

The Mangars: Identity Conciousness and Ethnicization Process in West Bengal

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ABSTRACT

The identity aspirations and sense of identity have offered a new dimension to the assertiveness of the ethnic groups. 'A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself...it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as history or mythology (Erikson E.,1975). The political and cultural pressures of a numerically dominant and educationally far 'superior' Bengali Race (Smith, 1996) forced the various Nepali communities like the Gurung, Tamang, Rai, Limbu, Mangar, Newar, Chhetri, etc to come under the umbrella of the Nepali or Gorkhali in the region. The United Nations declaration of 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples gave further impetus to the already changed political climate and brought a new lease of life to the marginalized and subjugated communities in the region. They began to organize themselves vigorously in search of lost identities (Subba, T.B., 1999). It is this quest that assembled the Mangars of this region and the formations of various associations was a boost for an overall development of them. The formation of "Mangar Development Board" on 16th September, 2015 in West Bengal paved the way for reinventing themselves amidst the clash of cultures. Thus, my attempt will be to highlight the present Cultural scenario and the circumferential adaptation of the Mangars in this region.

Keywords: Culture, Tradition, Beliefs, Ritual, Religion, Identity.

Introduction:

The identity aspirations and sense of identity have offered a new dimension to the assertiveness of the ethnic groups. 'A sense of identity means a sense of being at one with oneself...it means, at the same time, a sense of affinity with a community's sense of being at one with its future as well as history or mythology (Erikson E.,1975, 27). In the geographically adjoining areas of Darjeeling hills, Terai and Dooars of West Bengal there has recently been a budding of organizations which seek to preserve and develop their indigenous culture, language and religion. A number of organizations have been emerged at these areas in last few decades. One such organizations is of the Magar or Mangar (as known in India) has come to limelight in India and West Bengal in particular. Mangar is one of the Indo- Mongoloids

tribes speaking dialects of Tibeto- Burman branch of the Sino- Tibetan speech family found scattered in almost all parts of India (Chatterjee, S.K.1951, pp.40-41). The history of Mangar and their settlement in India is obscure and hard to reach in conclusive fact. Hence, the study of Mangar community and findings about their existence, traditional cultural value encounter with difficulties to the scholars.

The Mangar

The Magaras or Mangars, one of the aborigines of Sikkim and Nepal, belong to the Kirata community of the Eastern Himalayas. They are one of the oldest tribes of Sikkim. Rajesh Verma has reasonably stated that the Kiratis include Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Mangar and Tamang tribe of Sikkim (Verma R, 2013, 71). The Mangars, Limbus and Lepcha are the earliest settlers

of ancient Sikkim (Timsina S.R, 1998, 22). Iman Singh Chemjong states that a place called Shin in the northern part of the Himalayas was the original home of the Mangars (Chemjong I, S. 1967, 73). The Magars are described by Hamilton (1819) as a Himalayan Tribe 'Wallowing in all the ancient abominations of the mountaineers', and found anywhere in the Himalayan region (Vansittart Eden, 1896, 104). Iman Singh Chemjong further states that 'in the East Nepal and Sikkim the Mangars are so called because they were the children of Mang, Mong or Mongol people. The Chinese and Burmese people call Mang or Mong for Mongolians and ar or arui means children. So, Mangar means the 'Children of Mongols'.... their complexion proves that they are no other than scattered Mongolians (Chemjong, I. S, 1967, 73). The Mangars or Magars after having settled in Sikkim in Ancient times roughly before the 5th century ruled in its various parts independently like the Lepchas and Limbus (Singh G. P, 2008, 96).

H.H. Risley, while dealing with the '*History of Sikkim and its Rules*' also mentioned about the rule of the Magar kings or chiefs in Sikkim (Risley H.H., 10, 38). During 1600 A.D. or so the chief Sintu Pati Sen had established a Magarjong at Mangsari, West Sikkim, and ruled surrounding areas many years. The Ruins of Mangarjong at Mangsari, West Sikkim is still there. Similarly, ruins of many Mangarjong such as Sukhia Pokhari of Darjeeling; Mansong Mangarjong of Suldung, Kamrung, Famtham, Sudunglakha, Berthang-Berfok Mangarjong and Rateypani Kateng Mangarjong, are the historical and archaeological significance (Allay S., 2003, 69). Northey and Morris also approved of

inhabitation of Magar in the temperate region which was immediately to the north of foothills (Northey & Morris, 2014, 165.) From the Maharaja's History of Sikkim, it reveals that the Mangars were in Sikkim prior to 1642 as evident from the account of a travel of the first Chogyal Phuntsho Namgyal of Sikkim, who was consecrated in 1642, across the Kingdom (Subba J.R, 2008, 347). Shiva Kumar Rai has correctly stated that 'some parts of Nepal were under Sikkim once and likewise some parts of Sikkim were Under Nepal....Therefore, it is natural that the various communities living in Sikkim and Nepal...freely moved and settled in various parts of Sikkim and Nepal' (Rai S. K., 1995, 12). Hence, the settlement of Mangars in Jalpaiguri, a neighboring foothill and Darjeeling, once an adjacent part of Sikkim of West Bengal might also be a natural process whence, they were driven by the Bhutias in Sikkim.

The Settlement of Mangars

They are now found over most parts of Nepal and in Jalpaiguri, Darjeeling, Sikkim and other districts of West Bengal. They are mostly concentrated in Dooars, Darjeeling Hills, Dehradun, Bhaksu, also in Assam especially in Naga Hills and few are scattered in other parts of India. The 1901 Census figures for the Magars or Mangars were 3214 in Jalpaiguri and 11,174 in Darjeeling (*Linguistic Survey of India*, Vol-3, 206). There were 3709 Mangars in Jalpaiguri district in the 1911 Census figures (Grunning J.F., 1911, 41). The Census of 1951 gives the figure of Mangars in West Bengal as 42,663 and in Darjeeling Hills as 34,350 (Mittra, A., 1954 72-92).

Emergence of Identity Consciousness among the Mangars

The Gorkhas or the Nepalis of Darjeeling fought together in the Gorkhaland movement in the eighties. Their main issue was to carve a distinct identity of the Indian Gorkhas or Nepalis. In 1988 with the formation of the DGHC and with the name "Gorkha" inserted in the Hill Council, they felt that their identity issue was solved. It was in the beginning of 2005, that Subhas Ghising brought a new issue, to include the DGHC under the Vth or VIth Schedule but was more in favour of the latter. The Vth and VIth Schedules are meant for administration of predominantly tribal areas or scheduled areas under Article 244 of the Constitution. It provides administrative autonomy with the objective of preservation of the tribals' culture and protection from exploitation at the hands of outsiders (Chettri M., 2013). The United Nations declaration of 1993 as the Year of the Indigenous Peoples gave further impetus to the already changed political climate and brought a new lease of life to the marginalized and subjugated communities in the region. They began to organize themselves vigorously in search of lost identities (Subba, T.B., 1999, 3). This very thought became the path guider to the Mangars to find out their ancestral heritage and their identity amongst identities in West Bengal.

Most of the families living in West Bengal are either agriculturists (Hunter, 1876, 37 & Northey and Morris, 2014, 185) or tea plantation laborers and live in very awful condition in the society. The numbers of employees in government service are negligible as compare to the people of other communities. Hence, it was this very situation which turns the eyes of the few of the learned of the community who initiated

to voice and came into groups to preserve their culture and traditions as well as to fight for the right. Dr. N Bhattacharyya described the Mangar community as one of the marginal, backward and depressed hill communities in India with a luminal existence in the dominant cultural milieu (Bhattacharyya, 2015, 25-26). She argued that the marginal hill communities had enriched the pluralistic, multi-dimensional and composite cultural heritage in India. But at the same time the Mangar community had encountered the challenging task to resist the overwhelming infiltration of the dominant cultural forms persisting over several centuries. She observed that in the process of this unequal cultural encounter, the marginal communities had lost their cultural traits and heritage components very rapidly; that the process of the cultural reconstruction must be placed in that background.

Formation And Activities of the Mangar Samaj Darjeeling, 1939

The social organization concept of togetherness or Samaj was prevalent among all the Gorkhali communities. They constructed a group of the community people in order to apply the social ritual and value among them. Hence, the Mangars formed groups and a social organization to imply the basic social ritual. The formation of various association in the long run was the outcome of the association in the 19th and 20th century. The imperative effort to mobilize the community was initiated in different places with the formation of Mangar *Samaj* from the very beginning. The earliest information that is found was the Mangar *Samaj*, Darjeeling of 1939. Later it was registered in the year 1994-95, Reg no. S 79025. As per the records of the

magazine *Koseli* published under the banner of Magar Samaj, founder members of the samaj were Nar Bahdur Thapa, Padam Bdr Thapa (Ghoom), Man Bdr Thapa, Rann Man Thapa Nar Prasad Ghale (Chokbazar), Subehdar Dhan Bdr Ale (Dali), Jung Bir Thapa (Chota Kagihora), Peshok, Ram Baran Thapa (Pankhabari) (Koseli, 2000). As per the records found in the magazine it is also noticed through the writing of Teju Thapa that samaj paved the role of keeping relationship and mutual assistance within the people of Mangars of Darjeeling. He has mentioned that based on this platform the Mangar Samaj was reconsolidated in Darjeeling in 1970 by the Lt R.M. Thapa, Sri Bom Bahadur Thapa, Sri P.S. Thapa, Sri M.B. Thapa, and few of enthusiast social worker of the community. They played a significant role to unify the Mangars and active participation was seen from all the members during the time to till its amalgamation into Mangar Sangh Central Committee, Darjeeling in 2006 (Mangar Sangh Darjeeling Constituion, 1992).

The imperative effort to mobilize the community was initiated in different places with the formation of Mangar *Samaj* from the very beginning. The Mangar *Samaj*, Darjeeling of 1939, Mangar Lafa Sangh Kurseong, 1990 was such an attempt to mobilize the community in West Bengal. Mangars, living in different parts of India, have not been able to do anything concrete for the preservation of their own language, culture, dress etc. until the formations of different associations the Akhil Bhartiya Mangar Sangh, 2002, Mangar Sangh Bharat 2006, probably because they are educationally and financially backward.

The Efforts of Akhil Bhartiya Mangar Sangh, 2002

As per the records of ABMS and the eminent members of it, some members of Kalimpong went to meet Nepal Rashtriya Mangar Sangh's delegate Sri Gorey Bahadur Khapangi, Dr. Harsha Bahadur Bura Mangar, M.S. Thapa Jhedi Mangar, Sanjog Lafa Mangar, Bom Kumari Bura Mangar and others in 2002 A.D, had discussion with them, regarding the formation of Mangar Association in India. A meeting was held among the Mangars of Sikkim, Dooars, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong on 9th June 2002 at Munal Lodge, where the group shared about their inclinations on language, script, dresses, culture, and customs of the Mangars at a larger forum. On the evening of that very day a historical event took place for the Mangars, formation of a nationwide association named Akhil Bharatiya Mangar Sangh (ABMS). This association was registered on 26th November 2002 under Registration No. S/IL/12795-02/03. After inauguration of the Association, members increased communication with several State level and District level Associations all over India viz. Meghalaya (Shillong) Madhya Pradesh (Bhopal), Delhi, Uttaranchal (Dehradun) Jalpaiguri (Dooars), Siliguri, Sikkim, Darjeeling, Kurseong and different regions of Kalimpong. At present many Mangars associations are formed with common goals of bonding themselves well, and keeping co-ordinal social relation with other communities in order to preserve and promote their culture, tradition and language for recreating their glorious past. The Akhil Bharatiya Mangar Sangh (ABMS), Kalimpong, with its prime objective to preserve the community

approached to the Director, Cultural Research Institute, Backward Classes welfare Department, Kolkata in December, 2003 for the inclusion of the Mangar community spread over all parts of India in the Scheduled Tribe List. It is further to mention that the CRI, Kolkata in its letter no.722/CRI dated 16.08.11 has corresponded to the associations that matter has already been taken up with the Govt (CRI, BCWD, Kolkata, 2003).

The Development Boards of Sherpa, Lepcha and Tamang intensified the Mangars as well. The constant demand for the upliftment of the community under different banner of the Mangar association like ABMS, the Mangar Sangh Bharat (Darjeeling), the Nawa Mangar Association (Kalimpong), became fruitful on 16th September 2015 with announcement of the formation of Mangar Development Board. After the announcement to form a separate Development Board for Mangar by Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee during her visit in Kalimpong in the last week of September, 2015, the Mangars selected Sri Navin Thapa as the proposed chairman of the Mangar Development Board, who was the General Secretary of the Nawa Mangar Association in a meeting of the central committee of the association held in its head office at Delo, Kalimpong (PTI, 2015).

The Ethnicization of Community

The formation of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and its initiative to grant tribal status under Sixth schedule to some of the ethnic Communities were a significant step towards the mobilization of these ethnic groups. Since the 1990's each community enthusiastically drew their attention towards preparation of their qualifying

paper as a tribe on the basis of the features lay down by the Government of India, viz. possession of an old dialect and language, their own traditional language and scripts, traditional dress code distinctive from others and unique rituals and customs not resembling with others (Bhattacharyya, 2015, 5).

In the recent process of tribalization, the Mangar leaders tend to ignore the Hindu past. The cultural leaders in Darjeeling and Dooars especially in Alipurduar and Jalpaiguri, organize a regular meeting even in the remote villages urging people to follow their age-old traditional rites and rituals. The Mangar *Samaj* is very effective body in rural areas and exists also in few urban areas. The preservation of their rites and rituals have become one of their first attempt towards the unification of Mangar. The team of *Barah* Mangar (Hamilton, 1819, 26) is very influential for taking any sort of vital decision and making social agreement if needed. The mobilization has extended from rural to regional and at present the Mangars are organizing almost all their social functions in a large scale to engage all the age group people to acquainting age-old tradition. As a result, the participation of all the Mangars in such social customs and rituals slowly but steadily is mobilizing them with ethnic values. The Gorkha Regiment of the British Army recruited almost highest number of Mangar soldiers and they take pride for that. In fact, army heritage has become an integral part of their ethnic identity.

Revival Programmes

Revival of traditional language and scripts is an important component of the revivalist agenda. The Mangars script is known as Akha Lipi. For a few years, a quarterly

newspaper called the *Sikkim Herald* (Sikkim Govt. Press, Gangtok) is regularly being published in *Akha Lipi* from Gangtok. The Mangars have also taken initiative to publish books and booklets on the history, language and cultural heritage of the community in Nepali with a view to reach a larger audience. The noble initiative of Sri Ashok Kumar Khaprangi Mangar, aged 72yrs of Lankapara, Alipurduar district (Informer Ashok K. Mangar, 2017) is praiseworthy, who on his own effort gives classes on *Akharika*. He used to render his Sunday classes in Satya Sai English School in Lankapara without any support from the Government. He has published few books on Mangar script. Likewise, such school was also being run in Makrapara T.E. with the collaboration of some of these enthusiastic leaders.

The celebration of Mangar festivals like *Barahimijong*, *Maghe Sakrati*, *Baisakhi Purnima* etc, have paved the way for awareness among all the members of the community (Allay S., 2003, 93-94). Like many other communities, the Mangar community has taken initiative towards preserving and promoting their intangible heritage such as song dance and musical instruments. Thus, the community has determined certain crucial locations to forge a new identity from a just backward community to an ethnic one.

The Present Cultural Scenario and the Influence of ABMS

The Akhil Bhartiya Mangar Sangh (ABMS) has paved an incredible role in the unification and cultural recreation of Mangar in Darjeeling as well as in Terai of Jalpaiguri and Alipurduar districts of West Bengal. The formation of *Mangar Samaj* (a society consisted of Mangar people with

some eminent heads) and association has boosted a new dimension to them. However, from Hinduism to Shamanism has itself become a challenge to them. By the end of 20th century, the Mangars being resided with other Nepali community have become more or less a Hindu in terms of ritual and customs. The mantra enchanted by a Brahmin priest is generally accepted either in Darjeeling an urban area or in Dooars a rural area. With the efforts of Akhil Bharatiya Mangar Sangh (ABMS) Dooars branch, and their training session to get their own priest, a Bhusal, is on the verge of new turning point in the process of Mangar Cultural History.

The formation of Darjeeling Magar Samaj to the formation of Kurseong Mangar Lafa Sangh turned into the formation of different Mangar Lafa Sangh likewise in Dooars in the year 1995 under the Presidentship of Sri Anil Thapa, Beech T.E., Hasimara (Informer Anil Thapa, 2018) was an effort to assimilate all the Mangars of Dooars. His role for organizing the training session of Bhusal turned into a huge success. A training session for 27 Magar persons was organized at Birpara Surya Bahadur Magar Club from 13th Dec, 2018 to 19th Dec, 2018 under the supervision of Kharag Bahadur Purbachane Mangar, a *wafa* for seven days. Sri Dil Bahadur Khulal Mangar, the Dooars Zonal Secretary, ABMS was in charge of this training Programme. After the completion of the session the participants were handed over the certificate by the ABMS at the *Barahimizong* festival (visited as Guest of Honour) organized by the Beech T.E. committee members on 27th Dec, 2018. Akash Budathoki, sixteen years old was among the young trainee and Sri Jetha Pithakote Mangar, seventy years old was among the oldest trainee Bhusal. The

achievement of this training program was seen on 16th Dec, 2019 at Bhatpara *Barahimijong* festival where Akash was seen as a confident Bhusal organizing all the priesthood works there.

The Hindrances for the Unification in the Region

Since the Mangar localized in rural areas try to follow the rules as mentioned by the Sangh or Samaj, the process of *Mangarisation* (to bring the community under the Mangar cultural norms) of these Mangars are under process. The Akhil Bharatiya Mangar Sangh are now emphasizing on the *Magrati Dharma* (Stiller L.F., 1968, p. 192) and are being persuaded with the thought. The Mangars of Dooars have started to follow the rules and regulations settled by the Samaj. From birth to death ceremony the acceptance of Bhusal by the larger section of the community is a proof towards the new changing scenario. The *Jari Danda* in case of inter- caste marriage and purification of the family is widely prevalent among them. The concept of Barah (Twelve) Mangar is still being respected in these areas. *Samaj Chokhine* (Purification in the Society) is a well-known concept to them. Hence, distribution of *kalo dalo* (black pluses) and pork is prevalent among them. These rites and rituals have become a common factor in the unification process of this scattered community in the Dooars. However, the scenario in the urban areas like in Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong is not the same and secularism have become the utmost priority as existed in other urban areas. The Mangars in these areas are more liberal and do accept others customs and culture more liberally.

Conclusion

Under such circumstances preservation of the distinctiveness of Mangar's cultural traits is a complex task to the community residing in West Bengal. Since inter-caste marriages in urban inhabitation is not objectionable and the concept of equity of religion is more acceptable here. The concept of purification ceremony is not entirely accepted and no society or *Samaj* can impose such rituals with strict hands. At a time, the Nepali tried to come under one umbrella term have so far influenced the culture and customs of Mangar in the region. At present the celebration of Dashain and *Brahamijong* festival have become a priority for the bonding among the members. The distinctiveness of cultures that they adhered for generations is somewhere being lost. The upliftment of the community is only possible with the embrace of culture by the young generation as well else the effort made by the various associations will be in vain. Their fight for the Schedule Tribe status for the community in West Bengal is still in hold. This assimilation will be succeeded, only if instead of terai and hill, the community works as a unified force irrespective of any class or political background.

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The concept of *Barah Mangar* seems to have originated on the basis of their origin. Dr. Hamilton in his book published in 1819 says, "Before the arrival of the Rajputs, it is said that the Magar nation consisted of twelve Thams, the whole members of each being supposed to have a common extraction in the male line. Each Tham was governed by a chief, consisted as the head of a common family.

[11] Brian Hodgson also says: "The original seat of the Magars is the *Barah Mangranth*" and has further mentioned the names of the twelve districts which collectively were called *Barah Mangranth*.

[12] Information gathered from Dr. Jeewan Rana, President ABMS (to-date), Siliguri from 2018 to till date.

[13] Interview (2017) with Ashok Khapangi Mangar, Lankapara, Alipurduar on dated 15th November, 2017.

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