta and Jasper, 2001:289). Thus, elites use different fields of influence in an attempt to influence desired outcomes. Grievances are framed not only in terms of discrimination but also by drawing comparisons with Sikkim, thereby moulding public opinion in the favour of a separate state which will ensure all round development as well as attain national recognition for all the Nepalis living in India. Thus, identity politics in Darjeeling is shaped by the combined efforts of the political leaders and other independent members of the society who promote a defensive, insecure Gorkha as the only means of achieving socio-political emancipation from the state of West Bengal.

In comparison to Darjeeling and Nepal, Sikkim can be deemed as less active in terms of explicit, violent political turmoil against the state or even amongst ethnic groups. Political participation by the civil society is also negligent, emerging only when employment or other

benefits are being threatened by non-Sikkimese people.<sup>252</sup> Legislative and executive strands of the state are also closely interlinked as every department is headed by an elected representative, irrespective of their prior experience, capability or understanding of the functions of the department they are heading. The assertion of ethnic identity is thus also neatly guided by the bureaucratic elites (who perform the twin roles of bureaucratic as well as ethnic elites) who in turn follow the format set out by the political elites. Ethnic issues are framed in a way palatable to the state which is then endorsed and explained to the ethnic members by the respective ethnic associations. Although ethnic associations have representatives from rural areas, increasing formalization of rules, practices and the emphasis on literacy has reduced them to mere bystanders. Ethnic members in the rural areas are either illiterate and therefore unable to understand the rules, regulations or even the benefits under a particular category or they lack the social confidence to plead their case. Situated in a familiar bureaucratic environment, ethnic elites are well assimilated in bureaucratic circles and can therefore understand the bureaucratic language and the rules governing ethnic rights. They can therefore articulate and lobby on ethnic issues with the state in a manner which is legible to bureaucrats but not to anyone outside it. In contrast to Darjeeling and Nepal, in Sikkim it is the framework of grievance articulation that is handed down by the state which is then used by the ethnic (who are also bureaucratic elites) to forge and mobilise ethnic sentiments. Thus their field of influence extends not only towards their own ethnic members but also outwards towards other members of the bureaucracy who control the resources that they are either entitled to or are seeking.

These elites whose social capital is based on their position and access to the government, also constantly switch their field of influence between their ethnic members, mostly in the rural areas, and their colleagues in the government. However, this is not to disregard the efforts of the linguists and practitioners of culture, who have been working silently to uphold their respective languages and cultures even during times when there was little or no state support. Though they might not be executive members of ethnic associations, without linguists and cultural practitioners the urban, Gangtok-based ethnic associations would not be able to sustain and makes claims of cultural authenticity. Most of the ethnic associations

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<sup>252</sup> For example, in 2010 the state government tried to issue Residential Certificates to those residents who could establish that they were residents of Sikkim as on April 26, 1975 as well as to those who were regularised employees in the public sector. This led to mass outrage amongst the public and the formation of the Sikkim Subject Bachao Committee (Save the Sikkim Subject Committee) in order to stop the Bill which was seen as providing 'outsiders' easy access to the benefits given by the state. For more information see <http://isikkim.com/sikkim-subject-bachao-committee-stages-a-dharna/>

are still at a nascent stage and the full impact of their long-term activities is yet to be assessed but the role of the ethnic/bureaucratic elite has been crucial in negotiations with the government as well as in framing issues of cultural preservation amongst ethnic members. Ethnic associations have been successful in revitalising interest in their own communities and articulating the need for cultural preservation to the state, a sentiment which emerged as common amongst urban as well as rural ethnic members.

Elites are a crucial link in formulating opinions and articulating them in the most politically efficient manner. Although the elites in the three cases might be using similar cultural frameworks and understandings of Nepali culture, the agenda, motivation and overall aims of the elites leads to a difference in the political processes involved in the use and articulation of Nepali ethnicity.

#### **6.2 (iv) *Framing and Participation***

According to Baud and Rutters (2005: 88), the term intellectuals' which stood for the educated, urban vanguard has been increasingly been replaced in theory and practice by a wider understanding of intellectuals or knowledge specialists who can be found in all sectors of society and function as 'framing specialists- people who develop, borrow, adapt and rework interpretive frames that promote collective action and define collective interest, identities, rights and claims'. This broadening of the concept is a response to the changing nature and practices of politics itself. For example, ethnic politics in Sikkim and Nepal necessitates the support of ethnic members from rural areas who are deemed as the custodians of authentic culture or the workers from the *kaman* without whose belief in the Gorkha, no political movement for Gorkhaland can ever hope to be successful. This broadening of political space makes political agents out of ordinary men and women.

While grievances or aspirations are necessary, they are not sufficient for the formation of identities and their eventual political mobilization. What is important in political mobilization is the framing of individual and isolated grievances in a way which appeals to those experiencing them and at the same time is comprehensible within a larger socio-economic framework. As Fumagalli (2007: 568) points out, in order for the frames to be understood and used by the people, they need to be familiar and hence build on familiar material as well as cognitive elements. Thus, whether it be the demand for reservations in Sikkim or a separate homeland for the Limbus or the Gorkha, these issues and demands have to be contextually framed in a manner which is appropriate to and can be understood by all. For example if the

demand for Gorkhaland was based entirely on class based discrimination then political outfits like the GJM would not be able to garner the support of the masses even within the tea estates as there is limited class consciousness on the basis of class amongst the workers in the estates owing to the historical focus on ethnicity rather than class. Combining economic deprivation with ethnic discrimination has widened the scope and appeal of Gorkhaland to members of all sections of society and not just the working class. Following Goffman (1974) 'frame' has been defined by Snow et al (1986: 464) as a schemata of interpretation that enables individuals to locate, perceive, identify and label occurrences within their life spaces and the world at large. By rendering events or occurrences meaningful, frames function to organize experiences and guide action, whether individual or collective. Zald (1996: 262) adds that frames are the specific metaphors, symbolic representations and cognitive cues used to render or cast events in an evaluative mode and to suggest alternative modes of action.

This plays a fundamental role in the three cases in the eastern Himalaya, where the framing of issues and events by different actors leads to the variation in the articulation of ethnicity. Local, regional and national frames inform the nature and conduct of everyday politics. Frames do not emerge naturally but are carefully constructed by leaders and elites in order to mobilize or demobilize a community. Frames operate at the interface between background structural factors and the contingent choices of elites, thereby emphasizing the nexus between frames and agents. Thus, for any situation there can be multiple frames that can be used to make it explicit or intelligible to the common masses or the same situation can be framed differently even by similar kinds of agents (Fumagalli, 2007:568).

Walker (2001:88) emphasizes the social and cultural appropriateness of frames which can be attained only when all mediations between groups and the state are done by those who are 'appropriately embedded actors'. His concept of 'localism' in the context of local Thai elections is a highly insightful example which reveals the power of local actors over grand theoretical narratives and ideologies in the construction of political opinion amongst the masses and the achievement of desired political outcomes. This element of localism lends variation to identity formation in the eastern Himalaya, where different issues and actors emerge as important in different locations. Framing of issues has been quite unidimensional in Sikkim and Darjeeling with either the ethnic associations or the political parties steering the construction of ethnic grievances and arguments. In east Nepal, the Limbuwan agenda shows framing by multiple agents, political parties and ethnic associations, who use the same ethnic grievance and cultural tools but differ in the way it is used.

Ethnic identity is always created in the presence of the ethnic ‘other’ and in all three cases engagement with the ethnic other has been presented in an antagonistic manner. Books on Limbu history and mythology (mostly in Nepali) are an even mix between the bravery of the Limbus, treachery of the upper caste *bahun* and the eventual *soshan* (exploitation) by the state. The Gorkha is locked in a constant battle with the state for recognition and equality while the few books written on Sikkimese history have always reiterated the migrant background of the Nepalis and their eventual takeover of the Buddhist Himalayan kingdom. In Sikkim, framing of ethnic grievances has been done mostly by ethnic associations, who in spite of the difference in their cultural practices all seek the same remedies from the state, namely their declaration as STs, more reservations and political representation. Recent ethnographic reports written by ethnic associations represent ethnic groups as having ‘animistic, tribal features’ and the economic plight of the community is presented as a consequence of being a tribe rather than a result of poor governmental policies or representative of failed development. Thus, in all the three cases, poverty and social backwardness are framed as direct consequences of belonging to a particular ethnic group and therefore the key to economic emancipation of Nepali ethnic group lies in an approach which targets particular ethnic groups for development.

In the context of framing, it is also important to take into consideration the audience in question. In Darjeeling and east Nepal, framing socio-economic problems as a consequence of ethnic discrimination is directed towards the large Nepali/Gorkha and Limbu populations respectively, the majority of who live in rural areas. They are targeted in order to build a solid political base which might ultimately translate into political mobilization and electoral votes. In Sikkim on the other hand, this framing of ethnic groups as deprived and marginalised is framed more for the use by the state than by the people. Here, the ‘marginalized, backward groups’ discourse is then used in the redistribution of goods and services and eventually for political mileage by the state. Although in all the three cases poverty prevails irrespective of ethnic identity, an ethnic framing makes it easier for the people (who also appreciate the cultural revival brought on by identity politics), the elites and the government to comprehend and compartmentalise people.

Another important aspect of framing is that which is the role played by the state, the media and those considered as the ethnic ‘other’, all of which greatly impact the formation of an identity. For example, the Gorkha identity is a rejection of the Gorkha’s portrayal as mercenaries and immigrants in popular discourse and most specifically in the vitriolic attacks by the anti- Gorkhaland agitators like the *Bangla O Bangla Bhasha Bachao Committee* (Save



the Bengali Bhasa Committee)<sup>253</sup> which are social organizations with a political agenda. Similarly in east Nepal, Limbu nationalism is based on the attempt to break the homogenous culture and identity that was promoted by the Nepali state at the cost of other sub-ethnic identities. Another cultural tool that is prominent amongst stronger ethnic groups (i.e. those which are well organised, financially solvent and have a large membership) is the use of memories. The commercial reproduction (music videos, plays, Youtube videos) of folklore, past glories, sacrifice, contribution to nation building, indigeniety was evident in all the three areas.

Elites, frames and POS are all factors, which lead to varied choices in the manifestation of ethnicity. These are, however, activities which are usually negotiated by leaders or other prominent members of the ethnic group. This raises pertinent questions regarding the agency of those Nepalis who are not directly involved in ethnic politics. The participation and motivation of those who are neither elites nor executive members of ethnic associations or political parties also form an important component of our understanding of ethnic politics. Although people's agency might be restricted or limited, they are not bystanders to the political and economic changes around them. They can participate, criticize and are affected by political and economic changes in numerous ways. Thus people's participation is one of the key variables that can help explain the difference in the choice of a particular ethnic identity as political identity. However, to assume that one 'chooses' one ethnic identity over another is problematic because what may be considered as a choice could actually just be an awakening or assertion of elements from the 'habitus'. Also physical features, gender religion or the kinship system that one is born into forms an important component of the world view of groups and individuals.

Agency is difficult to gauge even when ethnic identification has resulted in mass mobilization as seen in Darjeeling and east Nepal. Questions regarding agency of the common man/woman must begin with an interrogation of what agency might imply in the three cases. Agency might range from participation in ethnic movements and political parties to negotiation with the elites but in the context of the thesis, the agency to make a particular ethnic identity meaningful in the political as well as social realm is of primary importance. However,

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<sup>253</sup> Bangla Bhasa Bachao Committee claims to be an apolitical social organization based in Siliguri, in the foothills of Darjeeling District. They are opposed to the formation of Gorkhaland. Their primary claim being that Nepalis living in the Darjeeling District are not Indian nationals and that Darjeeling was 'a predominant (sic) Bengali town even at the time of Independence'.

Source: Official blog of the Bangla Bhasa Society

<http://banglabanchao.wordpress.com/page/14/> (Accessed: 07/01/2013).

accepting this also requires an acknowledgment of the numerous hierarchies within an ethnic group which filter the agency of the actors so that by the time an individual's choice is enacted, much of its original essence and intent is either lost or altered.

An instrumental approach to understanding ethnic choice would suggest two aspects of ethnic participation- transactional and transcendental. The relationship between the two varies in different contexts but in most cases the transactional aspect (the context of who gets what and how) has to be shrouded under the transcendental (i.e. the promotion of values like religion, language, ethnic bonds) which constitutes the primary basis for identification and forms a persuasive basis for identification (Varshney, 2003; Mitra, 1992). While trying to unravel the question of ethnic politics, agency and choice it becomes comfortable and convenient to imagine that ethnicity is one of the rational choices that an individual or a group can make when having to make cost-effective choices. Rational Action Theory (RAT) assumes that all social actors decide their political participation on the basis of a cost-benefit calculation, participating only when participation costs are lower. The theory assumes that all human beings are rational, with a stable and consistent set of preferences and motivated in their everyday actions (Malesevic, 2002:195). Instrumentality is an important feature of ethnic politics in the eastern Himalaya and this argument can be extended to try and understand the different ethnic response to the state- why Nepalis in Sikkim find it beneficial to identify themselves as Limboo, Rai, Tamang while at the same time, Nepalis in Darjeeling use Gorkha as their means of identification. One of the fundamental problems with the RAT is that it relegates cultural values, ideologies and beliefs as 'second order reality' because a human being is always *homo economicus*, the individual is in a permanent state of competition over limited resources, economic advantages, wealth, power or status (Malesevic, 2002). However the case studies indicate that while access and control over the re-distribution of resources (reservation, employment or even a separate state) is one of the main motivations for ethnic politics, the unrelenting demand for symbolic goods like language recognition, cultural preservation, citizenship, official recognition of festivals cannot be neglected. These symbolic goods cannot be deemed as less important than the material because it is these cultural items that form the basis of identity politics, which could then also be used for effective negotiation with the state. This instrumental characteristic of ethnic groups also needs to take into account that different individuals in a group might value different things; therefore, to frame ethnic demands as purely instrumental demands would be inadequate. The three case studies prove this point to a large extent. Contemporary Sikkimese politics is marked by the polarization between the minority but historically dominant Bhutia-Lepcha community and the majority Nepali

community as well as by divisions within the Nepali ethnic group itself. This comes especially at a time when identity as a Sikkimese has emerged as a moot point of contention. Along with supporting the discovery, exploitation and essentialisation of the tangible aspects of culture, socio-economic categories have altered the members of ethnic groups themselves who are given the opportunity to reconstruct their social history as being native to Sikkim as opposed to being referred to as migrants and coolies (Gurung 2010: 248-49). With each ethnic group undergoing a degree of new found interest in the reconstruction of their 'original' cultures, politics in Sikkim thus provides a greater sense of belonging and identification as Sikkimese even though it may not bring the desired economic outcome.

On the emotive issue of identity, the word *Gorkha* refers to all the Nepalis living in India; when used in a political context, it refers to all the people of the Darjeeling Hills, including the Lepchas, Tibetans, Marwaris and even Bengalis, while at the same time creating a distinction from the Sikkimese-Nepali. As the boundaries of the peoples the term is supposed to encompass have become more ambivalent, the political saliency of the term is heightened in the pursuit of federal statehood. Enactment of Nepali-ness through dress codes imposed by the political parties as well as the *gaon-samaj* (village community) performed the latent function of reviving and instilling a sense of ethnic pride in the community, which is evident in the currency the word Gorkha has gained amongst Indian-Nepalis all over India.

Finally, in east Nepal, although assertion of the Limbu identity does not compete with the national identity of a Nepalese, it does make a breakaway from the cultural hegemony of the upper caste Hill groups. There is a prevailing sense of injustice and ethnic discrimination amongst the Limbus and thus to be able to openly assert and celebrate one's culture ranks high in prominence along with the instrumental benefits that might come with ethnic federalism. Therefore, the importance of transcendental benefits of ethnic politics to different groups and individuals cannot be under-estimated.

Guilliano (2000:296) makes a crucial point that individual political affiliation cannot be determined by ethnic affiliation as individuals might possess extremely strong ethnic identities and a sense of group belonging but this need not directly translate into political action. This is amply exemplified in all the three cases and most explicitly in the case of the Limbuwan movement, where the regional Limbuwan parties, despite stirring ethnic sentiments were not able to generate mass support from the Limbus who were either reluctant to switch their traditional affiliation with the national parties or were not convinced enough by the strength of the movement. Group preferences do not exist in some pre-made, latent form ready to be mobilized. Rather, it is important to analyse how support and confidence is acquired and how

the relationship between the voter, politicians and issues determines the use of ethnicity as a resource to ensure the maximum benefit for a particular ethnic group.

### ***Conclusion***

A survey of these four factors (ideological framework, POS, elites and grievances and framing) establishes that although seemingly simple, emotive and straightforward, ethnic politics is actually a process as well as an outcome of numerous, complex and often interrelated incentives and dis-incentives. The case studies from the eastern Himalaya, although diverse in their issues and actors, work to highlight that while the state and its institutionalised practices might form the over-arching structure that groups have to negotiate with, it is the presence of local, regional and international factors that ultimately determine the nature and content of ethnic grievances, actions and outcomes. The very same factors help establish that identity construction is a local process and thus despite cultural, historical and even ethnic similarities the political articulation and manifestation of ethnicity will ultimately be shaped by the social, political and economic exigencies that surround an ethnic group.

## Conclusion

### *(i) General Findings*

This thesis is based on the premise that ethnicity is an important component of the social as well as political identity of groups and individuals. The importance of ethnicity arises not only from its use as a means of demarcating and ordering social interaction but more so because of its value as a political resource. The validity of this claim comes from an interrogation of identity politics in the eastern Himalaya which focuses on the Nepalis who are geographically and historically connected but politically distinct from each other. This leads to a central hypothesis that the existence of *intra-ethnic* differences amongst the Nepalis living in Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal is based not only on their location but because of a range of external factors that determine their course of action, agenda and outcomes. The case of Sikkim highlights the role played by the state in facilitating the political assertion of ethnic identity. The tea plantations and the Gorkha in Darjeeling are representative of the impact of historical colonisation and the stagnant development on contemporary Nepali society. Finally the case of east Nepal shows the influence of international regimes and political opportunities in precipitating ethnic grievances. Despite this diversity, Nepali ethnic politics in the three cases is framed around the instrumental use of ethnic identity by ethnic groups as well as the state in order to establish new ways of engaging in the politics of the re-distribution. This relationship is fashioned and influenced by the state (especially through its bureaucracy) as well as other external institutions and ultimately leads to a variation in ethnic politics as well as the assertion of ethnic identity amongst the Nepalis of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal. Thus, by analysing the position of Nepalis located in three different political units, the thesis establishes that in spite of cultural and historical similarities the impact of external factors is so great that it leads to a substantial variation in the political assertion of ethnic identities, within the Nepali ethnic group.

In this process of political empowerment these identities themselves undergo a re-definition. As evidenced by the case studies, this re-definition has resulted in a fluid identity amongst those who identify or used to identify themselves as Nepalis, thereby highlighting the political and constructed nature of this group. This flux can be attributed to the very nature and composition of the Nepali ethnic group which acts as a meta-identity, subsuming different ethnic groups within liminal intra-ethnic boundaries. This permits the easy inclusion and exclusion of groups and the alteration of group boundaries, which in turn enables and

complicates ethnic politics. Owing to the inherent flexibility of this meta-identity, groups and individuals can make one identity more meaningful than the other in response to their social, political and economic environment. For example, in a social context, a Limbu from Sikkim could either choose to emphasize his/her ethnic affiliation in a multi-ethnic environment or can choose to identify themselves as Sikkimese or Sikkimese-Nepali (which immediately establishes political, historical and even cultural differences) when interacting with Limbus from Darjeeling or Nepal. Political demarcation is evident even in the presence of strong ethnic affiliations and kinship relations. Nonetheless, these identities overlap to a large extent making a clear-cut distinction between the assertions of one identity over another rather difficult.

The primary questions around which the research was conducted, analysed and presented were:

1. Under what conditions does ethnicity become a valued resource?
2. Why do people choose one particular identity over another for the purpose of political expression?

Nepalis are spread across different political units (from the Garhwal hills in the western Himalaya to Meghalaya and beyond in the east) and while a sense of cultural similarity, connection and empathy does exist, the case studies reveal that their political identities and actions are far from being mutually cohesive. The Nepali ethnic group conforms to the idea of a meta-identity which encompasses different ethnic groups but at the same time, it is also recognized as a political identity in relation to other dominant ethnic groups like the Bhutia and Lepchas in Sikkim and the Bengalis in Darjeeling. This is also visible in Nepal where the term 'Nepali' may not have as wide a currency as in Sikkim or Darjeeling given that all citizens of Nepal are called Nepalis or Nepalese but there are specific material indicators of being a Nepali (for example the Nepali *topi*, the *daura-suruwal*, *chaubandi* [traditional blouse]) which distinguishes Nepalis from other Nepalese citizens like the Madheshis in the southern border who identify themselves as Nepalese citizens but do not subscribe to Nepali cultural markers. These markers are also used by Nepalis living in Sikkim and Darjeeling from other ethnic groups.

As a meta-identity with certain cultural markers that distinguish it from other ethnic groups, the Nepali ethnic group is a key example of an 'imagined community' which was brought into existence by the literati in Benares and Darjeeling. However, once this identity was brought to life, the Nepalis have charted their own course in different geographical locations leading to distinct lifestyles, either oblivious or ambivalent to the condition of Nepalis

in other parts of the world. For example, the economic and political plight of the Nepalis in Darjeeling has very little political impact on the Nepalis in Sikkim which is evident through their reluctance to support the Gorkhaland movement publicly. Thus, if ethnic groups are imagined communities, my thesis is an example of the development of a community subsequent to its initial period of consolidation. It shows how external strains, demands and incentives might change the nature and function of ethnic groups altogether or alternatively, may bring about collaboration with other groups in a bid to increase the political efficacy of ethnicity. This thesis contributes to the growing literature on ethnic politics in South Asia. By focussing on the politics of indigenous, tribal identities (instead of caste groups, which has remained a dominant theme) the thesis shows the constructed nature of this identity. The thesis thus highlights the flexibility of ethnic politics to encompass a variety of issues as bases for political action which however, have legitimacy and potency only during a particular period and in the presence of some political as well as emotive catalyst.

The case of the Nepalis of Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal is a study of the political process as well as the rationale behind ethnic politics that eventually leads to the assertion of a specific ethnic identity. Although ethnicity might be considered to be a prominent aspect of everyday social interaction, my thesis has documented the growth, development and use of ethnic identity as a political identity.

In the face of widespread economic disparities and political marginalization, the use of ethnic identity in place of class or political ideologies is a well-documented phenomenon in South Asia and beyond. Economic and political claims based on ethnic or cultural factors like caste, religion and language have been the focus of much academic attention in South Asia. Instrumental use of ethnicity is thus not unexpected but a consistent phenomenon in identity based politics. Whilst engaging with these popular conceptions and pre-conceptions regarding identity based politics, my thesis has used the example of the Nepali ethnic group to extend the instrumental rationale of ethnic politics and highlight the variety of motivations behind ethnic politics. The thesis goes beyond the mere acknowledgment of ethnic politics in the region and instead aims to understand the different factors that encourage and sustain identity based politics. By analysing the case of the Nepalis, it highlights the relationship between ethnicity and the various social, economic and political structures that might encourage ethnic claims as well as provide the necessary outlet for grievances which have otherwise been neglected by the state. By analysing the case of the Nepalis, my thesis highlights the impact of socio-economic disparities on ethnic groups brought about by increasing development and expansion of the

welfare state. It also draws attention to the response of ethnic groups, the cultural resources that are available to them and the external structures that facilitate those claims. While economic and political benefits are usually deemed to be the sole motivation behind ethnic politics, the case studies show that although tangible benefits may not be equally divided amongst ethnic groups, ethnic politics may still be valued for the non-tangible benefits that it might bring in the form of language development, heritage preservation etc.

The thesis also makes an important contribution to the study of democracy in the South Asian context. The three cases show how ethnic politics can facilitate democracy further by widening the base through which people can contest the state and stake political claims. Rather than destabilising democracy, the three case studies show how ethnic politics provides an alternative path through which collective discontent can be channeled albeit within the democratic framework. The three cases show that ethnic politics has created space for a new layer of cultural elites and new forms of social capital that are politically relevant thereby promoting a more inclusive form of democracy. The case studies also discuss the role played by bureaucracy in ethnic politics. This not only adds a new dimension through which ethnic politics can be analysed but by highlighting the ethnic nature of bureaucracy, as illustrated by the case studies, also makes an interesting contribution to the study of bureaucracies in general. This can also be used more specifically, in the context of political borderlands which can further our understanding of how the states operate and are localised on the periphery of the nation-state.

While all three case studies contribute to the wider understanding of ethnic politics in general, each case study also makes its own particular contribution to the understanding of the relation between ethnicity and the socio-political environment that leads to the use of ethnicity as a political resource. The Sikkim case study focuses clearly on the role of the state in enabling the growth and development of identity based politics through its re-distribution strategies. Ethnic politics in Sikkim is successful because of the participation of the people who want to partake in a negotiation with the state. My thesis establishes that, despite it being perceived as a political manoeuvre, the motive for ethnic politics is firmly grounded in the economics of re-distribution. While demands for a separate state and greater control over economic and political resources also remains at the heart of the Nepal case study, it also shows how the interaction between the state and ethnic group is often coloured by factors which go beyond the local or regional, to those which are international in their origin. The case study, therefore, highlights the impact of international discourse on local constructions of identity, the



emergence of new actors and the form of grievance articulation. Akin to the Nepal case study, demands for greater access to political and economic resources is inherent in the demand for Gorkhaland and for which the Gorkha identity has been continually revived. The Darjeeling case study is an interesting example of the implications of colonisation and the persistence of neo-colonisation in an economically weak state which accentuates an ethnic frame over other modes of collective action. All three case studies show different aspects of ethnicity, its malleability and the capacity for political action which is also a response to the state and other structures that enable or disable the politicization of ethnicity and determine its cultural symbols.

In its exploration of the research questions, the thesis exhibits how the use of ethnic identity emerges under favourable conditions. It also examines the external factors that might lead to the preference of one identity over another. The thesis also highlights an important but often overlooked aspect of ethnic groups- *intra ethnic* boundaries. While inter-ethnic boundaries have been crucial in the construction as well as politics of identity, the present thesis shows how they are altered and manipulated. By taking a critical approach this thesis refuses ethnic groups the homogeneity that has been bestowed upon them by a large volume of literature and forces a deeper analysis of ethnic groups and ethnic politics itself. The case studies in the thesis go beyond the examination of simply local and cultural factors as sources of internal variation, thereby complicating our understanding of ethnic groups. It refers to the roles played by states and institutions (local, regional and international) in order to analyse how these contribute to differentiation within a single ethnic group.

The case studies also show that it is not the mere existence of grievances that leads to the politicisation and eventual mobilisation of ethnicity but also the impetus and the favourable environment provided by external political structures. Following Brubaker (2001), I placed the Nepali ethnic group at the center of a social, political and economic matrix of a particular area. The primary aim was to study the impact of these factors on the ethnic group. However, the case studies revealed a dialectic interaction between the two variables (ethnic groups and external factors). As much as the external factors affected ethnicity, the reverse was also true. Thus, the response and adaptation of ethnic identity to different incentives and impediments show that the study of ethnic politics has to be multi-dimensional. The analysis of ethnic politics requires an understanding and interrogation of the social and the political structures in which it is embedded and focusing just on the ethnic group and/or the social structures around it provides an incomplete picture. Thus, as the case studies show, ethnic politics is a dynamic

process and the relationship between ethnicity and the social, economic and political structures needs to be studied rather than just the impact of one over another. Neglecting this would limit our understanding of the perceived homogeneity of the Gorkha, the contrasting heterogeneity of the Nepalis of Sikkim and the political resurgence of Limbu nationalism in eastern Nepal.

The Nepali ethnic group also presents an interesting example of the evolution of an identity- its precarious position between being a contemporary necessity whilst also being understood and legitimised only through distinct markers from the past. For example, the Gorkha identity was born out of political and economic insecurity and the internalisation of a racist, colonial discourse rather than an apparent kinship bond or a common religion. Nonetheless, it still performs the function of an ethnic group by providing solidarity amongst members through the history of Gorkha as a martial race. The Gorkha's valour and sacrifice provides myths of origin which then facilitate a common platform to coalesce around. While this shows the constant evolution and the socially reflexive nature of an ethnic identity, the very fact that the Gorkhaland movement then necessitated visible, tangible aspects of 'Gorkha culture' shows the importance of tradition and cultural symbols (which themselves might be a product of conscious construction by political actors) in gaining political legitimacy. Consequently, this thesis establishes that while ethnic identities can prove to be useful heuristic devices, they nonetheless have very material consequences affecting who gets what, when and how. Thus understanding ethnic politics necessitates a fine balance between cultural elements and their use in a given socio-political context.

### *(ii) Contribution to Area Studies*

By studying Sikkim, Darjeeling and east Nepal my thesis makes a particular contribution to the literature pertaining to one of the most ill-researched areas in South Asia. Not only are these areas poorly researched, they have also been subjected to narrow, parochial frameworks that have limited the quantity and quality of research emerging from the region. This has important implications because of the limited, uni-dimensional vision that such research presents of the place and its people. Furthermore, these frameworks also become the basis for policy formulation, electoral propaganda and political opportunism. Owing to the large number of those groups who are considered as Nepalis and their dispersal across the Himalayan region, this ethnic group is also one that has traditionally been understood and analysed as a homogenous group despite its obvious diversity. My thesis thus makes a

contribution to a better understanding of the Nepalis and the political, social and economic situations with which they negotiate. Through this thesis I hope to have shed more light on the predicament of the Nepalis, especially Indian-Nepalis who are constantly battling the necessity to prove their right to live and belong in India despite their historical presence on the periphery of the Indian state for over a hundred years. By engaging with the historical contexts that led to the migration, settlement and finally the formation of the Nepali *jati*, first in India and then in Nepal, along with the discussion on the contemporary contexts that have led to the distinction between Nepalis, I have tried to establish the very important but overlooked distinction between the Nepalis living in India and Nepal.

Each case study in this thesis also makes an important contribution to the literature of their respective areas. The analysis of the Gorkha identity provides a base for the interrogation of the state or the Gorkhaland movement, the case of the Limbuwan movement can be used to study the local impact of international discourses and the Sikkim case can be used to study the symbiotic relation between state and ethnic groups. The case studies have focussed on particular periods in history to analyze the construction of identity which have been used by political actors. Most importantly the thesis has tried to engage in a critical and rigorous analysis of pre-defined identities and histories which have reified ethnic identity. One of the biggest limitations in the study of politics in the eastern Himalaya was the disjuncture between ethnic groups and the state, both of which are vital elements in a cohesive study of politics. This research has studied not only the relationship between ethnic groups and the state but also other factors that influence this relationship.

Despite the focus on the cultural bases of ethnic politics, its construction and uses, I recognize and emphasize the role of the state in my thesis. Economic liberalization and technological advancement have introduced neo-liberal forces whilst, at the same time, increasing the presence and dominance of the state in the lives of its citizens. This can be attributed to the practice of a mixed economy in South Asia whereby the public sector remains the largest employer as well as the distributor of essential goods and services. The range of governmental influence has expanded beyond a concern with raising revenue and maintaining order as the need to direct, train and motivate labour has increased (Brown, 1994:1). Also, the case of Nepal is an interesting example of a 'strategic rentier state' where there is a profound dependence on development aid, channelled through the state apparatus. Rentier states live largely off unearned incomes. The state is resourced with little organization or political effort on the part of the state apparatus and especially little effort in relation to their domestic

population (Moore, 2001 in Moore, 304:2004). This implies that even aid is channeled through the state or at the very least, has to meet the approval of the state. This increased role of the state directly or indirectly, has had a serious impact on the relationship between state and ethnic groups. Thus, along with discussing the response of ethnic groups, the thesis also examined different aspects of the developmental state which has facilitated ethnic politics.

While the Sikkimese case reveals the manner in which the state has co-opted its ethnic groups, the Nepal and Darjeeling case studies reveal the antagonistic approach of the state towards them thereby giving shape and direction to ethnic politics and its concomitant movement. As evident in the Sikkim and Nepal case studies, international and national discourses have a direct impact on the articulation of ethnicity which is achieved through the state apparatus. The cases are an example of what may be deemed as an emerging trend in South Asian politics especially in relation to minority and/or disadvantaged groups. This trend is spurred on by the expansion of the welfare state of which affirmative action is an important part. The thesis engages with the contemporary topic of affirmative action to show how vote bank politics has now acquired a formal structure and is safeguarded by the constitution as a legal right. The cases evidence that while ethnicity has been used for political purposes by the state (most specifically in Sikkim) ethnic movements in Darjeeling and east Nepal are also, to a very large extent, premised upon the promise of positive discrimination in the near future.

The case studies also show that ethnicity has emerged as a powerful basis for political contestation which manifests itself through movements for ethnic homelands (Gorkhaland, Limbuwan) as well as other tangible markers of ethnicity which are recognized and endorsed by the state. Once again, one of the important characteristics that I have attempted to highlight is that unlike other homeland movements within South Asia or beyond, the demand for homelands either by the Gorkhas or the Limbus does not necessarily seek secession from the country of origin. Whether it is Gorkhaland or Limbuwan, these homelands are located within India and Nepal and they represent more of a demand for control over the state and/or greater access to the resources that are controlled by the state. Ethnic politics is thus enacted within a frame which is recognized by all the participants, very much akin to Bourdieu's notion of the 'game' where all the players are aware of the limitations and positions that are accepted in the game. Although political actors do go back and forth across a number of different fields, they all make claims within familiar and accepted frameworks, whether imposed by the state (in India) or international organisations (in Nepal). Thus, the three cases also show a variation in ethnic movements and the strategies of ethnic actors, at least in the South Asian context.

*(iii) Limitations of the research*

One of the most significant limitations of this thesis is the lack of discussion of ethnic politics from the perspective of borderland studies, owing to time constraints in the field. The location of the three areas at the periphery of the nation-state has had a significant impact on their socio-political history as well as the formation of attitudes towards the nation itself. Sikkim's strategic location as a geo-political frontier has brought great financial and infrastructural benefits to the state, while the socio-economic status of neighbouring Darjeeling has remained unchanged for generations. Bordering Darjeeling and Sikkim is eastern Nepal which shares greater cultural and linguistic affinity with Sikkim and Darjeeling than with Kathmandu. Relatively more prosperous compared with other districts in Nepal (owing to commercial production of tea, ginger and cardamom) and with close border connections with India, Ilam district may have benefitted economically from its location but its distance from the centre has resulted in a lack of political recognition by the state. Understanding the impact of the international as well as regional borders would have made a significant contribution to a holistic understanding of identity formation in the eastern Himalaya and the lack of it is an important limitation of this thesis.

It is generally acknowledged that ethnicity is usually studied closely in the context of nations and nationalism. However the present thesis focused primarily on the processes of ethnic politics that facilitate a variation in political articulation within a single ethnic group which did not challenge notions of citizenship or the idea of a nation. Discussion on nations and nationalism would have added another layer of complexity to the arguments in the thesis but was not pursued in order to maintain the focus of the thesis on ethnic politics at the micro level. Although the case studies focused more on the demands for greater inclusiveness within the nation-state, the importance of a thorough discussion on nations and nationalism is recognized.

Methodological limitation was posed by the incessant strikes in Darjeeling that hampered my mobility which eventually affected data collection. In Sikkim, primary data collection (interviews) was comparatively more difficult owing to the reluctance on the part of respondents in Gangtok to give me an interview or by the limited information that they parted with during our interaction. Also, most of my respondents were male (especially in the rural areas) as most of the women were either shy, denied interviews on the basis that they had insufficient knowledge or would simply agree with the male members of the family. Most of the political leaders and executive heads of ethnic groups were male and thus, all interviews have an unintentional gender bias.

*(iv) Future research*

This thesis paves the way for further research on the region on a variety of topics ranging from politics, area studies and development studies to gender and class relations. Given the diversity of activities in the eastern Himalayan region, the prospects and avenues for future research are immense. Accordingly, the present thesis provides a base from which to propel studies on different topics. The case studies discussed in this thesis would be particularly useful not only as a resource on that particular area but would also interest those engaged in a comparative study of ethnicity, political movements, and minority politics.

Because of the multi-disciplinary approach of the thesis, it will find readership within disciplines ranging from politics and cultural studies to development studies. The primary focus of the research has been on recognizing and resolving the issue of political heterogeneity within an ethnic group. At the same time, the thesis throws open numerous questions which need to be analysed through further research. As mentioned before, the impact of borders and border politics in this geographically bound area is immense and thus provides scope to extend the study of borderlands further inland. Another important field of study that is often overlooked is gender. The present research acknowledges the dearth of research focusing on women in general as well as on gender relationships given that these relationships are now enacted in a rapidly changing socio-economic environment which is being spurred on by migration, development, globalization and changed family patterns.

An important and interesting aspect that would benefit from further academic exploration is that of class and other relationship based on different modes of production. Both Ilam and Darjeeling are home to sprawling tea estates yet there has been no thorough interrogation of class based activities or the lack of it in these areas. Sikkim on the other hand has a burgeoning middle class which has rapidly embraced globalization and its concomitant consumerism. This opens avenues for further enquiry on the nature of this class and its importance in the wider social, political and economic matrix.

The research also directs towards the enquiry of democracy itself. Political practices in these three areas highlight divergences in democratic practices which then have an impact on the agency as well as the outcome of elections, policies or other decisions that may affect the lives of the people. What qualifies as democracy in the region? Is digression from the principles of democratic practices a regional norm? What is the local interpretation of democracy and what factors affect or limit the choice of the people? Does democracy actually work for the greater good? How do democratic and religious values (which also have political connotations)

interact? These are a few of the questions that can further a critical analysis of democracy and its regional interpretations.

Ethnic politics has changed the static understanding of the self as well as the other living in the region. The process is so rapid that it overwhelms even those who are in the midst of it. Because of its contemporary nature, there is much to study on the various forms that identity politics is taking and thus, there is still a great vacuum that needs to be filled by further research on ethnic politics in the eastern Himalayan borderland.

# Annexe

## (i) Interview schedule

### (a) Nepal

1. Krishna Shrestha, Ilam- 22/07/ 2010
2. Madhav Basnett, Ilam-02/08/2010
3. Pradeep Limbu, Ilam-03/08/2010
4. Bishal Limbu, Ilam-17/08/2010
5. Bhardoj Gurung, Ilam-24/08/2010
6. Kumar Sunwar, Ilam-28/08/2010
7. Maila Limbu, Yangnam- 03/09/2010
8. Yangnam Group Interview-04/09/2010
9. Leela Jabegu, Phidim-04/09/2010
10. Upendra Jabegu, Phidim-07/09/2010
11. Deependra Kurumba, Phidim- 06/09/2010
12. Keshav Raj Chemjong, Phidim-07/09/2010
13. Gautam Jabegu, Phidim-09/09/2012
14. Chok Magu Group Interview-10/09/2010
15. Ram Sherma,Phidim-07/09/2010
16. Angben Sherpa, Kathmandu-22/09/2010
17. Arjun Limbu, Kathmandu-22/09/2010
18. Bairangi Kaila, Kathmandu-25/09/2010
19. Passang Limbu, Ilam-30/09/2010
20. Maya Limbu, Ilam-30/09/2010
21. Shekhar Yonzon, Ilam-30/09/2010



## **(b) Darjeeling**

1. Kunga Tamang, Darjeeling-21/12/2010
2. Happy Valley Tea Estate Union, Darjeeling-22/10/2010
3. Sunil Rai, Darjeeling-24/12/2010
4. Ringit Lepcha, Darjeeling- 26/12/2010
5. Naren Chettri, Kalimpong-29/12/2010
6. Rajesh Dhakal, Kalimpong-30/12/2010
7. Vijay Prasad, Kalimpong-30/12/2010
8. Rajesh Dhakal, Kalimpong-30/12/2010
9. Maya Dhal, Mungpoo, Darjeeling-03/01/2011
10. Ram Mukhia, Mungpoo, Darjeeling-04/01/2011
11. Gautam Tamang, Mungpoo, Darjeeling- 04/01/2011
12. Nirmal Pakrin, Mungpoo, Darjeeling-04/01/2011
13. Sushil Moktan, Bagrakot- 12/01/2011
14. Vishnu Bhujel, Bagrakot-13/01/2011
15. Bishnu Prasad Sharma, Bagrakot-13/01/2011
16. Mahesh Kumar Pradhan, Bagrakot-13/01/2011
17. Khadga Bajay, Bagrakot-14/01/2011
18. Krishna Khadga, Bagrakot-15/01/2011
19. Kishore Pradhan, Siliguri- 20/01/2011
20. BhaskarGolay, Siliguri-22/01/2011
- 21.I.B.Rai, Siliguri-21/01/2011
22. Kamal Tamang, New Delhi-13/02/2011

## **(c) Sikkim**

1. Gurung Association Interview-10/11/2010
2. Bhujel Association Interviews-13/12/2010
3. Mukhia Association Interviews-13/12/2010
4. Yogesh Rai, West Sikkim- 12/11/2010
5. Raj Rai, West Sikkim-12/11/2010
6. Shweta Rai, West Sikkim-12/11/2010
7. Arjun Tashi, West Sikkim-11/11/2010

8. Sancha Limboo, West Sikkim- 13/11/2010
9. Shyam Limboo, West Sikkim-13/11/2010
10. Kamal Subba, West Sikkim-14/11/2010
11. Bhim Kancha, West Sikkim-14/11/2010
12. K.Limboo, West Sikkim-16/11/2010
13. Pem Dorjee's Mother, West Sikkim-18/11/2010
14. Binita Tamang, West Sikkim-18/11/2010
15. Phul Maya Tamang, West Sikkim-18/11/2010
16. Dawa Tamang, West Sikkim-18/11/2010
17. Sharmila Tamang, West Sikkim-18/11/2010
18. Hangu Bahadur, West Sikkim-19/11/2010
19. Ravi Rai, Gangtok- 23/11/2010
20. S.K.Rai, Gangtok-28/01/2011

## **(ii) Treaty of Peace and Friendship Between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal**

Kathmandu,  
31 July 1950

The Government of India and the Government of Nepal, recognising the ancient ties which have happily existed between the two countries; Desiring still further to strengthen and develop these ties and to perpetuate peace between the two countries; Have resolved therefore to enter into a Treaty of Peace and Friendship with each other, and have, for this purpose, appointed as their plenipotentiaries the following persons, namely,

THE GOVERNMENT OF INDIA

His EXCELLENCY SHRI CHANDRESHWAR PRASAD NARAIN SINGH,  
Ambassador of India in Nepal.

THE GOVERNMENT OF NEPAL

MOHUN SHAMSHER JANG BAHADUR RANA,  
Maharaja, Prime Minister and Supreme Commander-in-Chief of Nepal,  
who having examined each other's credentials and found them good and in due form have agreed as follows:—

### **Article 1**

There shall be everlasting peace and friendship between the Government of India and the Government of Nepal. The two Governments agree mutually to acknowledge and respect the complete sovereignty, territorial integrity and independence of each other.

### **Article 2**

The two Governments hereby undertake to inform each other of any serious friction or misunderstanding with any neighbouring State likely to cause any breach in the friendly relations subsisting between the two Governments.

### **Article 3**

In order to establish and maintain the relations referred to in Article 1 the two Governments agree to continue diplomatic relations with each other by means of representatives with such staff as is necessary for the due performance of their functions. The representatives and such of their staff as may be agreed upon shall enjoy such diplomatic privileges and immunities as are customarily granted by international law on a reciprocal basis: Provided that in no case shall these be less than those granted to persons of a similar status of any other State having diplomatic relations with either Government.

### **Article 4**

The two Governments agree to appoint Consuls-General, Consuls, Vice-Consuls and other consular agents, who shall reside in towns, ports and other places in each other's territory as may be agreed to. Consuls-General, Consuls, Vice-Consuls and consular agents shall be provided with exequaturs or other valid authorization of their appointment. Such exequatur or authorization is liable to be withdrawn by the country which issued it, if considered necessary. The reasons for the withdrawal shall be indicated wherever possible. The persons mentioned above shall enjoy on a reciprocal basis all the rights, privileges, exemptions and immunities that are accorded to persons of corresponding status of any other State.

### **Article 5**

The Government of Nepal shall be free to import, from or through the territory of India, arms, ammunition or warlike material and equipment necessary for the security of Nepal. The procedure for giving effect to this arrangement shall be worked out by the two Governments acting in consultation.

### **Article 6**

Each Government undertakes, in token of the neighbourly friendship between India and Nepal, to give to the nationals of the other, in its territory, national treatment with regard to participation in industrial and economic development of such territory and to the grant of concessions and contracts relating to such development.

### **Article 7**

The Governments of India and Nepal agree to grant, on reciprocal basis, to the nationals of one country in the territories of the other the same privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, movement and other privileges of a similar nature.

### **Article 8**

So far as matters dealt with herein are concerned, this Treaty: cancels all previous Treaties, agreements, and engagements entered into on behalf of India between the British Government and the Government of Nepal.

### **Article 9**

This Treaty shall come into force from the date of signature by both Governments.

### **Article 10**

This Treaty shall remain in force until it is terminated by either party by giving one year's notice.

DONE in duplicate at Kathmandu this 31st day of July 1950.

(Signed )CHANDRESHWAR PRASAD NARAIN SINGH

For the Government of India.(Signed ) MOHUN SHAMSHER JANG BAHADUR RAN,

For the Government of Nepal

### **(iii) Grants under Article 275 (1) of the Constitution of India**

#### **Article 275(1) of the Constitution provides as follows:-**

Such sums as Parliament may by law provide shall be charged on the consolidated Fund of India in each year as grants-in-aid of the revenues of such States as Parliament may determine to be in need of assistance, and different sums may be fixed for different States: Provided that there shall be paid out of the Consolidated Fund of India as grants-in-aid of the revenues of a State such capital and recurring sums as may be necessary to enable that State to meet the costs of such schemes of development as may be undertaken by the State with the approval of the Government of India for the purpose of promoting the welfare of Scheduled Tribes in that State or raising the level of administration of the Scheduled Areas therein to that of the administration of the rest of the areas of that State”.

#### **Funding Pattern:**

This is a Central Sector Scheme and 100% grants are provided to the States.

Coverage: The scheme covers States namely Andhra Pradesh, Arunachal Pradesh , Assam , Bihar, Chhattisgarh, Goa, Gujarat, Himachal Pradesh, Jammu & Kashmir, Jharkhand, Karnataka, Kerala, Madhya Pradesh, Maharashtra, Manipur, Meghalaya, Mizoram, Nagaland, Orissa, Rajasthan , Sikkim , Tamil Nadu, Tripura, Uttar Pradesh, Uttarakhand and West Bengal having Scheduled Tribe Population..

#### **Features\_**

(i) The grants are provided to the States on the basis of ST population percentage in the State to the total tribal population of the Country.

(ii)The funds are released to the State Governments against specific projects for the welfare of Scheduled Tribes and strengthening of administration of tribal areas from the year 2000-2001. A part of funds are also utilised to establish Eklavya Model residential Schools to provide quality education to ST students from class VI to XII.

The Ministry of Tribal Affairs issued revised guidelines, in super session of the earlier circulars/ letters/ guidelines on the subject, under No.14011/ 9/ 2001-SG&C dated 2.7.2002 for adoption during 10th Five Year Plan.

## **Main Features of the Revised Guidelines dated 2.7.2002**

The following are the main features of the revised guidelines issued by this Ministry on 2.7.2002.

- (i) Grant under Article 275(1) is additionality to Normal Central Assistance to the State Plan.
- (ii) Adoption of the project approach and prior approval of the Ministry is necessary.
- (iii) The projects under the first proviso to Article 275(1) are part of the overall TSP and the Annual State Plans.
- (iv) Micro-plans for each ITDA/ MADA are to be prepared through multi-disciplinary teams.
- (v) Thrust areas are to be identified so that resources are better targeted rather than spreading too thin.
- (vi) Provision for utilization of 2% of the funds for project management has been made.
- (vii) Provision of expenditure upto 10% of the funds for maintenance and infrastructure with prior approval of the Ministry has also been made.
- (viii) Proportionate, at least 30% coverage of women is necessary.
- (ix) TSP Component of the Annual State Plan is to be put in a separate budget head under the administrative control of their respective Tribal Development Department.
- (x) Earmarking of 10% of funds out of the overall allocation under the first proviso to Article 275(1) for innovative projects has been provided which will be sanctioned amongst only those States who provide TSP in the State Plan in proportion to the ST population of the State in a single budget head and then have spent at least 75% in previous three years on an average.

### **Proposed Activities**

States can take up activities for strengthening the infrastructure in the sectors critical to enhancement of human development indices such as education, income generation, health irrigation, roads, bridges, forests, forests villages, electrification, communication, rural marketing, agriculture, animal husbandry, food processing, processing of MFPS, human resource development in technical and vocational spheres, water harvesting, resettlement of displaced persons, tribal land management, sports promotion. Generation of community welfare assets like residential schools, Maintenance of schools, Providing skilled teaching including in tribal language, Nutritional support to needy: children, mothers and elderly people, Community Grain Storage, Assured Drinking Water, and Other activities meant for welfare of Tribal population different from conventional development etc.

## **Eklavya Model Residential School**

### **REVISED GUIDELINES FOR SETTING UP EKLAVYA MODEL RESIDENTIAL SCHOOLS (June 2010)**

#### **I. Introduction**

- i) In the context of the trend of establishing quality residential schools for the promotion of education in all areas and habitations in the country, the Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) for ST students take their place among the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalayas, the Kasturba Gandhi Balika Vidyalayas and the Kendriya Vidyalayas.
- ii) Eklavya Model Residential Schools (EMRS) are set up in States/UTs with grants under Article 275(1) of the Constitution of India.
- iii) States/UTs are free to apportion funds out of their Article 275 (1) Grants to construct and run additional EMRS over the number sanctioned by the Ministry.
- iv) The State Governments/UT Administration will ask for new EMRS after ensuring that all the existing EMRSs have been made functional.
- v) The Ministry's support to the States/ UTs for the EMRSs programme and its expansion will be subject to the States/UTs ensuring high quality of management and running of the schools. Quality management indicates timely and smooth transition of funds allocated from the State Government/UT Administration to the management societies/schools; ensuring the recruitment of the desired number of teachers; ensuring the provision of medical facilities to staff and students; clean and hygienic surroundings and food for the children and providing a healthy, happy environment for the academic and overall development of the children. If the progress in the EMRSs is seen to be poor as a direct result of poor management and lack of adherence to standards the States/ UTs concerned would be unable to claim any more funds from the Ministry for this programme.

#### **II. Objectives of EMRS**

The objective of EMRS is to provide quality middle and high level education to Scheduled Tribe (ST) students in remote areas, not only to enable them to avail of reservation in high and professional educational courses and as jobs in government and public and private sectors but also to have access to the best opportunities in education at par with the non ST population. This would be achieved by:



- a) Comprehensive physical, mental and socially relevant development of all students enrolled in each and every EMRS. Students will be empowered to be change agent, beginning in their school, in their homes, in their village and finally in a larger context.
- b) Focus differentially on the educational support to be made available to those in Standards XI and XII, and those in standards VI to X, so that their distinctive needs can be met,
- c) Support the annual running expenses in a manner that offers reasonable remuneration to the staff and upkeep of the facilities.
- d) Support the construction of infrastructure that provides education, physical, environmental and cultural needs of student life.

### **III. Structure of EMRSs**

- a) Admission to these schools will be through selection/competition with suitable provision for preference to children belonging to Primitive Tribal Groups, first generation students, etc.
- b) Sufficient land would be given by the State Government for the school, play grounds, hostels, residential quarters, etc., free of cost.
- c) The number of seats for boys and girls will be equal.
- d) In these schools, education will be entirely free.
- e) Every class can have maximum 60 students preferably in 2 sections of 30 students each and the total sanctioned strength of the school will be 480 students.
- f) At the Higher Secondary level (class XI & XII), there will be three sections per class for the three streams in Science, Commerce & Humanities. The maximum sanctioned strength of the each section may be 30 students. In case of short fall in a section, ST students from other schools may be admitted as per procedure mentioned at above para (a).

### **IV. Management and Running of EMRS**

- i) The EMRSs may be affiliated either to the State or Central Boards of Secondary Education as desired fit by the State Governments/UT Administration.
- ii) The norms and standards for a school class VI to class VIII in respect of the number of teachers to be appointed, as provided in the Schedule to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009 shall be strictly followed.
- iii) Efforts may be made to recruit maximum no. of women teachers. At the time of recruitment, preference may be accorded to candidates whose spouses also qualify for selection as teachers. Women should be given preference for employment among the non-

teaching staff and in any case women be deployed in the posts of cook, helper and cleaner.

- iv) Each State Government/UT Administration would be solely responsible for the management and effective functioning of the EMRSs.
- v) State Governments/UT Administration may opt for any feasible/ suitable mode of management whether by autonomous education societies; public-private partnership with reputed educational institutions; in arrangement with the State Department of Education or any other mode found suitable.
- vi) All State Governments/UT Administration are encouraged to set up a society/use an existing registered education society for the management of the EMRSs. Such a society will be eligible for accepting donations, contributions and grants from individuals and institutions, for the purposes of augmenting the infrastructure/ facilities/ educational resources of the schools in the interest of quality education.
- vii) A Management Committee may be constituted for each EMRSs which could include, among others, reputed local NGOs involved with education. Help of such NGOs may be taken to organize socially relevant, development/ welfare extension programmes.
- viii) The tasks of school admissions, appointment of teachers, appointment of staff, personnel matters and day-to-day running of the schools would be handled entirely by the society chosen by the State Government/UT Administration and in the manner deemed most suitable.
- ix) The State Governments/UT Administration shall ensure and maintain the highest quality in the selection of teachers and staff for academic and extra-curricular excellence.
- x) The Government of India, Ministry of Tribal Affairs shall not accept any responsibility for the management of the School including student admission, staff recruitment, personnel policy / administration estate management etc.

## **V. Building Design and Layout**

- (i) The land allocation for each school should be 20 acres of which upto 3.5 acres may be used for the construction purposes. The remaining area must be maintained properly and a reasonable portion may be earmarked for sports/ games.
- (ii) The plan of the school must indicate a layout of the compound, including the kitchen, vegetable garden and plantation (fruits and nutritional trees like drumsticks (moringa/Sahjan), citrus) areas. States/UTs are encouraged to use fuel saving or renewable energy technologies in the school by availing of the schemes of the Ministry of New & Renewable Energy.
- (iii) The design of the EMRS must take certain essential components into account as well as

local, environmental characteristics. A list of suggested essential components is at Annexure.

(iv) The norms and standards of a school in respect of 'Building' as laid down in the Schedule to the Right of Children to Free and Compulsory Education Act 2009, shall be strictly ensured.

## **VI. Costs & Budget**

### **(i) Capital Cost (non-recurring)**

The capital cost for the school complex, including hostels and staff quarters will now be Rs. 12.00 crore with a provision to go up to Rs.16.00 crore in hill areas, deserts and islands. Any escalation will have to be met by State Government/UT.

### **(ii) Recurring Cost**

Recurring cost during the first year for schools would be @ Rs. 42000/- per child. This may be raised by 10% every second year to compensate for inflation etc.

(iii) For procurement of essential, non-recurring items like furniture/equipment including for the kitchen, dining, hostel, recreation, garden etc. @ Rs.10 lakh per school - will be allowed once in every 5 years, allowing for inflation.

(iv) The annual budget for recurring expenditure shall be formulated and placed before the Management Committee for approval at the end of the each financial year for the next year. The rates for calculation of recurring costs may be based on the prevailing rates sanctioned for the Jawahar Navodaya Vidyalaya from time to time.

(v) The amount under recurring cost, due to each functioning EMRS, would be released by the State/UT Government to the bank account of the EMRS. The bank account of each EMRS for this purpose may be opened jointly in the name of the Principal of the EMRS and any Member of the Management Committee who is also a Government official.

## **VII. Review and Monitoring**

(i) The progress of implementation of the scheme will be reviewed by the Union Ministry of Tribal Affairs through periodic reports from the State Government/ implementing agencies.

(ii) The Ministry of Tribal Affairs will conduct review meetings during which States/UTs

would be required to make presentations on the progress of their EMRSs.

(iii) The guidelines for the use of the grants under Article 275 (1) provide for an amount up to 2% of the total allocation to be used for administration of the programme. This would be applicable in case of EMRS.

(iv) A centralized mechanism for the online monitoring of the EMRSs would be developed. Meanwhile States/UTs may strength their own systems/methods.

The Government of India is free to make any modification in the aforesaid conditions in consultation with selected State Governments/ UTs whenever deemed necessary.

## **B. Special Central Assistance to Tribal Sub Plan**

The Special Central Assistance (SCA) is provided by the Ministry of tribal Affairs to the State Government as an additive to the State TSP. SCA is Primarily meant for family-oriented income-generation schemes in sectors of agriculture, horticulture sericulture and animal husbandry cooperation. A part of SCA (not more than 30%) is also permitted to be used for development of infrastructure incidental to such income generating schemes.

SCA is intended to be additive to State Plan efforts for tribal development and forms part of TSP strategy. The objective of the strategy is two folds:-

Socio-economic development of STs

Protection of trials against exploitation. of the above, SCA primarily funds schemes/projects for economic development of STs.

### **The GOI guidelines broadly lay down the following norms:-**

SCA is primarily meant for income generating family oriented schemes and infrastructure incidental thereto (not more than 30% of the total outlay) Wherever a scheme is provided for any Central Sector/Centrally Sponsored Schemes (CSS), SCA should not be utilised for the same. Rather, the allocations available under specific schemes can be availed of Major infrastructure development should be supplemented from the TSP flow, rather that being catered out SCA like roads, electrification etc.

Schemes for funding demonstration units should not be financed out of SCA. Rather, the follow-up of demonstrations should be catered to looking to the Special disadvantages that

the tribal funds themselves with.

Tribal populace below povertyline should alone be supported with SCA financed activities.

In any specific schematic projects financed by outside agencies, both national and international, normally a part of the outlay is proposed as State Government contribution. Such contribution should flow from normally State Plan and not out of SCA.

Wherever State Government Organizations like Tribal Development Cooperative Corporations (TDCCs) or Forest Development Corporations (FDCs) are dealing with schemes related to tribal welfare and development, the equity based should not be financed out of SCA, without prior approval of the GOI. This will lead to better monitoring of the concerned activities.

Specific sectors related to the Tribal need to be given a fillip by special schemes in the areas like sericulture, horticulture, etc out of SCA.

SCA is released to the States normally in three installments and the entire amounts expected to be made available by the end of third quarter. The releases would be subject to the performance by the State Governments and the utilization of previously released funds. Wherever conjunctive flow of funds can be ensured from other on going development programmes, this must be dovetailed so as to have a better spatial and demographic coverage.

**SCA is released for the economic development of the following :-**

Integrated Tribal Development Project (ITDP) area contiguous large area in which ST population is 50% or more out of a total population.

Modified Area Development Approach (MADA) pockets identification of pockets containing 50% or more of ST population out of a total population of 10000 and above.

Clusters-identified pockets containing 50% or more ST Population out of a total population of 5000.

Primitive Tribes-identified isolated communities among the STs characterised by the low rate of population, pre-agricultural level of technology and extremely low levels of literacy (so far 75 Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) have been identified.

Displaced tribal population outside (a),(b),(c) and (d) above.

Assistance for Margin Money Loan Programme (MMLP) for Tribal Finance and Development Corporations in the States to implement MMLP.

Special Projects-Specific Project proposals are also received and sanctioned.

So far as the procedural aspect is concerned, the guidelines are as follows :-

SCA should be allocated by the State Governments/UT Administrations to the ITDPs and no part of SCA should be released to any department at the State level, Transfer of funds to implementing departments/agencies if required should be done by the ITDP. to the corresponding officer of the implementing agency/line.

ITDP should prepare 5 year/Annual Plans depending upon the local parameters. Activities of, non-plan nature should not be catered to from SCA.

To fulfill the constitutional provisions, the schemes on which SCA is proposed to be utilized, should be specified in the annual TSPs of the States/UTs and administrative approval of the Government of India be obtained Financial sanctions however need not be obtained on a case by case basis.

### **Norms for allocation of Special Assistance**

- Release of SCA would be entirely based on the utilization/ performance by the State Governments.
- SCA funds earmarked by the Ministry to ITDPs should be released directly to the ITDP by the State Governments.
- Transfer of funds to implementing departments/ agencies, if required, should be done by the ITDPs.
- SCA is released for the economic development of the following:
  - a) Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs) are generally contiguous large areas of the size of one or more Development Block in which the ST population is 50% or more of the total population.
  - b) Modified Area Development Approach (MADA): These are identified pockets with a concentration of tribals 50% or more ST population within a total population of a minimum of 10,000 persons and above.

c) Clusters: These are identified pockets of tribal concentration containing 50% or more ST population within a total population of about 5,000 or more.

d) Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs): Identified isolated communities among the STs characterized by a low rate of population, a pre-agricultural level of technology and extremely low levels of literacy.

e) Dispersed tribal population outside (a), (b), (c) and (d) above.

### **Norms for Allocation for Special Central Assistance**

- The TSP component of various Departments/ Sectors under the State Plan should be put in a separate Budget Head of the Tribal Development Department of the State.

- Of the total allocation under SCA to TSP, an amount of 10% is released to the States based upon a system of weighted criteria, listed below:

a) Of the total allocation under SCA to TSP, an amount of 10% is released to the States based upon a system of weighted criteria, listed below:

b) Adoption of the TSP approach in letter and spirit by ensuring that the entire TSP funds at least in equal proportion to the population of tribals in the State, are placed in one Budget Head under the administrative control of the Tribal Development Department of the State Government for more integrated and focused planning and implementation of projects/ schemes;

c) Thereafter, at least on an average 75% of the approval Tribal Sub-Plan funds are actually utilized/ released to the implementing agencies in the previous three financial years through the budget head of the Tribal Development Department of the State; and d) Funds awarded, as incentives to the State, should be utilized only for employment and income generating activities benefiting the tribals. • 90% of the total allocation under SCA is further allocated amongst the States on the basis of the share of the programmes under the broad strategy of the Tribal Sub Plan, namely, Integrated Tribal Development Projects (ITDPs), Modified Area Development Approach Pockets (MADA), Clusters and Primitive Tribal Groups (PTGs) and is calculated in proportion to the Scheduled Tribe Population under each programme.

### **Scheme for Assistance to State Tribal Development and Finance Corporations(STFDCs)**

This is a Centrally Sponsored scheme. STFDCs are functioning in States and UTs having sizeable Scheduled Tribes population. They are playing an extremely useful role in mobilization of finances for economic development of the Scheduled Tribes. They act as

promoters and catalysts for generating credit from financial institutions, providing missing inputs by way of margin money loans and subsidy to the target group. STFDCs motivate ST families to undertake suitable economic development schemes.

**Objectives:**

- 1) Identification of eligible ST families and motivating them to undertake economic development schemes.
- 2) Sponsoring those schemes to financial institutions for credit support.
- 3) Providing financial assistance in form of margin money on low rate of interest and subsidy in order to reduce their repayment liability, and
- 4) Providing necessary link/ tie up with other poverty alleviation programme.

A person belonging to Scheduled Tribes living below the poverty line is eligible for assistance under this scheme from the State Scheduled Tribes Development Corporation. Under the scheme, State Government/ UT Administration has to provide 51% share for the corporation – balance 49% is to be provided by the Ministry as a Central Government's share.

**Development of Forest Village**

After the enactment of Forest (Conservation) Act, 1980 State Governments faced problems in taking up non-forestry developmental activities relating to infrastructure for improving socio-economic conditions of people living in the villages located in the forest areas. Consequent to the intervention of this Ministry, steps like stopping of illegal eviction of genuine tribal people living in the forests, allowing diversion of forest lands for providing the basic and essential developmental facilities to the tribal/forest villages etc have been achieved.

This programme was launched during the 10th Plan as a one time measure with for Integrated development of 2690 forest villages originally identified with about 2.5 lakh tribal families with a view to:

- I. to raise the Human Development Index (HDI) of the inhabitants of the Forest Villages
- II. Provide basic facilities and services like food, safe drinking water, health care, primary education, approach roads, other infrastructural facilities etc.

**Activities**

Under the programme, infrastructure work relating to basic services and facilities viz. approach roads, healthcare, primary education, minor irrigation, rainwater harvesting, drinking water, sanitation, community halls, etc. and activities related to livelihood are taken



up for implementation.

**Process of approval :** The project proposals received from the States for the activities to be undertaken in the villages are scrutinized by the Ministry of Environment & Forests and put up for the consideration of the Project Appraisal Committee constituted for the purpose. Joint Secretary in the MTA acts as the chairperson of the Committee in the normal course. As per recommendation of Project Appraisal Committee, the proposals are approved and funds released after getting the financial concurrence.

**Implementing Agency:**

Forest Development Agency (FDA) - forest division level, Joint Forest Management Committees (JFMCs) - village level, composed of all willing adult members of the village

**Funding pattern**

The funding is done under the programme of 'Special Central Assistance to the Tribal Sub-plan Fund flows from Ministry of Tribal Affairs to Department of Tribal Welfare/ Tribal Development of the States and then to the implementing agencies.

Since forest villages are most backward and are located in forest areas, they have not got benefits of development over the years. To enable these settlements/forest villages to get the fruits of development, to begin with 100% financial assistance is provided under this special Programme. As a first step, funding of proposals for each forest village has been generally given for Rs.15 lakh each. Additional funding of Rs 15 lakh per village has been initiated in the second phase during 2006-07.

**Impact:** Teams comprising of Director/ Dy. Secretary/ Under Secretary level officers of the Ministry had been deputed to various States during 2006-07 to get a first hand information on the progress of the activities undertaken in the forest villages for which funds were released by the Ministry. The reports received from the teams has been very encouraging and based on the same and other factors, extension of the programme by another at least two years has been done so that sufficient developmental activities take place in these villages, which are comparatively backward.

#### **(iv) REVENUE ORDER NO. I.**

With reference to Order dated the 2nd January 1897, it is hereby again notified to all Kazis, Thikadars and Mandals in Sikkim that no Bhutias and Lepchas are to be allowed to sell, mortgage Or sub-let any of their land to any person “other than a Bhutia or a Lepcha without the express sanction of the Durbar or officers empowered by the, Darbar in their behalf whose order will be obtained by the landlord concerned. If any one disobeys he will be severely punished.

In this order the term ‘mortgage’ means mortgaging the whole or part of holding the Biyaz or masakata system and the term sub-let means sub-letting the whole or part of holding on the Pakhuria system.

#### **DEFINITION**

- (1) ‘Biyaz’ mean mortgaging land to another person who enjoys the produce of the land as interest, so long at the principal loan remains unpaid.
- (2) ‘Masikata’ means mortgaging of fields to a creditor who enjoys the produce of the field as an annual installment towards the loan. ‘
- (3) ‘Pakhuria’ means sub-letting, where a rayot allows another new rayot to settle upon a portion of his own holding, generally receiving from him some rent in cash and some assistance in cultivating his own fields

Gangtok,  
The 17thMay, 1917.  
C. A. Bell,  
Superintendent,  
Sikkim St

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