

The Ethnic and Religious Fusion of Darjeeling: A Historical Reflection

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Abstract

The Tibetan form of Buddhism has migrated into and found its base in some places within India especially after 1959. When the migration took place prior to 1959, there existed constant relations between the two nations (India and Tibet) which had seen the doors open for religious tolerance and intermingling. However Buddhism has always been credited to be the religion/ study that had emerged from the pious grounds of India.

Though many hypotheses have been proposed on the origin of the Lepchas, it is now recognized by the government that they were and are the original inhabitants of the region now covering districts of Kalimpong, Darjeeling, and the state of Sikkim. These three regions are not new to migrants since the British era. Even prior to the British, migration had taken place in Sikkim especially from Tibet. So, one may rightly say that Tibetans were the first migrants into Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim.

The areas of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim, are also where migrants brought along with them various forms of religions and cultures that they had been practicing. Consequently, there are different religions that are prevalent in Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Sikkim namely Buddhism, Hinduism, Christianity, and Islam which are being taken up by the society that resides in these parts. The harmony in which all these religions coincide and live harmoniously, sometimes adopting the others customs and traditions yet preserving their own is a uniqueness of these parts.

Keywords: Buddhism, Shamanism, History, Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

Introduction

Darjeeling, known also as the Queen of hills, if only the sacred hills that surround this historical place could speak, one would know the true legacy of our hills and its people. The third highest peak in the world Mt. Kangchenjunga, which is also being the protective deity to the indigenous people through who's blessing we are still believed to be enjoying the essence of wellbeing has a lot to narrate if deeply researched upon.

History as we speak needs no explanation, it would focus on the past, as such we need to understand the geographical extent of Darjeeling, its status prior to independence and its relation with countries of Nepal, Bhutan, and Sikkim. In short we can narrate the history of

Darjeeling from the days of the British as the Kingdom of Sikkim where it was noted that the inhabitants were the Lepchas. It was documented by Captain George Alymer Lloyd and J.W. Grant (1829) when they were asked to intervene by the then Governor General Lord William Bentinck, regarding the border dispute that had arisen between the countries of Nepal and Sikkim (Sikkim in those days was an independent country). Captain Lloyd reverted to the East India Company of the place called Darjeeling which could have been in his opinion used as a sanatorium; it was later approved by the Company. Here again the real motive behind Lloyd's interest in Darjeeling as a sanatorium or as a strategically important place to invade or trade with Tibet, Sikkim, and Nepal can be questioned.

However the Maharaja of Sikkim or the then Chogyal was approached for the said land of Darjeeling and a lease as the Deed of Grant was made between the Chogyal and the East India Company 1835. Dr. Archibald Campbell was made the first superintendent of the sanatorium in 1839 after its completion. He brought Chinese tea seeds in 1841 and started growing tea. It may be noted here that tea is a labour oriented industry as such many historians believe that laborers were brought in from Nepal and so the coming of Nepalese into the Darjeeling region but again one must not forget the Gorkha invasion since 1780's wherein a lot of territories of Sikkim was captured which was later returned to Sikkim after the Anglo- Gorkha War (1814-1816) through the Treaty of Titalia 1817 after signing the treaty of Sugauli 1816 with Nepal. As such migration from Nepal could have taken place well before the plantation of tea. The area of Kalimpong on the other hand came under the British after signing of Treaty of Sinchula 1865 between the British and Bhutan (Anglo-Bhutan War) where even Dooars was ceded to the British. The influx of Tibetans into these parts increased after 1959 when China occupied Tibet; prior to that Tibetans mostly pilgrims and traders visited India and some settled in parts of Darjeeling Hills.

The People

The Lepchas that we know of are considered as the indigenous people, their presence is widely recorded and even the gazetteer speaks of them as the first settlers in these parts which includes present day Darjeeling Hills, Kalimpong and Sikkim. Their history is a different chapter which needs detailed revision and understanding but the fact that they have incorporated different beliefs, faith, and religion which have come over the years speaks in itself that they are very accommodating. If we look at the History of Sikkim since Darjeeling was part of Sikkim it would be clear that the Lepchas were subdued by the Tibetans in terms of religion, as Buddhism was brought into their way of life and then the making of a kingdom. The arrival of missionaries further made the Rongs incline towards Christianity, as they incorporated this religion. Nowadays we can come across Lepchas who are Buddhist, Christians, Hindus, and few remain to their roots of Bon or Mun faith.

The Tibetans who came as traders and pilgrims from Tibet via the trade routes into India made Kalimpong their trading hub. As a result many settled in parts of Kalimpong after intermingling with the local population. Where there was trade the merchants also followed. Merchants who were of the business class known as the Marwari's originally from Rajasthan who are famous for

business dealings settled in these parts. Today a lot of Biharis can also be seen doing business now that there is peace and tranquility and there is ample amount of scope for business due to the strategic location of the region especially in terms of Tourism. For this influx of Tourism and intermingling of various communities this area has been mapped and is being advertised globally. This globalisation of the Darjeeling Hills should be credited to the revered Mt. Kangchenjunga who's beauty and the weather it helps to maintain has attracted people from all over the world.

The Gorkhas or the Nepalese who have settled in the Darjeeling Hills can be traced well before the British came into these parts as narrated earlier the invasion of Nepal since 1780's when Darjeeling was a part of Sikkim, then there was the need for labour for cultivation of Tea in the hills of Darjeeling, the enlistment of Gorkhas from Nepal into the British Army are some of the ways the Nepalese settled in these areas. Many took up the profession of business, administrative jobs, and became politically active today. Most of the Indian Nepalese settled in Darjeeling Hills have made a name for themselves as any proud Indian would irrespective of the hardships they had to face over the years.

Religion

The religion which was practiced by the earliest settlers the Lepchas in Darjeeling, Kalimpong Hills in the past was Animism or nature worship. Later after the arrival of Tibetan immigrants, many Animists were converted to Buddhism and for several years the Buddhist religion flourished in these regions. With the rapid advent of British along with their culture and religion many more started following Christianity. The Nepalese, Biharis, and Bengali immigrants brought their own culture and religion and converted many to Hinduism. The migrant Muslims also came to these regions with their religions and culture with a few followers, which have increased in numbers at present. The Jain adherents migrated from Rajasthan. They are mostly business classes who have come as traders. There are many religions in Darjeeling Hills which people follow.

- **Hinduism:** In Darjeeling Hills Hindu religion is followed by a large number of people. Hinduism spread during the Gorkha invasion and the British rule, where the people from Nepal migrated here, they mostly followed Hindu religion. It is an ancient religion which is still practiced by most of the people. The Hindu religion is followed by Chettris, Rais, Pradhans, Subbas, Mangars, Gurungs, Tamangs, Kamis, Damais, Sarkis, Ghartis, Marwaris, Biharis, and Bengalis etc. Though Nepalese, Marwaris, Bengalis, and Biharis follow Hinduism, they practice in different ways and to different deities.
- **Animism:** Animism has been practiced in Darjeeling Hills before any religion prevailed in these parts. The Lepchas followed the Bon faith or Mun Faith. The Lepcha faith is based on nature worship. They believe that animals, wind, rain, sun, rocks, and mountains too have souls or spirit. Many Authors have described the religion of Lepchas as Animism and some as Shamanism.
- **Buddhism:** There are many religions in the Darjeeling Hills, out of which Buddhism is one of the principal religions followed by the people of these regions. One can see a lot

of monasteries which would itself tell about the considerable amount of Buddhist population. Buddhism is not only practiced by the Buddhists but also the Newar community, who follow the Hindu rituals and Culture, celebrate some of the Buddhist festivals. It is said that their ancestors were Buddhist but with time they have assimilated themselves to Hindu religion.

- **Christianity:** With the advent of British East India Company in nineteenth century, Christian missionaries too set foot in Darjeeling hills. In the year 1870 the British missionaries started opening schools, sanitariums etc. Macfarlane of the Scotch Mission, the pioneer of Christianity in these regions started with a school in Darjeeling and with time he had established many more schools and he started a hospital with training facilities for nurses and compounders in Kalimpong too. His efforts were completely successful as the people of these regions gradually converted to Christian faith.
- **Islam:** One of the other religions in Darjeeling hills is the Islam religion which is followed by the Muslims and Tibetan Muslims. Here one can see the majority of Muslims at Friday midday prayer which they follow religiously.

Conclusion

The Hills of Darjeeling have always been open to all religious sects and culture, this region has been tolerant and welcoming to all and this possibility is and has been made through the simple nature of the real inhabitants of this region being the Lepchas. They have remained very welcoming to all sections of the society and till date follow a neutral way of living. Yes, they have also not been untouched by the cultural change that has taken place in Darjeeling Hills. Inter-marriages between different sections of society have further caused the assimilation of different religions. It has been observed and seen that groups belonging to different sections of society be it the Lepchas, Bhutias, Gurungs, Tamangs, Sherpas, Nepalese, Biharis, Marwaris, etc. the Darjeeling Hills have been open to assimilation in terms of inter-marriage and this has paved the way to the formation of acculturation of all religious sects prevailing here. The different sections have now come to accept this assimilation of culture of different religions and have also created a unique environment where all religion is tolerated and given its due respect. The term religious and cultural harmony which is the foundation of our great country and the idea of our founding fathers of this Nation we call India can be found in existence in the Hills of Darjeeling where people of different communities are termed or known by their own unique and distinctive classification or name. We have all learnt to live in harmony, respecting and adhering to each ethnic group's own respective traditions, culture, and rituals which have been preserved. Each culture is precious and preservation is important, the Darjeeling Hills has been able to preserve all such culture and tradition and the ones witnessing and following this cultural bonding should try in all possible ways to preserve this heritage and unity while doing so, one must not forget that all living beings are living on the same planet, the only difference is that the people here are holding different languages from different countries and states. However as human beings everyone is the same and the cause and condition which makes people are also the same. Hence it is important to be a compassionate human being rather than being just a human being. Buddhism has always taught and continues to teach compassion and tolerance. It is the essence of life, to be compassionate is not undermining one but evolving our self into being a better person. Not just for the community in this case but for the whole of humanity.

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