Tribal detour in Darjeeling Hills

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Tribal identity in the mountainous Darjeeling area of West Bengal is being used as a tool by the state to dismantle the renewed Gorkha agitation. An analysis of the ways in which the classificatory arrangement by which the state identifies and designates communities as tribes has become a politically provocative and productive tool to divide the hill communities.

This brief communiqué is but a reflection on the contemporary tribal situation in Darjeeling hills, West Bengal. Besides being the historical site of a durable ethnic conflict (i.e., known as Gorkhaland movement) Darjeeling hills have acquired political prominence in the recent past for being the playground of intra-ethnic revivalism and tribalism. In addition to the Bhutias, Lepchas, Sherpas and Yolmos – the already designated tribes of Darjeeling district since India’s independence – majority of the hill communities today are busy both in claiming and establishing their claims of being a tribe of the region.

Nepali Social Structure

Indian Nepalis corroborate to the idea of a speech community that is composed of both caste Hindus and Indo-Mongoloid groups. Caste system has been the historical basis of Nepali social structure. Since Nepali caste system in Darjeeling hills has been lax in nature compared to its Nepal counterpart,[1] it successfully accommodated the Indo-Mongoloid groups into its fold. Sanskritisation had been at work in the hills ever since the mid-19th century. Available historical data is capable of establishing the fact that the Mongoloid communities felt content with the Nepali caste system and quite often despised the cause of being tribes.[2]

But in the new millennium the Tamangs along with Limbus did mobilise themselves for tribal status and were accorded with the scheduled tribe (ST) status in 2002. This energised the other Mongoloid groups (like Rais, Magars, Gurungs, Sunwars, Yakhas, Thamis to name a few) of Darjeeling hills clamour for the ST status. Such a programmatic vision for the attainment of protective discrimination measures by the majority of the hill communities is
certainly an unprecedented phenomenon that ran parallel with the movement called Gorkhaland.

As is well known, tribal identity especially among the caste Hindu Nepalis, is arguably a contentious issue. During the late 1990s Subhash Ghising had to face socio-political upheavals as a ready reaction to his decision to play out the “tribal identity card” as a hold-all phenomenon for all the hill Nepalis including the Bahuns and Chhetris (twice born high castes) while the government took a “safer” stand by not indulging into the affairs of the hills. Similar kind of social undercurrent is at work now but the hill communities seem to be in agreement with the political project of tribal status so much so that the tagadharis (men of sacred thread – the higher caste groups) are inclined to join the race in which their matwali (men of liquor – the low caste/status groups) counterparts have already made some discernable progress.

Role of GTA

These issues become a matter of wider significance when one notices that the tripartite agreement called Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA), signed on 18 July, 2011, and the subsequent approval of the GTA Act, 2011 by the government by March 2012 incorporates in it a provision stipulating that the state government facilitate the demand of ST status for all the Gorkhas except the scheduled castes. Not surprisingly, the three designated Nepali scheduled castes like Kami (blacksmiths), Damai (tailors), and Sarki (cobbler) numbering roughly 78,000 (as per 2001 census)[3] have now jumped into the bandwagon.

It is interesting to note that growing tribalism in Darjeeling hills has appeared as a livewire of hill politics at that period of time when ethnic revivalism took place in much more prominent fashion in neighbouring Nepal since the 1990s.

The ethnic revivalism that took place in Nepal since the 1990s is largely based on the attempts to ethnicise caste and community identities to search for an alternative non-hierarchical social imaginary that could provide an egalitarian alternative identity and can even alter the given power structures of society. The inclination to ethnicise community identities while rebuffing sanskritisation is at work in the contemporary Darjeeling hills.

To effectively mobilise the aspiration to become a tribe the Mongoloid communities are foregrounding their past traditions to address the “authentic” and “indigenous” qualifiers of being a tribe. An equal amount of emphasis is also being given to distance their communities from the “vices” of sanskritisation – which they now consider as a process that weakened their organic link with the rich heritage of a “tribalist past”.

Tribal Development Board

The problem becomes more intricate when one takes into account the recent government
decision to create a separate development board for the already designated tribes (viz, Lepchas and Tamangs) of the hills as a measure to better serve their interest. Luring the Lepchas and Tamangs through a separate development board and packages has added new incentives for ethnicising the idea of tribe.

The emphasis on tribal development boards or for that matter favouring the communities to become a tribe might not be a rational response to their region specific practical interests. Nevertheless the collaborationist gesture adopted by the state was legitimised on the ground of “development populism”. The concept of tribe in contemporary Darjeeling hills has been strategically posed along the continuum of politics-community-power. In a situation like this – where the state approval meant almost every community could become a tribe – answers to vexed questions like “who is a tribe?” or “what is a tribe?” were to be sought not in ethnographic literature or in welfare imperatives, but in the discourses of power.

The ethnicisation of tribal identity in the contemporary Darjeeling hill is certainly a new development, which also helped the state scale down the intensity and pace of the renewed call for Gorkhaland that took place in the recent past during July to October 2013. However, the question is whether such a policy of “engaging tribe” – a strategy profitably used by the United States (US) in pacifying anti-US and anti-imperial feelings of the Iraqis and Afghans - will reduce the concept of the tribe to merely a “policy category”?

In Conclusion

It is as a consequence of this policy that many a community in the Darjeeling hills are working hard to revive their erstwhile practices linked with ancestral worship, “animism”, Shamanistic and / or Buddhist rituals and so on. Through their revival of their “tribalist” cultural traditions the hill communities are trying to search for and adopt new identities. This will change their relationships with power and privilege and could open up space for inter-community conflicts based on differential political affiliations.

This is how the tribal identity issue has taken an ethnic detour in contemporary Darjeeling hills, particularly since the state itself is seen to encourage such a detour. The situational conditions, produced and reproduced through the discourse of power, are sharpening the fervour for authenticity and making distinctiveness and exclusivity a widespread aspiration. The tribal identity claims of different communities has loosened the idea of tribe from its classical anthropological moorings and pushed it towards being a politically productive “notion”.

Notes

[1] T B Subba has analysed in detail the differences between Nepali caste system in India and Nepal and commented at length regarding the socio-historical forces that resulted into
the formation of a relatively weak caste structure among the Indian Nepalis compared to their brethren there in Nepal. For details, see Subba (1985:23-26).

[2] Surendra Munshi and Ugen Lama’s study on the Tamangs of Darjeeling did reveal the significance of caste in the complex and multidimensional process of expressing their identity through the Nepali Tamang Buddhist Association during the 1970s. For details, see Munshi and Lama (1978).

[3] The data were collected from the website of Backward Classes Welfare Department, Government of West Bengal. The number of the three designated Nepali Schedules Castes in West Bengal (Kami, Damai and Sarki) is 78,202. See Government of West Bengal (2001).

References

