



‘Becoming’ Tribal: Heritage, Identity and Ethno Politics in Chetan Raj Shrestha’s *The Light of His Clan*

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Abstract

This paper seeks to study the question of the ‘politics of identity’ and ‘identity politics’ of ‘being’ and ‘becoming’ tribal in the contemporary times among the Indian Nepalis with the onslaught of modernity and urbanisation. The novel, *The Light of his Clan* is set in present day Gangtok and portrays the quotidian lives of people of a very modern and urban Gangtok through the eyes of Chetan Raj Shrestha. The paper seeks to critique recent trend among ethnic groups of Nepali origin in Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills in ‘becoming tribal’ through the discursive strategies adopted by the ‘Chandanths’ to prove their identity as a primordial, indigenous people to assert their ‘tribalness’ in order to appropriate facilities, entitlements and resources. The protagonist, Kuldeep Chandanth an ex –Minister of the Government of Sikkim is the ‘light of his clan’. The ageing patriarch who represents the old way of life is a repository of his people’s heritage, culture and identity. He takes immense pride in the glorious past of the Chandanths who were one of the first communities to have migrated from Nepal to Sikkim. Despite opposition from Kuldeep jiu, the Chandanths of the younger generation aspire to get the Chandanth community recognized as a Schedule Tribe for better opportunities and financial benefits from the government. The focal point of the novel is the effect of globalisation and urbanisation on culture, values of an ethnic community and the antagonistic relation between modernization and dwindling ethnic identities. *The Light of his Clan* foreshadows the issues of identity which shape politics and attitudes in the region today.

Keywords

heritage, identity, tribal status, ethno politics

Generally, in India communities that are identified as backward, or marginalised in the political and socio economic arenas like education, health, communication are recognised as Scheduled Tribes. After Independence the Indian Government has enacted special provisions for affirmative action through protective constitutional measures to uplift and advance such peoples (qtd. in Tamang, Sitlhou 35). The government laid down certain mandates for ST recognition such as cultural distinctiveness, purity, geographical isolation, linguistic exclusivity etc. The ‘affirmative actions’ promised to ‘uplift ‘and ‘advance’ peoples with S T status were reservation of quotas and seats in government jobs, educational institutions, special developmental packages and other entitlements (qtd. in Middleton 18). With the passage of time almost every backward community sought tribal rights and recognition. This paper seeks to critique the recent trend among the Sikkimese Nepali ethnic groups in ‘becoming tribal’ through the discursive strategies adopted by the Chandaris or the Chandanth a fictitious community created by Chetan Raj Shrestha in *The Light of his Clan* (2016). Shrestha’s second novel *The Light of His Clan* is set in present day Gangtok. It portrays the quotidian lives of people of a very modern and urban Gangtok. The novel throws light on the contemporary socio-political realities of modern day Sikkim where ethnic communities compete to prove themselves as primordial, indigenous and tribal to appropriate facilities, entitlements and resources. The novelist humorously and satirically presents the race among various communities for reservation through the words of the protagonist Kuldeep Chandanth “These days everyone had glorious histories and everyone had been oppressed by history. The speeches were identical, appeals to pride and hurt, the speechmakers were the same, rivals in self-degradation and arguing at once for glory and squalor” (92).

Many political parties turned this assertion into a political instrument thereby turning the policy of reservation to the politics of reservation. The Indian Nepalis of Sikkim also accepted the reservation politics. The conglomerate Nepali speaking, predominantly Hindu Nepalis of Sikkim began to revive their distinct ethnic identities in an attempt to receive recognition as tribals. Ethnic groups formed associations and started demanding for S T status. However, many such proposals were rejected by the Ministry of Tribal Affairs. Such rejections made the ethnic groups even more determined and they further strengthened their demand and renewed their tactics to attain the coveted ST status. This led ethnic associations to adopt various discursive tactics to prove themselves as authentic, indigenous and hence tribal. Demands for recognition as Scheduled Tribes also helped in affirming their indigeneity and therefore belongingness to the region and consequently to the nation state. The pursuit of S T status among the Sikkimese Nepalis was not just aimed at securing ethnic rights and reviving one’s lost authentic ethnic culture but also to help negotiate their identity by affirming their claims to indigeneity in Sikkim. It also addresses at large the bigger question of assimilation and inclusion of these ethnic groups within the mainstream in post-colonial India.

Quoting Arora, to understand the ‘politics of identity’ and the ‘identity politics’ of ‘being and becoming tribal’ (1) in Sikkim it is necessary to discuss briefly the history of ethno politics in Sikkim. The kingdom of Sikkim was predominantly inhabited by the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Tsong or the Limbus. The Lepchas were autochthonous to Sikkim, the Bhutias from Tibet and Bhutan had settled in Sikkim in the 13th century and

the Tsongs or the Limbus whose ancestral lands were situated in west Sikkim. Towards the end of the 18th century many people from north-eastern Nepal fled to Sikkim during the Gorkha Conquest. In the 19th century the British (who wielded administrative power in Sikkim from 1888-1918) and the nobles of the Namgyal Dynasty encouraged migration of Nepalese artisans, labourers and agriculturists to Sikkim. A major share of labour and taxes came from the Nepalese and they also served as a buffer against the Tibetan influence (qtd. in Vandenhelsken 168). Although by the 19th century the population of Nepali ethnic groups had become greater than the autochthones they occupied the lowest rungs of the Sikkimese feudal society. British colonisers categorised the Sikkimese population into the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalese. In the 19th century all the Nepalese belonging to various ethnic groups whether tribes or castes irrespective of their descent, race, religion were straitjacketed into the homogeneous category of Nepalis. The multi ethnic and linguistic peoples some of whom did not directly hail from Nepal but were only culturally connected to Nepal were not identified on the basis of their lingua franca-Nepali rather than their ethnic identity. The Nepalis were looked down upon as immigrants, outsiders and foreigners. The State created a dichotomy between the ‘hereditary Sikkim Subjects’ the Lepcha-Bhutia and the Nepalis. The King passed the Sikkim Subject Regulation in 1961 addressing only the Lepchas, Bhutias and Tsongs and deliberately excluding the Nepalis which stated that Sikkim subject hood would be granted to residents of the territory of Sikkim for a period of at least fifteen years ‘preceding the promulgation’. The King wanted to validate Sikkimese national identity as Mongoloid, and Buddhist as opposed to the Indo-Aryan, Hindu. It is generally considered that tribals or the Adivasis are indigenous people. Therefore, in the Sikkimese context too subjecthood was based on ethnic identity and indigeneity. The Nepalis of Sikkim were anti-monarchy and were desirous of the annexation of Sikkim to India. The Sikkim State Congress (SSC) which wanted to demolish the Sikkimese monarchy and set up a Democracy in Sikkim found huge support from the Nepalis in Sikkim. From time immemorial the politics of Sikkim has always been based on ethnic lines.

After the integration of Sikkim to India in 1975, as per provisions of the Sikkim Citizenship Order of 1975, all those persons recognised as Sikkim Subjects by virtue of the Regulation of 1961 were granted Indian Citizenship. As per the Indian reservation system the erstwhile Sikkimese elites and aristocrats the Lepchas and Bhutias were labelled as ‘primitive’, ‘backward’ and ‘minority’ and were enlisted as Scheduled Tribes of India in 1978. As a result of which twelve out of a total of thirty-two seats were reserved for the Lepchas and Bhutias in the State Legislative Assembly besides quotas in government jobs and education. Whereas the unreserved seats in the Assembly were left open for all including traders and businessmen from the plains, recent Nepalese migrants and even Nepalis from the neighbouring Darjeeling hills. This came as a blow to the Sikkimese Nepalis and they raised claims to indigeneity and to be recognised by their ethnic identity as rightful Indian citizens. Gradually the homogenised Nepalis broke down into two groups the Mongoloids comprising of the Tamangs, Mangars, Rais, Limbus, Gurungs etc. on one hand and the Aryan, high castes the Newars, Bahuns and Chettris (NBC) on the other. In the 1980s the Mandal Commission had recognised nine Mongoloid ethnic groups to be categorised as OBC but the then government which was backed by the NBCs opposed it

vehemently. The Nepalese Janajati (indigenous) movement (1990) which was initiated by the janajatis or the tribes against the hegemony of the high castes greatly influenced the Nepali tribes and lower castes in Sikkim. After the advent of democracy in Sikkim ethnic identities became even more politicised and people soon realised the importance of socio-political categories with respect to political representations.

The recommendations of the Mandal Commission which raised reservation for minorities from 27% to 49.5% was implemented by the Sikkim government only after Pawan Kumar Chamling came into power in 1994. As a result of which the erstwhile cohesive 'Nepalis' of Sikkim branched off into discrete ethnic groups like Newar, Rai, Limbu, Thami, Tamang, Gurung etc. which were further formally categorised as SC, OBC, MBC by the State. Seven Sikkimese ethnic groups of Nepali origin-Bhujel, Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Sunuwar and Tamang were recognised as OBC in 1994. The OBCs (who formed 40% of the electorate) were responsible for the victory of Chamling a fellow OBC in the State Assembly elections (Chettri163). The victory of Chamling against Bhandari was perceived as a victory of the Mongoloids against the high caste Aryans. Ethnopolitics in Sikkim is said to have reached its apex during the national record breaking long Chief Ministership of Chamling spanning from 1994 to 2019. As per the recommendations of the Mandal Commission the Scheduled Tribes and Castes were entitled to special land rights, low interest loans and reservation of posts in government jobs, seats in the State Legislative Assembly and educational institutions. Whereas lesser number of seats and posts were reserved for the Other Backward Classes. For a little more than two decades the 'B-L' (Bhutia –Lepcha) block enjoyed special socio-political and financial benefits and more so after the SDF government headed by Chamling adopted a 'pro-tribal' policy (Shneiderman, Turin 2). He aspired for tribal status to be granted to all Sikkim Subjects so they could be exempted from paying Income Tax. In 2002, when two erstwhile OBCs-the Tamangs and Limbus were granted ST status after many years of struggle other non ST groups began to clamour for the coveted ST status (Tamang, Sithlou). The case of the Tamangs and Limbus aroused hope amongst others in the OBC category that their demand to be recognised as Scheduled Tribes would be fulfilled soon by the Government. Ethnic groups began to establish associations with the motive of directly engaging with the State to obtain facilities and entitlements conferred to STs. But it would not be fully apt to consider the ethnic associations to be driven only by their financial and socio-political interests. In the contemporary times when globalisation, westernisation, urbanisation have taken a toll on culture and heritage of ethnic groups these associations play an important role in the preservation of culture. Ethnic groups sent delegations to Nepal to acquaint themselves with their *thet* (authentic) culture and traditions. In order to strengthen their demands for attainment of ST status discursive tactics were also adopted by associations of many ethnic groups to prove their authenticity and indigeneity. Concerted efforts were made to fit into the official definition of 'tribes' and to portray themselves as primitive, geographically isolated, having their own distinctive language and religion. Though religion is not one of the determining factors many communities detached their association with Hinduism and inclined towards animism or shamanism. For instance, the Rais projected themselves as animists and the Gurungs as Buddhists. Adequate measures were undertaken by ethnic associations to develop and disseminate their long forsaken and forgotten languages. A

number of dictionaries and language tutorial books were published and widely circulated especially among the younger members of the ethnic groups. Use of language both spoken and written was greatly encouraged in educational institutions and offices. In the process of asserting their cultural distinctiveness ethnic groups became so obsessed with the idea of having their own scripts that some groups without it went to the extent of developing it using Nagari characters. Shneiderman and Turin have termed this obsession among ethnic communities as ‘Scriptophila’ and have accused it of being more symbolic than actually achieving mastery of one’s own language (Shneiderman, Turin 3).

Kuldeep jiu, an ex –Minister of the Government of Sikkim is the ‘light of his clan’. The ageing patriarch who represents the old way of life is a repository of his people’s history, cultural heritage and identity. He takes immense pride in the glorious past of the Chandanth who according to him were one of the first communities to have migrated from Nepal to Sikkim. Following the British conquest, the Chandanth had migrated to Sikkim from the Chayalu Valley. After a prolonged history of oppression in Sikkim in the hands of royalty and aristocrats in the pre democracy era, the recognition of the Chandari-speaking people as a backward caste pleased Kuldeep jiu. He was of the opinion that the exclusive status was “an instrument to correct the wrongs done to them in history but his contentment proved to be short lived as “the Hon’able Chief Minister had ensured that almost everyone else was since declared backward” (92). The younger generation of Chandaris were unsatisfied with their OBC status much like the Magars, Rais and Thamis and others who are dissatisfied with the reservation of smaller number of reserved posts and seats for OBCs in comparison to the STs and SCs and made concerted efforts to assert their tribal identity. Despite opposition from Kuldeep jiu they aspired to get the Chandanth community recognized as Scheduled Tribe to improve their socio-economic and political status .A Steering Committee was established by the Chandari Chief Minister of Sikkim to articulate the demands of the Chandaris for tribal status and to devise ways and means to shape Chandari identity to fit into the definition of the Scheduled Tribes in India even if it meant rewriting and distorting Chandari history and culture .The Steering Committee was explicitly political unlike the association of the Chandaris established by Kuldeep jiu in the prime of his political career which focussed more on the preservation of the dwindling Chandari culture with the effect of westernisation and urbanisation in Sikkim. Differences in ideologies pitted Kuldeep jiu and the Chief Minister against each other. *The Light of his Clan* reflects the issues of identity, ethnicity which shape politics and attitudes in the region even today.

Though small in number the Chandanth stood divided on theories of their origin, history, culture and even the very name of their ethnic community. The minority community of the Chandaris was split into two unreconciled groups the Chandanth Action Society (CAS) led by the ex-Minister, Kuldeep jiu and the Chandith Heritage Action Preservation Society (CHAPS) which was headed by Mitradas Chandith. Kuldeep took pride in the glorious past of the Chandanth and firmly believed that “Chandanth was derived from *chandan* after the sandalwood forests that ringed Chyalu, the valley of his ancestors’ origin in north western Nepal” (6) He was countered by Mitradas, who considered that they were actually Chandiths and the name of their community was derived from *chaandi* or silver, from the silver mines of Chyalu. The debate on the issue of S T

status further created a rift in the association. The ex- minister and the Chief Minister were at loggerheads. The man who had worked hard for the upliftment of his community in the heydays of his political career gets side-lined by the new generation leaders.

In the process of asserting their indigeneity, leaders of ethnic groups have challenged the historical accounts of their respective communities recorded by colonial administrators and also state sponsored historians of the past who have remained closemouthed about the presence of Nepali ethnic groups in the kingdom of Sikkim of yore. To emphasise the exclusivity of their identities ethnic communities have resorted to rewriting their history, myths and legends to be disseminated among members and more so before government officials to exhibit their tribal identity. Ethnic groups have enterprised to standardise and put in black and white details of their rites, rituals, customs and traditions in pamphlets and journals to teach people. Kuldeepjiu's greatest dream was to complete the construction of the temple for Kumbura the deity of the Chandanth which he had started during his tenure as Minister. Erecting temples and shrines, placing idols in a locality where they predominate is a way of demarcating the locale as their own. In a bid to justify their belonging to a region ethnic groups point to their shrines and sacred sites to authenticate their 'historical roots' in the region (Chettri 65). To set themselves apart from other ethnic groups and add weightage to their appeal for reservation many have judiciously appropriated certain cultural icons exclusively for their group. The sacred icon for the Chandanth, was Kumbura the deity of the Chyalu, a flying rooster "depicted with a cloak of feathers" who was believed to be the incarnation of Vishnu.

As a mark of her devotion to Kumbura, the Chandanth Chief Minister of Sikkim on first assuming power had promised to ban chicken in Sikkim. She had proclaimed it as her sacred duty towards Kumbura but had failed to keep her word. Whereas on taking office, the Honourable Chief Minister of Sikkim instead motivated her fellow Chandaris to worship stones and forget Kumbura in order to exhibit themselves as animists. As Mitradas exclaims "All our gods gone, all our customs gone...you heard the HCM is saying No more Dasain now, we have to focus on Nehepau Doh instead" (226). This reminds us of how Subash Ghising had exhorted people in the neighbouring Darjeeling hills to worship a *shila* (stone) instead of the idol of Durga during Durga Puja in 2005. It was an attempt on his part to project the Indian Nepali community as non- Hindu and hence tribal so that he could convince both the Central as well as the State Government that the Darjeeling hills be declared a 'tribal area' as per the provisions of the Sixth Schedule of the Constitution of India. She spoke on the need of the Chandaris to be recognised as Scheduled tribe "We need to get recognized as a Schedule Tribe, everyone knows how important such a recognition is. Look at the Bhutias, the Lepchas, the Tibetans life has become easier for their children. We should want this for our people, instead of fighting. There are so many things to fight against: history, poverty, illiteracy..." (2).

Ethnic groups aspiring to become tribal organised flamboyant cultural programmes to showcase their ethnic performances before government officials and anthropologists to validate their tribalness. Conferences and mass gatherings, cultural programmes, public rituals showcasing each of their unique 'tribal' culture has become an integral part of the ethno politics in Sikkim. The Chief Minister and the Steering Committee were determined to get the Chandanth recognised as Scheduled Tribes and were tirelessly organising

conferences and fancy cultural programmes. The members of the Steering Committee who were culled by the Chief Minister were opposed to any suggestion from Kuldeep jiu. Members of the Mangar and Thami associations in the process of filing their request to the Ministry of Tribal Affairs for recognition as Scheduled Tribes organised an elaborate cultural show for the Tribal Affairs Minister in November 2005. The Thami dance troupe's 'hip –gyrating' performance to foot thumping Thami pop songs was heavily applauded in contrast to the slow dance moves of the Magars. On the basis of such instances Shneiderman and Turin conclude "(F)rom such stage-managed productions it becomes clear that the battle for tribal status rests as much on a group's ability to recast cultural practices appropriated from the homeland in crowd-pleasing performative styles as it does on any alleged indigeneity" (2). Demands for ST recognition resulted in inter-ethnic competition and groups took recourse to desperate discursive measures to get access to political connections and pass the selection criteria. The Chief Minister and the Steering Committee were contemplating of organising a two-day programme with the Tribal Affairs Minister of the Central Government as the Chief Guest to showcase the distinct 'tribal heritage' of the Chandanth. The programme was named Libhanaya Bhod which meant reawakening in Chandari and it was to be held in September instead of the Balidaan Diwas which was observed in July every year since they were categorised as OBCs in 1997. The Chief Minister was confident that the programme would end with a resolution calling for Constitutional recognition of the Chandanth as a Schedule Tribe. All the Chandaris in Sikkim were exhorted to adopt the name Chadat. Newer appellations were adopted by ethnic groups to lay stress on their exclusivity and distinguish themselves from other groups. Various groups embraced new names like 'Yakkha' for Dewans, 'Tamu' for Gurungs, 'Khambu' for Rais etc. "Everything will get a new name. We have to change our names. It's going to be Chadat now. No "n" in our names, they say..." (226). The Chief Minister prescribes 'Chadat' as the authentic label for the community and rejects all the other variations of the name - Chandanth, Chandeth, Chandith and Chadith.

Kuldeep jiu harboured an "inextinguishable hope" that the younger generation would take interest in affairs pertinent to the Chandanth of Sikkim. He dreamt that the next generation would also share his passion and burden and work diligently for the welfare of the Chandanth. But his children were indifferent to his love and vision for his community and rejected the responsibility to carry forward his dreams. Unlike Nepal where mixed or inter marriages are almost non –existent Shneiderman and Turin have estimated that about 75 percent of marriages amongst Nepalis of Sikkim are of 'mixed ethnic background' (4). Mixed ethnic identities complicate and call to question the claims of authenticity and indigeneity made by tribal status aspirants. Therefore, in order to safeguard ethnic purity from miscegenation, marriage within one's own ethnic group is encouraged among youngsters by elders in the family as well as the ethnic associations. His greatest fear was that "soon there would be no pure Chandanth blood left" and that "their bloodlines were withering in Sikkim "and therefore wanted his children to get married to Chandanth. As a desperate measure to unite Dr Kuldeep a Chandari physician and Yogita his daughter in marriage he feigned sickness to summon them home -Yogita all the way from Delhi and Dr. Kuldeep from STNM hospital every now and then. Very often he bragged about his sacrifice for the sake of the Chandanth community. For the love of his community and to

preserve the purity of their bloodline he had ostracized even his beloved sister Kalpana for marrying a non- Chandanth. He “did not visit her, even on her death bed that, he often asserted, that was called sacrifice” (60).

He was extremely proud of his Chandanth lineage and history which went back to the ‘ages of antiquity’. He aspired to acquaint the younger generation to their rich cultural heritage and infuse in them a sense of pride and love for their community. “There were evidences in the battles recorded in the *Ramayan* and *Mahabharat* of Chandanths who offered sandalwood for the funeral pyres of demi-Gods and princes. The Chandaths were one of the most prosperous, cultured among the peoples of the Himalayan kingdom of Nepal”. They patronised all the arts, their music was far better than those of Tamangs, their handlooms and embroidery left the people of Tibet speechless. They were warriors...and the food, there were stories of the Thakalis putting away their utensils once they had tasted Chandanth delicacies. And literature patronised by their benevolent kings and inspired by their incomparable histories, the Chandanth dramas and epics in their unique script which put the literature by Bahuns to shame” (202). The attack of the Chyalu Valley by the British prompted the Chandanth king to kill his family along with himself rather than surrendering himself to his foes. He wanted the Chandaris to imbibe virtues of Chandari pride and honour and apply it in their day to day lives even in the midst of the corruption, materialism and all forms of moral degradation of contemporary Sikkim. For twenty years the man who single handedly worked for the upliftment of the Chandaris and the keeper of Chandari history and culture dies lonely and unappreciated. Kuldeep jiu’s dreams of completing the unfinished temple consecrated to Kumbura remains unfulfilled. The planks of chandan he had hoarded to build the temple were for his funeral pyre. The death of the ex-minister is metaphorical. With his death authentic Chandari history, custom, traditions, and the old way of life passes away.

The competition among various ethnic groups of Nepali origin in the wee state of Sikkim to be enlisted as Scheduled Tribes of India was triggered by their identity crisis and their anxiety to be considered as belonging to Sikkim and as rightful citizens of India. Even though the Nepalis of Sikkim had been settled in Sikkim for more than a century, they were looked down upon distrustfully as ‘outsiders’, ‘immigrants’ or rebels who overthrew the Sikkimese monarchy. This created a sense of insecurity and fear among them. At this juncture, they embraced the policy of reservation which seemed to be the only route to rights and recognition for small ethnic groups from the fringes of India in the melting pot of post-colonial India. The ethnic associations of respective ethnic groups persistently engaged with the government to appropriate rights, resources and recognition. The ethnic associations played a significant role in the preservation of authentic heritage and culture and also negotiation of culture. In order to articulate their demands for reservation these ethnic associations moulded and remoulded the malleable ethnicity and identity of ethnic groups to meet the norms for recognition prescribed by the government. The anxiety of the people to belong shaped and still continues to shape people and the politics of Sikkim even today. But it cannot be said for certain that all claims to indigeneity and tribal identity would be genuine and authentic. As ethnicity and identity are fluid entities that can be sculpted by different socio-political imperatives, ambitions and opportunities. “The cultural politics transforming a group into a Scheduled Tribe reflects its own political strength and

power to influence the regime of representation in order to appropriate preferential entitlements and resources. Being Tribal may not always necessarily indicate indigeneity, oppression or subaltern status, it signifies political assertion and empowerment in Sikkim” (Arora 195).

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