SOCIOLOGICAL BULLETIN
56 (2), May – August 2007, 195-220
© Indian Sociological Society

Assertive Identities, Indigeneity, and the Politics of Recognition as a Tribe: The Bhutias, the Lepchas and the Limbus of Sikkim

Vibha Arora

Using the case of the Bhutias, the Lepchas, and the Limbus, who are defined as tribes in contemporary Sikkim, this article discusses the 'politics of identity' and the 'identity politics' of being and becoming tribal in India. The cultural politics transforming a group into a tribe and a 'Scheduled Tribe' reflects its political strength and power to influence the regime of representation in order to appropriate preferential entitlements and resources. Being tribal does not necessarily indicate indigeneity, oppression, or subaltern status; it signifies political assertion and empowerment in Sikkim.

[Keywords: democracy and citizenship; ethnicity; historical sociology; indigenous groups; Sikkim]

This paper treats tribal identities and interests, indigeneity and their cultural representations as not being given, but as the emergent products of history, cultural politics and economic development of the Himalayan region in the last two centuries. The discussion shows the interpenetration of politics and culture (Cohen 1974, 1993) in the construction and articulation of identities to establish, affirm and perpetuate boundaries between the self and the other, contextually and strategically, for symbolic-political-material ends (Barth 1969). Using a particular case of groups defined as tribes in contemporary Sikkim, I discuss the 'politics of identity' and 'identity politics' of being and becoming tribal in India.[1] Identity contestations are evident in the debates engendered by the implementation of the Scheduled Tribe (ST) Orders of 1978 and 2002. If constructing cultural identity is about constructing cultural difference and

establishing boundaries, then deconstructing these identities is predicated in the act of their origin and transformation. The (de/re) construction of the tribal identities of the *Lhopo, Monpa, and Tsong* (the Lepchas, Bhutias and the Limbus) takes 1835 to the present period as its canvas.[2] This impressionist painting[3] analyses the crystallisation of identities by examining the impact of the colonial rule (1835-1947), self-government (1947-1975) and the post-colonial Indian state (since 1947) on a group's identification and its self-definition. Deconstructing these identities involves the unsettling of definitions of the indigenous and migrant groups of Sikkim. The current battle to gain recognition as an indigenous group and, more specifically, the entitlements associated with Scheduled Tribe status in Sikkim, indicate that tribal identity does not necessarily signify marginality, subalterneity and oppression; it reflects political empowerment of groups in Sikkim.

The Lepchas refer to Sikkim as their *nye máyellyang* (garden of Eden), while the Bhutias term it their *sbas yul 'Bras mo ljongs* (hidden valley of rice and fruits), although the term 'Sikkim' originates in the Limbu word *Su khyim* meaning 'new house'. Located in the Eastern Himalayas, Sikkim is the former Buddhist kingdom that was ruled by the Namgyal dynasty until its incorporation into India in 1975. Historically, Sikkim was a *de facto* protectorate of British India since the treaty of 1861, and the 1950 treaty with independent India continued its protectorate status until 1975. Out of its total population of half a million persons (540,493) in 2001, about 20.6 per cent are enumerated as Scheduled Tribes while the Scheduled Castes (exclusively of Nepali origin) comprise about 5 per cent of Sikkim's population. Demographically, the Buddhists comprise a large minority of approximately 27 per cent, while 68 per cent of the total population are Hindus, 3 per cent are converted Christians and some Muslims settled here recently (Census 2001).

This paper is divided into three sections. The first section deconstructs the ethnic categories of Sikkim stressing the assertiveness of tribal identities. The second section discusses the intersection of politics of identity and identity politics in the identification of tribes in Sikkim and India. The argument in both these sections moves between the particular case and the general situation to provide a comparative framework and an ethno-historical understanding of the being and becoming of tribes. The final section discusses the iconic representation of the tribal people as the vanguard of environmental wisdom and custodians of alternative knowledge. The tribal tag is now a 'desirable identity' and a sign of privilege associated with socioeconomic entitlements and rights. Tribes are not disappearing but gaining ground with the

emergence of political consciousness in the community. The self-perception and the struggles over tribal identification indicate these.

I
Assertive Identities: The *Lhopa* (Bhutias), *Monpa* (Lepchas) and *Tsong* (Limbus)

The identity politics of contemporary Sikkim is layered and complicated by the cultural, religious, linguistic and racial diversity of the twenty-two groups residing there, and the class, educational and occupational differentiation within them. Broadly speaking, there are three main ethnic categories in Sikkim: the Lepchas, the Bhutias, and the Nepali groups. There are cultural, religious and linguistic differences between these groups. However, these broad categorisations underplay the competing definitions, the internal variations, and the intersections between the diverse ethnic groups in Sikkim. Instead of strict demarcations or absolute hostilities between ethnic groups, there are degrees of inclusion and exclusion, which determine ethnic relations in Sikkim. The situational selectivity of ethnic identity plays a crucial role in inter-ethnic relations. These also serve as a buffer and a bridge between conflicting ethnic groups.

I follow V. Xaxa (1999a, 1999b) in treating tribes as ethnic groups by emphasising relationality and boundaries; these boundaries are defined linguistically, culturally and politically by the groups themselves, other groups, the state and the anthropologists. Tribal identities are understood in terms of how they are defined by others and in terms of their own articulation and self-definition in relation to land and sacred landscapes. Ethnic identities are not essentially fixed; as dynamic constructions, imagined relationally and visibly identified in those terms (Cohen 1974, 1993; Anderson 1983). Discourses not only represent identities, but also constitute personal and social identities by establishing the boundaries of difference from 'Others' (Foucault 1972, 1973). Identity, as a discourse of rights, is intimately connected to livelihood, entitlements and well-being. These discourses articulate political consciousness, encourage social action in order to challenge and subvert dominant ideologies (Gramsci 1971).

Lepchas

The Lepchas term themselves *Rong* (a Lepcha word meaning ravine-folk or the dwellers of the valley) and they define themselves by their association with the sacred mountain Kanchenjunga that is regarded as

the source of their knowledge, culture, religion, wealth and resources, and the place of their origin. They are the autochthones in their self-perception while anthropological discourse debates their indigeneity. Gorer (1938: 35) follows Lepcha self-definition but H. Siiger and J. Rischel (1967) agree with L.A. Waddell, who has argued that the Lepchas have Indo-Chinese origin and they migrated to Sikkim by way of the Assam valley. Both consider the Lepchas to be an outlying member of the Naga tribes (Arleng or Mikir sub-group) (see Siiger and Rischel 1967: 26-27). Many recent studies of the Lepchas are by Lepchas themselves, and they regard the Lepchas as indigenous to Sikkim (Tamsang 1983; Foning 1987; Gowloog 1995). This is also the official position of the Lepcha associations in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim. The earliest Lepcha association – Mutanchi Rong Shezum – was established in 1925 at Kalimpong and invigorated during the 1970s, while the Lepchas of Sikkim became politically conscious after 1975 and established the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association in 1993.

Presently, the Lepchas live in Sikkim, Kalimpong and the Darjeeling Hills of West Bengal in India, in west Bhutan and in Illam district of Nepal. They are concentrated in North Sikkim that also contains Dzongu, the Lepcha reserve. Otherwise they are scattered in the multi-ethnic villages of Sikkim. They are primarily agriculturists and a minority are in government employment. They are polygamous and they practise bride price. They trace descent patrilineally while giving importance to the matrilineal relations. By religious affiliation they are sub-divided into followers of Buddhism, Shamanism and Christianity. Shamanism or *mun* (in Lepcha) is considered to be their original religion. In the 14th century, after the migration of the Bhutias to Sikkim, the majority were converted into Buddhism. With the arrival of the Christian missionaries in the 19th century, they converted in large numbers in Darjeeling but only in small numbers in Sikkim. Linguistically, they belong to the Sino-Tibetan family, the Tibeto-Burman subgroup, and the Kachin family (Thurgood *et al.* 1985). The Lepcha language is considered to be difficult, and this explains why the Nepali groups term them *Lāpche*, which means vile speakers. Many regard the Nepali term *Lāpche* as the origin of the name Lepcha. The Tibetans use *Monpa*, which means dwellers of the Himalayan valleys and of India.

Bhutias

It is widely accepted that the Sikkimese Bhutias migrated from Eastern Tibet in the 14th century under the leadership of Khye Bumsa (a Tibetan prince of the Minyak dynasty of Kham). In the 14th century, a covenant

was solemnised between the representatives of the Bhutias (Khye Bumsa) and the Lepchas (Tekong Tek) that legitimised Bhutia migration and settlement (Dolma and Namgyal 1908: 12-13). In 1641,[4] three lamas, including Lhatsun Chenpo, crowned Phuntsog Namgyal, a descendant of Khye Bumsa as the first king of Sikkim (Waddell 1899: 50-51; Dolma and Namgyal 1908: 11-12).

The Bhutias are primarily agriculturists, pastoralists, traders and a minority are in government employment. They are concentrated in the north, the east and the west districts of Sikkim and only a small proportion live in South Sikkim. Like the Lepchas, the Bhutias trace descent patrilineally, are polygamous and practise bride price. The Bhutias are sub-divided into followers of the Nyingmapa and the Kargyupa sects of Tibetan Buddhism. In Tibet and the Himalayan region, the term 'Bhutia' connotes people of Tibetan descent who use one of the Tibeto-Burman languages. They term themselves *Lhopo,* who are identified as the descendants of Khye Bumsa and other Khampas who migrated to Sikkim between the 14th and the 17th century and speak *Lhoke*, a language that belongs to the Sino-Tibetan family and Tibeto-Burman group (Thurgood *et al.* 1985). The Scheduled Tribe Order of 1978 expanded the Bhutia category by including other Tibetan groups, namely, the Sherpa, the Dukpa, the Tibetan, the Dopthapa, the Kagatey and the Chumbiapa. The Bhutias vehemently opposed this Order as, according to them, it diluted their ethnic identity. In the early 1990s, the Sikkim Bhutia and Lepcha Apex Committee was formed consisting of six representatives each from the Lepcha and the Bhutia groups to safeguard their mutual interests and get this redefinition of the Bhutias revoked. In 2002, the Bhutias accepted those other groups as belonging to the Bhutia category.

The Lepchas and the Bhutias trace their social origins and the birth of their lineage ancestors to specific (sacred) sites such as the five peaks of Kanchenjunga, the other sacred mountains, lakes, caves and sites in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills. They perform annual rituals to ensure the continuity of their lineages and regenerate their land. These symbolic cultural dimensions of identity accentuate the politico-economic foundations of their indigeneity and identity. This is not to deny that other groups such as the Limbus lack symbolic or ancestral connections with Sikkim's landscape.

Limbus

The term Limbu means archers (Subba 1999: 32), and it was popularly used in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills from the 19th century onwards.

Yakthungba, meaning yak herders, is the ethnonym used by members to refer to themselves, while the Tibetans call them *Monpa* (also used for the Lepchas), the Lepchas and the Bhutias term them *Tsong,* which traces their origin in the Tsang region of Tibet and signals their occupation as cattle-herders and butchers (Risley 1894: 37), and in East Nepal they are connoted as *Subba.*[5] The community is sub-divided into ten clans whose migration histories often figure in these identity discourses.

The Limbu language belongs to the Kiranti branch of the Tibeto-Burman language family. According to Sprigg, its script shows similarities with the Tibetan and the Lepcha scripts, although it was later influenced more by the Devanagari script.[6] Traditionally, the Limbus were animistic like the Lepchas. However, in the last century, a large majority of them have become Hindus, and upwardly mobile Limbu families have sanskritised their lifestyles. Some of them have become Christians in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim (Subba 1999: 126). They are primarily agriculturalists, pastoralists and labourers, and some are in government employment in contemporary Sikkim. The Limbus regard themselves the indigenous inhabitants of Sikkim and East Nepal (Limbuaan region). In fact, during the reign of Gyurmed Namgyal in the early 18th century, there was a massive Limbu rebellion in Sikkim that led to the outmigration of Limbus from Sikkim into Eastern Nepal (Risley 1894: 5), while in Eastern Nepal they fought wars against the Gorkhas until submitting to them finally in 1774 (Pradhan 1991: 80-83; Subba 1999: 36-37). They are acknowledged to be one of the earliest settlers of Sikkim along with the Lepchas (Hooker 1891; Risley 1894; Siiger 1967: 27; Pradhan 1991) but colonial administrative discourse progressively classified them as Nepalis. Only a small proportion of the Limbu population immigrated into Sikkim in the 19th century. Today, the single feature that distinguishes Limbu persons of Sikkimese origin from those of Nepali origin is the Sikkim subject certificate.

Some Limbus blame the theocratic regime of the Namgyal dynasty for discriminating against the Limbus and reducing them to a minority in their own homeland (see Subba 1999: 124-25). Archival research for the period 1830 to 1917 reveals that the British administrators were conscious that the Limbu were indigenous to Sikkim. In 1835, when the British Raj annexed the Darjeeling Hills, officers commented that ‘they were practically uninhabited excepting a few hundred Lepchas and Limbus’ (see O’Malley 1907). The legend below a map of British Sikkim drawn by Captain W.S. Sherwille in 1852 states ‘this mountainous country from 1500 to 4000 feet above sea level is inhabited by a warlike beardless race termed Limboos (cf. Subba 1999: 35-36). Another British archival map

showing the approximate race distribution of Sikkim in 1892 demarcates the ethnic settlements of the Lepchas, the Bhutias, the Limbus and the Paharias (Nepalis) in Sikkim and the Darjeeling Hills. A statement printed on the map clearly stresses ethnic-settlement: 'Line north of which Paharias are not allowed to settle.' Limbus inter-married freely with the Lepchas and the Rai's in Sikkim until an imperial law, enforced in 1913, checked ethnic miscegenation by regulating marriage among Lepchas and Bhutias. This law contoured a preference that the Lepchas and Bhutias should marry within their own communities while prohibiting the marriage of Lepchas and Bhutias with the Tsongs and Nepalis in Sikkim.[7] This law was enforced until the 1940s.

The progressive Hinduisation of Limbus drew a boundary between them and the Lepchas-Bhutias (who were treated as outcastes by Hindus due to their pork- and beef-eating habits and kinship practices such as polygamy). The Limbus occupied a Shudra position in the caste hierarchy of Nepal and Sikkim (A.C. Sinha 1981: 194; Subba 1989: 53). In the 19th century, to improve their social standing, the Hinduised Limbus distanced themselves from their earlier animist identities while some converted to Christianity in the late 20th century. By becoming Hindus, the Limbus asserted the superiority of having a caste identity to the Lepchas-Bhutias, while by becoming Christians they tried to modernise themselves. In the late 20th century, the Limbus campaigned for a 'tribal' identity by emphasising their indigenous and animistic identities. Currently, Hinduisation, retribalisation and westernisation are occurring simultaneously.

How exactly have Limbus suffered after being defined as Nepali? The contemporary Nepali category includes groups that migrated from East Nepal such as the Rai, the Magar, the Yakha, the Khombu and the Mechi, which have clear migration histories between eastern Nepal and Sikkim. The other Nepali groups such as the Gorkha, the Newar, the Bahun, the Kshettri and the Sunwar migrated from other parts of Nepal. The fragmentation of the Nepali category into four groups, namely, the Other Backward Classes (Gurungs, Rai's, Magars, Sunwars and Newars), Scheduled Castes (Kamis, Damais, Lohars, Majhis and Sarkis), Scheduled Tribes (Limbus and Tamangs) and a General category (Bahuns and Kshettris) challenges all imaginings of a unitary Nepali category. In the past, the Nepali language affirmed Nepali identity, and its status as a *lingua franca* and national language in 1992 reflects their ascendancy. The contemporary articulation of ethnic subjectivity has undermined the linguistic solidarity of the Nepali in Sikkim, as ethnic groups instrumentally emphasise the uniqueness of their language, revive it in their everyday life, reinstate forgotten scripts, recover their literature

and record their oral history to claim historicity. These identity claims are intimately connected with their survival and struggles over land, forests, education, employment, justice and dignity in post-independent India.

The Nepali category was constructed by the colonial administrative discourse. However, Subba (1999: 2) attributes them to the theocratic rule of the Namgyal dynasty, which did not recognise the cultural, linguistic, and religious heterogeneity within the Nepali category and treated them as migrants. I disagree with him on this, as many Namgyal rulers consciously took consorts from ethnic groups other than the Lepchas, Tibetans and Drukpas to garner their support; Subba acknowledges these marital alliances. After the 1826 Lepcha rebellion at Kabi, the influence of the Lepchas in Sikkim's administration waned considerably (Sprigg 1995). The genealogies of many families indicate marital exchanges between the Lepchas and Bhutias, Lepchas and Limbus, Limbus and Rai's, Bhutias and Tibetans, Bhutias and other Buddhists such as Sherpas and Tamangs, and among members of other groups generically designated as Nepali. Politically also, the Namgyal rulers acknowledged the differences between the Newars, the Gorkhas, the Limbus and the Magars, and accorded them differential status.[8]

The ethnic boundaries and hostilities between the Lepchas-Bhutias and the Paharias/Gorkhas are not recent, but historically can be traced to the recurring invasions of Sikkim by the Gorkha rulers of Nepal during the 18th and the 19th centuries (see Dolma and Namgyal 1908: 49-54) that necessitated British intervention as peace-makers into the region. These hostilities were aggravated by 19th century imperial policies that sponsored *en masse* settlement of Nepalis in the region in order to increase revenue earnings and counter the pro-Tibetan leanings of the Lepchas and the Bhutias (see Risley 1894: xxi; A.K.J. Singh 1988: 204).

Tracing the roots of these ethnic categories in the past, one finds that during the 1891 Census of Sikkim its population was ethnically differentiated into 13 groups (see Risley 1894: 24). However, after 1891, the imperial administration delineated four groups, namely, the Lepchas-Bhutias, the Limbus, the Nepalis and the others. In 1915, when the land revenue rates were finalised, the imperial regime differentiated between only the Lepchas-Bhutias and the Nepalis (see Anon 1915: 2). From 1931 onwards, they progressively categorised all groups, excluding the Lepchas-Bhutias, as Nepali. If colonial policies protected and transformed the Lepchas and the Bhutias into the indigenous groups of Sikkim, then other policies discriminated against the Limbus, who were indigenous to Sikkim, by treating them as Nepali immigrants. Within Nepal, the state extended protection to the Limbus by enforcing a law, in 1901, prohibiting the alienation of Limbu lands to non-Limbus in eastern Nepal (cf. Subba

1999: 40). In some ways this law was a precursor of the landmark Land Revenue Order No. 1 discussed later in this section.

The British Raj ended in 1947, and the Namgyal rulers of Sikkim adopted religious criteria to categorise people into Buddhists, Hindus and Christians in the 1951 Census. The May agreement of 1951 recognised the special status of the Limbus by incorporating provisions for protecting their identity and rights as a Nepali group of Sikkimese origin and two seats were reserved for them in the council. The Sikkim citizenship order and the parity formula were implemented during this period. On the whole, during the 1960s and 1970s, the Namgyal dynasty stressed the need to preserve the privileges of the Lepchas-Bhutias as indigenous people and reinforced their ethnic-nationalist belonging and migrant identities of the Nepalis. At the first general meeting of the Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumlung, in July 1973, a resolution was passed: 'Chong/Tsong are not Nepali but one of the indigenous groups of Sikkim' (cf. Chemojong 1973: 34-40).

In 1975, Sikkim became a democratic state of the Republic of India and the Lepchas-Bhutias blame the Nepalis for this merger. The merger opened the floodgates for ethnic and cultural resurgence of the diverse groups constituting the Nepali category. The Government of India rejected the demands of the Limbus for preferential entitlements and ST status. They were merged into the Nepali category in 1975 (Kazi 1993: 220-23). In 1978, only the Lepchas and the Bhutias were recognised as Scheduled Tribes and twelve seats were reserved in the legislative assembly to safeguard their political interests and quotas allocated in government employment and educational institutions. Special safeguards were justified in order to protect the 'tribal' interests of the Lepchas and the Bhutias who were rendered a political minority with the incorporation of Sikkim into India. However, no special provisions were made for the Damai, Kami, Lohar, Majhi and Sarki who were recognised as Scheduled Castes in 1978. The Nepalis would elect political representatives for the seventeen general seats.

In the 1981 Census, Sikkim's population was administratively re-classified into Scheduled Tribes (Lepchas-Bhutias), Scheduled Castes, Nepali and Others, in accordance with the all-India pattern. In the early 1980s, some Nepali politicians filed a petition in the Supreme Court of India challenging the special status of the Lepchas-Bhutias. On 10 February 1993, the Supreme Court delivered a landmark judgement upholding the reservation of the Bhutia-Lepcha seats and one seat for the *sangha* in the Sikkim legislative assembly. Realising the benefits of tribal status, the Limbus aggressively campaigned for Scheduled Tribe status in the late 1980s. Unlike the Lepchas-Bhutias whose indigeneity

was affirmed in colonial discourse and post-colonial laws, the Limbus had to gather political support and pressurise the state government of Sikkim and the government of India for such recognition. In 1990, during Shri V.P. Singh's tenure as the Prime Minister, they were recognised as an Other Backward Class with the Rai, the Magar, the Gurung, the Tamang and the Bhujel groups. The Scheduled Tribe Order of 2002 restored their indigenous status. The identification of a group as 'tribal' clearly bears the imprint of state policies and reflects their relative bargaining power and aspirations for social mobility.

The Nepalis stress their contribution towards developing Sikkim's agrarian economy and shaping the contours of its land. Today, they can be found in all the sectors of Sikkim's economy, and constitute the political majority of contemporary Sikkim. Economically, they have succeeded in rising from the bottom of the agrarian hierarchy. A brief discussion of the discrimination suffered by the Nepalis (and Limbus as Nepalis) under Land Revenue Order No. 1, lessee landlordism, Sikkim subject status, and the parity formula indicates the historical and politico-economic basis of the identity of the Nepali in Sikkim:

(1) Both Land Revenue Order No. 1 (issued by Charles Bell in May 1917) and Tashi Namgyal's proclamation on North Sikkim (30 August, 1937) protect and safeguard Lepcha and Bhutia interests in land.[9] Under notification No. 5093/F dated 13 April 1948, the opening of new lands was prohibited in Sikkim, which checked Nepali settlement considerably, although by then the Nepali groups had outnumbered the indigenous population in Sikkim. These laws prohibit the sale, mortgage or subletting of lands belonging to a Lepcha or Bhutia person to any Nepali person. These laws safeguard the economic interests of the Lepchas and the Bhutias while framing the parameters of their indigeneity and identity. After considerable debate in the mid-1980s neither of these laws was revoked.

(2) Under the lessee landlord system introduced by J.C. White in 1888, the landlords collected revenue on behalf of the king, and the tenants were at their complete mercy since they functioned as magistrates. The landlords encouraged the settlement of Nepali migrants to increase both revenue collection and to extract free labour. In 1915, two sets of land revenue rates were introduced in Sikkim. Until the abolition of landlordism in 1949, almost half the landlords and revenue collectors were Nepalis and the rest were either Bhutias or Lepchas. Nonetheless, the lease of land given to a Nepali landlord was for 10 years, and to a Bhutia or a Lepcha landlord, 15 years (Rose 1978: 215). Numerous land dispute cases available in the Sikkim state archives reiterate the idea that the 'Bhutia and the Lepcha cultivators are the sons

of the soil and therefore entitled to preferential tenurial rights and differential land revenue rates'.[10] In 1954, the state government issued notification No. 3082/L.R. enforcing a lower ceiling in land ownership of 5 acres and an upper ceiling through restrictions on purchase of land for persons owning more that 20 acres of land. The Cultivators Protection Act of 1985 affirmed the tenurial rights of the tenants and existing cultivators and assured parity in land revenue rates (Lama 2001: 45).

(3) Sikkim subject status epitomises the indigeneity of the Lepchas and the Bhutias by reinforcing the migrant identities of the Nepali groups. Under the Sikkim subject regulations of 1961, the early Nepali settlers who paid land revenue were recognised as legal settlers and given Sikkim subject certificates (Rao 1978: 20-21). The Bhutia and the Lepcha were automatically granted citizenship irrespective of their status as owners or cultivators of land. A large proportion of Nepalis were denied Sikkim subject status since they were labourers (Sinha 1975: 61; Datta 1994: 77-78). According to the 1975 Sikkim Citizenship Order, 'every person who immediately before 26 April 1975 was a Sikkim subject under the Sikkim subject regulations of 1961 shall be deemed to have become a citizen of India on that day'. In addition to the Nepali, there is a large section of population of Indian origin residing and working in Sikkim (such as Marwari, Bengali) since the late 19th century, who do not possess Sikkim subject certificates. Living in Sikkim over a period and being part of Sikkimese culture, is not sufficient for claiming Sikkimese identity and belonging.

(4) The politics of the parity system defines the ethnic politics of Sikkim (Sinha 1981: 195). Following its implementation, the Nepali groups were equated with the Lepcha and Bhutia groups in the matter of the distribution of seats in the State legislative assembly. Until 1979, the Nepali groups, who comprise 75 per cent of Sikkim's population, were equated with the Lepcha and the Bhutia groups that comprise 20 per cent of Sikkim's population. A modified parity system continues in the form of twelve reserved seats for the Lepchas and the Bhutias and one seat for the representative of the Buddhist monasteries in the Sikkim legislative assembly. Currently, the Limbus and the Tamangs are demanding seats in the legislative assembly from ST quota (leading to the decimation of the Lepcha-Bhutia share) or by increasing the number of seats in the state assembly to give them separate representation (a dilution of Lepcha-Bhutia power).

Almost every community in Sikkim is signalling the presence of its distinct language, script, culture, dance and music, and circulating a trope of economic backwardness to claim rights and entitlements. I conclude this section by stressing the importance of language in Sikkim's ethnicity.

The deed of the Darjeeling Grant (1835) is written in the Lepcha language and, until 1850s, the Lepcha and the Tibetan languages were used by Sikkim's administration. Even the British political officers of Sikkim were required to be competent and had to undergo language proficiency tests in the Tibetan language. In 1911, Sir Charles Bell took an examination in the Nepali language and justified it by stating 'that seventy five per cent of Sikkim's population is Nepali and efficient administration required competence in Nepali'.[11] This argument signals the reasons for the shift to the Nepali language as the language of administration in Sikkim in early 20th century. The increasing importance of the Nepali groups is reflected in the changes in the place names and with the Nepali names gaining importance over the original Lepcha or Bhutia names (Waddell 1891). Today, the *lingua franca* of Sikkim is Nepali and it was accorded the status of an Indian national language in 1992. The Nepali language has served as a source of identity and brought about the closer integration of the Nepali community in the diaspora (Hutt 1997: 116) as it serves as the mode of inter-ethnic communication.

The diverse groups within the Nepali category have languages and scripts of their own. Initially, the state government recognised four languages, namely, Lepcha, Bhutia, Limbu and Nepali, and these were taught in the schools at the higher secondary level, but other groups are demanding a similar facility. Today, the official weekly of Sikkim, the *Sikkim Herald* is printed in thirteen languages. The promotion and revitalisation of linguistic diversity is evident in the recent release of primers, dictionaries, and magazines. Language has been an important unifying force especially in situations where communities have been sub-divided by occupation and religion. Uniqueness of a language and its script has acquired significance such that they have become a mark of cultural uniqueness: 'without a language of one's own, there is no distinct culture, and hence, there can be no people/nation' (cf. Karlsson 2000: 226). Where there are no scripts, they are being invented and where scripts were modified, a fetish for originality is evident. In 2002, I witnessed a heated argument between two Lepcha ideologues, Lyangsong Tamsang of Kalimpong and Ugen Shipmoo of Sikkim (who has successfully computerised the Lepcha script by making some minor modification). These modifications were totally unacceptable to the other Lepcha ideologues of Kalimpong, while the Lepchas of Sikkim justified them as being essential for wider dissemination and printing of literature in the Lepcha language. Despite such heightened ethnic-linguistic consciousness, very people use their own language in daily discourse or even manage to read their own scripts; this reflects linguistic symbolism rather than linguistic proficiency.

Despite retribalisation and a common origin in Nepal, the Nepali language and a common subjective experience of exploitation under the Namgyal dynasty and colonial rule does provide some basis of political consciousness to the Nepalis in Sikkim. Recognising these aspects, A.C. Sinha advocated the use of a new terminology 'Nepamul' for Indians of Nepali origin (INO) in order to distinguish them from other Nepali persons of Nepal who come as seasonal agricultural labourers in the region (Sinha and Subba 2003: 11). A recent suggestion of the Gorkha National Liberation Front of Darjeeling that 'Gorkhas' be used for Nepalis of Indian origin has not yet gained any acceptability among other Nepali groups of Northeast India. Ghising even went so far as to suggest that their language be termed Gorkhali rather than Nepali. The following section relates the particular case of tribes of Sikkim to the colonial perception and post-colonial discourse about tribes and their identification in India.

II
Identity, Identification of Tribal People and Indigeneity

The concept of 'tribe' has generated much debate in colonial and post-colonial discourses, yet its contours lack explicit definition, despite its popular use in the discourses of social anthropologists, administrators, lawyers, tribal activists, politicians, and the government and international agencies. There has been more concern with the identification of tribes than with their definition in India. Popular discourse uses terms such as tribes, Scheduled Tribes, indigenous people, *vanjati*, *adivasi* and *jana* interchangeably. Nevertheless, each evokes different connotations and genealogies of use and representation in India and in Sikkim, in particular.

Social anthropologists argue that the concept of 'tribe' is a colonial construction (Xaxa 1999b, 2005; Karlsson 2000), necessitated by the need to classify people into categories for administrative purposes and influenced by the work of imperial scholar-administrators in India such as Elwin and Risley and by anthropologists' usage (such as that of Ghurye). The East India Company officers initiated social research in India by collecting information on religion, customs, agriculture, trade and population. These practices were later institutionalised in the census, gazetteers and ethnographic surveys (Cohn 1987: 248). The first ethnographic surveys of India refer to hill and forest tribes (*vanjati*s) thereby emphasising regional habitat, economic and political marginalisation in an evolutionary conception of tribes. However, not all tribes live in forests and all forest-dwellers are not tribes. Indian tribal communities are distinguished by religion and culture from the caste

groups. Many 19th and 20th century monographs on India habitually confused tribe with caste, although caste is a different kind of social category (Béteille 1998: 187). The 1901 Census of India used 'animism' as the criteria to distinguish between castes and tribes. Tribes were defined in opposition to caste, as lacking caste attributes – hierarchy, purity and pollution, kinship-based, technologically primitive, economically homogenous, and politically segmentary groups, practicing animism, possessing distinctive languages and placed at the margins of the state control. Post-colonial ethnographic studies have debunked representations of tribes being 'an isolated, self-contained and primitive social formation', since tribes and castes have coexisted in proximity with other social formations (see Sundar 1997: 16).

State recognition has given tribal identity a definition that they lacked in the past. Many groups became castes and ceased to be tribes in colonial India while the reverse process of castes becoming tribes is evident in the post-colonial period. Historically, many groups used the census operations of the colonial India to claim upper caste status or caste identities (see Cohn 1987: Ch. 10). Ethnographically, there are instances of groups becoming castes and outcastes and later reclaiming Scheduled Tribe status. A famous example is that of the Rajbansis whose members have Scheduled Caste status in contemporary West Bengal, although Rajbansis living in North Bengal staked claims to Kshatriya caste status in the late 19th century and objected to their census classification as Rajbansi-Koch, who were classified as tribal groups (Risley 1905 [1969 reprint]: 72-75, 126; Karlsson 2000: 223). In order to pass off as Kshatriyas, some Rajbansis distanced themselves from the economically backward members of the community and even hid their background and passed off as Bengalis. However, by the end of the 20th century, in order to claim the benefits of affirmative action, many Rajbansis of North Bengal were reverting to their 'original' identity as forest-dwellers, demanding ST status and a separate state, Kamtapuri (Nandi 2003: 148-53).[12]

In 1935, despite the circulation of 'aboriginal tribes' or the autochthones in discourse, the British Raj and the government of independent India decided to use the term 'Scheduled Tribes'. In 1991, the Anthropological Survey of India (see K. S. Singh 1994) identified about 461 tribal groups (varying in size, geographical spread, mode of livelihood, and social organisation) and several other groups are clamouring for 'tribal' recognition, special entitlements, reservations, and protections. Article 366 (25) refers to Scheduled Tribes as those communities who are scheduled in accordance with Article 342 of the Constitution according to which, 'the Scheduled Tribes are the tribes or

tribal communities or part of or groups within these tribes and tribal communities which have been declared as such by the President through a public notification' (Jain 2000: 271-72). The Scheduled Tribe status is an administrative classification using the criterion of primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the community at large, and economic backwardness. Groups may possess the so-called tribal attributes, nonetheless not beget the Scheduled Tribe status. The list of Scheduled Tribes varies from state to state, and groups classified as castes in one state may be classified as tribes in a neighbouring state: tribal identities are contentious.

The transformation of a group into a Scheduled Tribe confers special entitlements to the members of that group, which range from reservation of seats in the Legislative Assembly to quotas in government employment and educational institutions, and various other concessions. Other special provisions include the right of Scheduled Tribes to use their own language for education, and to profess their own religious faith and customary practices. The Fifth and Sixth Schedules of the Indian Constitution contain special provisions for protecting the tribes and administration of tribal dominated areas. There is a need to critically examine the political and administrative process around the recognition and conferment of tribal status to groups. Recognition as a Scheduled Tribe indicates the group's political strength and its power to influence the regime of representation in order to claim preferential entitlements and resources. Being tribal does not necessarily indicate indigeneity, oppression or subaltern status but signifies political assertion and empowerment.

The term *adivasi* – meaning original inhabitants – was first used in the Chotanagpur region of Bihar in the 1930s. In the historical context, the term denotes communities lying outside the state/society who were eventually colonised by the British Raj and brought under direct or indirect rule (Heredia 2000: 1522). Historians have documented the oppression, subjugation, colonisation of *adivasi*s by moneylenders and the colonial state, and narrated stories of their resistance and rebellion (Hardiman 1987, Sundar 1997). Today, *adivasi* has achieved a saliency in the discourse of tribal leaders and academia such that it connotes the marginality, dispossession and subjugation of tribal people rather than necessarily original inhabitation (Hardiman 1987). However, there are regional exceptions. In Bengal, the Rabhas prefer being termed tribal, while using *adivasi*s to connote the tribal groups that migrated from central India to work on the tea plantations. The Lepchas and Bhutias of Sikkim too prefer being tribal.

Any question of colonisation and subjugation of tribal people is problematic in the Sikkimese context. My ethnographic research in Sikkim indicates that hierarchies can emerge even among tribes, with groups ranking each other and there are dominant-subordinate partners in tribal/ethnic alliances such as the Lepchas-Bhutias. Many other social groups classified today as Nepalis in Sikkim suffered under the imperial regime, while protective measures were enforced to prevent the alienation of lands belonging to the Lepchas-Bhutias and check their political marginalisation in Sikkim. Poverty, economic and political subordination are not distinctive of tribal communities since other non-tribal groups such as the dalits were marginalised equally in history. Nevertheless, the stigma of untouchability surpasses the stigma of tribal status in Sikkim and in India. My informants in Sikkim stressed the social unacceptability of any union between a Scheduled Tribe person and a Scheduled Caste person and gave several examples of romances that were socially unacceptable and ended in heartbreak. Unlike the tribal people, the dalits cannot claim territoriality as a basis of their identity; nonetheless deterritorialised groups do have their own localities (Appadurai 1995: 222). The proliferation of SC housing societies, including government housing in urban India, have made it possible for the dalits to assert themselves locally and make themselves socially visible in the landscape.

Territorial affiliation and linguistic and cultural distinctiveness have legitimised tribal claims in both national and international contexts. Globally the tribal people are being referred to as the indigenous people, with this term acquiring political correctness as it encapsulates the conquest, subjugation, and decimation of native people such as in Australia and the Americas. This term was popularised after the declaration of 1993 as the year of the indigenous people. However, there are theoretical and practical difficulties of such a conflation of tribes as indigenous people in India. People designated as tribal are not necessarily indigenous while groups identified as indigenous may not necessarily be tribal in the Indian context. Any blanket generalisation of tribes as 'indigenous people' is problematic and misleading in the Indian case especially given the migration histories of some tribal groups, while other groups (castes) are indigenous to the region.

What cut-off point in India's history should we use to determine who are indigenous and who are the migrants? Given the waves of migration of people of different languages, races, cultures, and religions dating back to several centuries, any demarcation is contentious. The question of original settlers is contentious and problematic, as migration discourses mix up settlement within a region and the country (Sikkim and India).

Can this question of indigeneity be reduced to the time period of settlement?

The regime of representation of the tribal as the indigene has acquired a valency that cannot be ignored. Xaxa (1999b) makes two important points: (i) that tribal identity as the indigenous is a matter of pride, and (ii) that it is associated with rights and privileges. The colonial regime, and later the government of independent India, has played a critical role in transforming tribal people into the indigenous. Recovering history, circulating historic myths, and sanctifying historic sites as repositories of collective memory is critical for sustaining indigenous identities. Identity discourses on indigeneity are instrumentally using history as a Malinowskian charter for justifying their present. This explains the importance of the myth of the blood-brotherhood treaty at Kabi for affirming indigeneity and the idea of *Lhomontsongsum* (the ethnic alliance of Lepcha, Bhutia and Limbus). The Limbu anthropologist Subba (1999: 112) argues that the *Lhomontsongsum* was solemnised by Phuntsog Namgyal in 1641 to neutralise Lepcha and Limbu opposition and garner their support for the kingdom of Sikkim, while Sinha (1975: 14, 1981: 197) argues that this myth was circulated in the 1980s by the Bhutias to forge a '*Lhomontsong'* commonwealth against the Nepalis, although this unity could not be sustained due to religious and cultural differences among the constituent groups. However, according to other historical accounts and oral history I collected during my fieldwork, the blood-brotherhood treaty was solemnised at Kabi between Tekong Tek, a powerful Lepcha shaman and Khye Bumsa, the Tibetan Prince of the Minyak dynasty of Kham, and not by Phutsog Namgyal.

According to the Sikkim Bhutia Lepcha Association and the Lepcha associations, the ethnic alliance at Kabi was enacted in the 14th century between the Lepchas and the Bhutias and materially represented by sacred stones raised into the ground. They identify Kabi in North Sikkim as the sacred site where a blood-brotherhood treaty was solemnised between Tekong Tek and Khye Bumsa as the representatives respectively of the Lepchas and the Bhutias in 1366, thereby legitimising Bhutia migration and settlement into Sikkim; their version does not mention the Limbus. The witnessing stones of the Kabi sacred grove materially and symbolically deny indigeneity to other groups that do not possess such signifiers of indigeneity. Some versions of the Kabi myth mention the sacrifice of a Limbu person that transformed these three groups into a family, with 'Bhutias as the father', the 'Lepchas as the mother' and 'Limbus as the children'. During the 1990s, several memoranda of the Limbu association cited this myth about the sacrifice of a Limbu at Kabi as evidence of their indigenous status and pressed for

the Scheduled Tribe status.[13] Incidentally, Kabi was the primary site of my fieldwork in Sikkim and it is predominantly a Lepcha-Bhutia settlement where the Nepalis were settled in the early 20th century. Oral accounts of Kabi villagers do mention the sacrifice of a Limbu, although hardly any Limbus reside in Kabi or its adjoining areas. The only Limbus I discovered at Kabi were seasonal agricultural labourers from Nepal who come to harvest cardamom.

The sense of belonging is a politically negotiated process, and emplacement is not merely the outcome of dwelling in a place. On what grounds are the Lepchas-Bhutias-Limbus more tribal than the other groups residing in Sikkim? The Lepchas, Bhutias and Limbus equally have a history of settlement in the geographical region of contemporary Sikkim, Bhutan and Nepal. From the late 17th century, many groups such as the Magars, Limbus, Rai and Yakha find casual mention in the history of Sikkim written by the ruling family (Dolma and Namgyal 1908: 21, 30-32, 37-40, 53-54), and British travelogues of mid-19th century state that the Limbu, Mechi, and Magar are indigenous to Sikkim (Hooker 1891: 94, 285). Locality mediates ethnic-nationalism, but ethnic-nationalist origins also mediate locality; otherwise, the identities of the Nepalis as migrants into Sikkim would have been effaced and Limbu indigeneity would have been a foregone conclusion. This explains why the Gorkha National Liberation Front of the Darjeeling Hills is demanding an autonomous state and pressing for a shift in semantics from Nepali to Gorkha, as the term Nepali indicates Nepali citizenship of Nepal: ‘we are not here in India in accordance with the 1950 Indo-Nepal agreement, but we have been here in this land since the 12th century’ (cf. Baruah 2005: 199).

Like other essentialist identities, indigeneity has become a powerful tool that is being deployed by tribal people for political mobilisation and self-affirmation. Ideas of territoriality (rights over territory due to prior settlement) and indigeneity have been conflated in ethnic-nationalist discourses of tribal people and encouraged demands for autonomy and secession, although the two ideas are distinct. Post-colonial India has witnessed several ethnic-nationalist assertions of tribal people including violent insurgencies in Northeast India, shattering any romantic imaginings of peace-loving docile tribal people lost in their own worlds. There have been several instances of conflict-induced displacement of tribes and other groups in Northeast India: Kukis and Nagas have been displaced from Manipur; the Bengalis, from Assam; and the Chakmas, from Arunachal Pradesh. The Kukis are demanding a separate hill district in Manipur, while the Nagas are demanding the inclusion of Naga

inhabited areas of Manipur into Nagaland and greater autonomy from India.

III
Icons of Alternative Knowledge and the Emergence of Political Subjectivity

The myth of the 'savage tribe' released by the modern mind has been resurrected in the postmodern post-colonial period under a new *avatar* as the iconic custodian of alternative knowledge. Those modern fictions have become truths firing the political consciousness while providing resources for oppositional and identity politics. Undoubtedly, these representations have subverted the epistemic basis of their domination and dehumanisation.

In many parts of the world, indigenous people perceive their knowledge to be part of their cultural identity, and political movements have incorporated this as an integral part of their discourses (Strang 1997). Tribal claims of an organic link between their cosmologies, cultures, and territory and the environment were foregrounded in many resource-related struggles during the 1980s and 1990s (such as Narmada Bachao Aandolan) and continue to be powerful symbols of identity and instruments of political empowerment. During the Rathongchu movement, the Lepchas-Bhutias and the Buddhist activists asserted that, as the indigenous people of Sikkim, they are the custodians of Sikkim's sacred landscape, which would be defiled by state-sponsored development projects such as the Rathongchu hydel project and the settlement of Indian migrant workers.

The process of the Hinduisation of tribal people into castes and their assimilation into Indian mainstream has been reversed in post-colonial India with an accent on retribalisation and affirmation of tribal identities. With the emergence of an educated middle class among the tribal people (many of them are beneficiaries of reservation) some even are 'indigenous ethnologists' engaged in reconstructing their identities. Ethnology is essential for claiming an *ethnos;* hence, every community in Sikkim is discovering something unique about its identity and claiming special privileges for its protection. The late 1980s witnessed a cultural revival of the tribe in Sikkim,[14] with the Lepchas, Bhutias, Limbus (and some other groups) establishing tribal associations and reintroducing their languages, reinstating their forgotten rituals and giving status to their shamans. Other aspects such as dance, music, craft skills and cuisine were reinstated to affirm cultural specificity and reclaim an ethno-nationalist belonging.

Many Lepchas mentioned the stigma associated with their identities as uncivilised forest-dwellers, which had made it difficult for them to take pride in their identity, while permitting the Bhutias to dominate them. The process of the Bhutianisation of the Lepchas captured their status-predicament and indicated their individual mobility strategies. This involved the abandonment and forgetting of Lepcha culture, language and rituals by the adoption of Bhutia identities, Buddhist culture and Bhutia life-styles. The spread of Buddhism, inter-marriage between the communities, and similar legal status with the state had made this transformation possible. During the 1990s the Bhutianisation of the Lepchas was replaced by the remembering to be a Lepcha. The Lepcha ideologue P.T. Lepcha of Darjeeling Hills emphasised, 'being Lepcha is not just about being born as one. Lepchaness has to be expressed, affirmed, and demonstrated by one's participation in community activities'. In the early 1990s, politically conscious Lepchas-Bhutias revived many rituals in order to assert their indigeneity, affirming their symbolic connections with Sikkim's landscape, and politically staking a claim over its resources as the 'sons of the soil' to oppose the ascendancy of the numerically and politically Nepali majority.

The struggle to shape culture is often a battle over power (Cohen 1993: 148). Rituals such as the worship of mountains and lakes, first-fruit offerings, worship of nature, rain, plants and agricultural land, that were earlier a source of stigma for the nature-worshipping and forest-dwelling Lepchas, were consciously revived to assert indigeneity and subvert dominant ideologies that dehumanised them. Their forest-dwelling identity is an essential weapon for demanding rights over the forest and the fields. With their ongoing opposition to the implementation of the Teesta project, the Lepcha are emerging as the primordial environmentalists of the Sikkim Himalayas.

Indigeneity is intrinsically a sign of neither subalterneity nor resistance, but an assertive political statement. The idea of a defiled sacred landscape was the chief argument used by the Lepchas, Bhutias and Buddhist activists protesting against the implementation of Rathongchu hydroelectric project in West Sikkim during 1993-97. The activists argued that the project infringed their indigenous rights in land and violated Article 371F of the Indian Constitution under which the kingdom of Sikkim was incorporated into India in 1975. Articulation of Lepcha and Bhutia identity and indigeneity in the landscape did not begin with the battles around the Rathongchu hydel project nor have they ended with its cancellation in 1997. The inclusion of the Limbu and the Tamang in the Scheduled Tribe category in 2002 has evoked bitter

opposition from the Lepchas and the Bhutias who resent the dilution of their indigeneity and are not prepared to share their entitlements with other groups.

On 26 June 2003, the Sikkim Lepcha Youth Association and other Lepcha leaders submitted a memorandum to the Chief Minister of Sikkim demanding protection for the Lepchas as the Most Primitive Tribe:

> The Lepcha community, which represents the indigenous and primitive tribe of Sikkim, are politically, socially, economically and educationally more backward than the other communities of Sikkim. The Lepchas of Sikkim who are the indigenous people of Sikkim are having low levels of literacy, declining or stagnant population and other agricultural level of technology and economically backward than other communities of Sikkim…. Unless special care is given to protect and preserve this endangered human species there is every likelihood that Lepcha people will vanish from the Himalayas one day, as these people cannot adapt in such competitive world (*Weekend Review,* Gangtok, 4 July 2003).

The Sikkim Bhutia and Lepcha Association led a delegation of Bhutia and Lepcha protestors to Delhi and gave a memorandum to the President of India on 29 September 2003. In anger, the protestors challenged the merger of Sikkim into India. They have submitted many other memorandums and sent delegations to the concerned authorities asserting that, under Article 371f, preferential entitlements were given to the Bhutias and Lepchas, and not to them as Scheduled Tribes. The Sikkim government has currently proposed to the Central government that the strength of the state legislative assembly be increased from 32 to 40 seats in order to give the Limbus and the Tamangs the benefit of their tribal status. In the 2001 Census, the Limbus and the Tamangs were enumerated as part of the Nepali population. Hence, these groups are demanding the conduct of a fresh census recognising their Scheduled Tribes status in order to ascertain their exact numerical strength and thereby legitimise their demand for a proportionate share of reserved seats for their political representatives, jobs in government employment, and seats in educational institutions.[15] In 2005, the Lepchas were recognised as 'Most Primitive Tribe' by the Government of Sikkim while some Nepali groups, such as the Khambu Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sunwar, Thami, Dewan and Bhujel are pressurising the state government and the National Commission of Backward Classes to include them in the list of Scheduled Tribes.[16]

Conclusion

In this paper, the politics of tribal identity has been analysed in conjunction with the historic changes and the economic development of the eastern Himalayas in the last two centuries. Discourses indicate that tribal identities depend on exclusions and inclusions, expressions of territoriality, indigeneity and belonging in the landscape, and their recognition by the state. The continuing role of the state is explicit in the structuring of identities, allocation of entitlements to Scheduled Tribes, and its response to ethnic-nationalist assertions and movements for political autonomy. Claims of tribal indigeneity recreate homelands of ethnic-nationalist belonging while denying others a belonging in this landscape. The rediscovery of 'indigenous religions', shamans, and sacred sites do not merely represent tribal cultural revival; on the contrary, they reflect the flowering of tribal political consciousness among the Lepchas, the Bhutias and the Limbus. Culture is instrumentally being wielded as a weapon to politically affirm the 'tribal' self and challenge the domination of others by reconstructing identities in history to claim a historicity. History, religion and language emerge as important symbolic sources for furthering ethnic-national claims of tribal identity and indigeneity. These expressions of reflexive agency are certainly not unique or restricted to Sikkim. The struggle to be recognised as 'Scheduled Tribe' in Sikkim indicates that tribal identity is no longer a sign and symbol of subalternity but political consciousness. The Limbu were politically marginalised in Sikkim and could not bargain effectively with either the colonial powers or the post-colonial government for protective laws. It is only recently that they have succeeded in gaining Scheduled Tribe status and they are campaigning for rights and entitlements associated with it.

Much recent work outlines the embeddedness of the constructions of the 'tribe' as part of the colonial project and continuities in the constructivist policies of the post-colonial Indian development project (Sengupta 1986; Baviskar 1995; Karlsson 2000). The tribal certificate issued by the government is no longer a mark of stigma, but prized and priced in the market. Paradoxically, while the post-colonial ethnologists and historians are busy debunking essentialisms connected with tribal identities, the tribal people and the 'indigenous anthropologists' have appropriated the essentialisms of being 'primitive', 'shy innocent and other-worldly', 'nature-worshippers', 'indigenous', 'hunters and gatherers', and 'politically marginalised groups', in order to reconstruct identity discourses which can galvanise public and international support for their resource-related struggles not merely over water, forests and

fields, but also over seats in legislatures, jobs in the administrative services including the police and the judiciary, and seats in Indian universities, elite engineering, medical and management institutes. If these shifting terrains signal the political constituency of the tribe in India, then the market circulation of 'fake tribal certificates' reminds us that tribal identities need not necessarily be original, but can easily be purchased as commodities.

Notes

Research for this paper was conducted during my doctoral research (2000-04) as funded by the Commonwealth Scholarship Commission (UK), and the Beit Fund of Commonwealth History, Linacre College, and the Radhakrishnan Fund of the University of Oxford, and the Royal Anthropological Institute, London. This paper was presented at the 19th European Association of South Asian Studies Conference, Leiden, 27-30 June 2006. Discussions with Marcus Banks, David Parkin, Robert Parkin, Caroline Humphrey, Keith Sprigg, Virginius Xaxa and Rajib Nandi improved the argument. The usual disclaimers apply.

1. Although interlinked in concrete contexts, scholars distinguish between 'identity politics' – the top-down formal institutional arena of administration, organisations, parties and the government for affirming identities – and 'politics of identity' – the bottom-down process of individual and social articulation for power (Hill and Wilson 2003: 1-2).
2. In 1835, the British annexed the Darjeeling Hills from Sikkim and merged them into the Bengal State of Calcutta Presidency (Wangyal 2002).
3. The contestations and fluidity of identity explains the accent on impressionism.
4. The *History of Sikkim* gives 1642 (the Water-Horse year) as the date of the coronation (Dolma and Namgyal 1908: 17), while the most popular source in the English language cites 1641 as the date (see Waddell 1894: 50). According to the Tibetan astrological calendar, the Water-Horse year is stated to be 1646 (Interview: Dr. Rigzin Ngodup Dokhampa, the Namgyal Institute of Tibetology, Gangtok, Sikkim, 2002).
5. The title *Subba* was given to them by Prithviraj Narayan Shah in Nepal (Pradhan 1991: 82).
6. Source: Interviews with the famous linguist Keith Sprigg, England, 2003-04.
7. Proclamation issued on 21 July 1913 by the British Political Officer of Sikkim (Sikkim State Archives, Gangtok).
8. The Newar group retained an elite position in Sikkim, as in Nepal, and they formed the largest section among the Nepali landlords.
9. The first Political Officer of Sikkim J. C. White is blamed for encouraging Nepali settlement. However, in the Sikkim State Archives, I found a document dated 2 January 1897 signed by White prohibiting the Lepcha-Bhutia Kazis' *mandal*s from selling any land to Nepalis without the council's permission.
10. Cf. File No. 2 of Serial No. 18 of 1932 of General Department in Sikkim State Archives, Gangtok.
11. Refer to Examination of Mr. C. A. Bell, Political Officer in Nepalese-Khas Khura, Foreign Department, General B, Proceedings February 1911, National Archives, New Delhi.

12. A similar process is evident in the Rabhas of Bengal who were initially classified as a Scheduled Caste in the 1931 Census, but redefined themselves as Scheduled Tribes in the 1959 Census (Karlsson 2000: 202).
13. This is documented in memoranda submitted by Akhil Sikkim Kirat Limbu Chumlung to the Chief minister, the Prime Minister and the President of India (refer to 'Lhomentsong treaty revived', *Sikkim Observer*, 24 October-5 November 1988; 'Limbus demand Scheduled Tribes status', *Sikkim Observer*, 14 July; and 'Limbu Memorandum submitted to the President: Full text', *Sikkim Observer*, 28 July 1990).
14. Some of these measures can in fact be traced to Hope Cooke's efforts to revive Sikkimese (Lepcha-Bhutia) culture during the 1970s (Cooke 1980: 192).
15. 'PM lends an ear to Sikkim', *Statesman*, Gangtok, 4 December 2005.
16. *Backward commission to study demand for tribal status in Sikkim*, Gangtok, 16 December 2005. http://news.webindia123.com/news/showdetails.asp?id=193299&cat=India.

References

Anderson, B. 1983. *Imagined communities: Reflections on the origin and spread of nationalism.* London: Verso.

Anon. 1915. *Administrative report of the Sikkim state 1914-1915*. Calcutta: Superintendent Government Press.

Appadurai, A. 1995. 'The production of locality', in R. Fardon (ed.): *Counterworks: Managing the diversity of knowledge* (204-25). London and New York: Routledge.

Barth, F. 1969. 'Introduction', in F. Barth (ed.): *Ethnic groups and boundaries: The social organisation of cultural difference* (9-35). Oslo: Scandinavian University Press.

Baruah, S. 2005. *Durable disorder: Understanding the politics of Northeast India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Baviskar, A. 1995. *In the belly of the river: Tribal conflicts over development in the Narmada valley*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Béteille, A. 1998. 'The idea of indigenous people', *Current anthropology,* 39 (2): 187-91.

Census. 2001. *Primary census abstract (CD 6 - Sikkim)*. Registrar General, Census Operations.

Chemojong, I. S. 1973. *Kirat Sahityako Itihas*. Teerethum: Manishankaer Sering Limbu.

Cohen, A. 1974. *Two-dimensional man*. London: Tavistock.

——. 1993. *Masquerade politics: Explorations in the structure of urban cultural movements*. Oxford: Berg.

Cohn, B.S. 1987. *An anthropologist among the historian and other essays*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Cooke, H. 1980. *Time change: An autobiography*. New York: Simon and Schuster.

Datta, A. 1994. 'Ethnicity and resource management', in M.P. Lama (ed.): *Sikkim: Society, polity, economy, environment* (68-81). Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.

Dolma, Y.M., and T.M. Namgyal. 1908. *History of Sikkim*. Gangtok: Namgyal Institute of Tibetology.

Foning, A.R. 1987. *Lepcha: My vanishing tribe*. Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Foucault, M. 1972. *The archaeology of knowledge*. London: Tavistock.

——.1973. *Power/knowledge (Selected interviews and other writings, 1922-77)*. New York: Pantheon Books.

Gorer, G. 1938. *Himalayan village: An account of the Lepchas of Sikkim.* London: Michael Joseph.

Gowloog, R.R. 1995. *Lingthem revisited: Social changes in a Lepcha village of north Sikkim*. New Delhi: Har-Anand Publications.

Gramsci, A. 1971. *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*. London: Lawrence and Wishart.

Hardiman, D. 1987. *The Coming of the Devi: Adivasi assertion in Western India*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Heredia, R. 2000. 'Tribal history: Living word or dead letter?', *Economic and political weekly*, 35 (18): 1522-38.

Hill, J.D., and T.M. Wilson. 2003. 'Identity politics and politics of identity', *Identities: Global studies in culture and power,* 10 (1): 1-10.

Hooker, J. 1891. *Himalayan journals or notes of a naturalist*. London, New York and Melbourne: Ward, Lock, Bowden and Co.

Hutt, M. 1997. 'Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections of South Asian diaspora', in D.N. Gellner, J. Pfaff-Czarnecka*, et al.* (ed.): *Nationalism and ethnicity in a Hindu kingdom: The politics of culture in contemporary Nepal* (101-44). Amsterdam: Harwood Academic Publishers.

Jain, S.C. 2000. *The constitution of India: A commemorative edition on 50 years of Indian constitution*. Delhi: Taxmann Publishers.

Karlsson, B.G. 2000. *Contested belonging: An indigenous people's struggle for forest and identity in sub-Himalayan Bengal*. Richmond, Surrey: Curzon Press.

Kazi, J.N. 1993. *Inside Sikkim, against the tide*. Gangtok, Sikkim: Hill Media Publications.

Lama, M. P. 2001. *Sikkim: Human development report – 2001*. Delhi: Government of Sikkim, Social Science Press.

Nandi, R. 2003. *Depletion of natural forest in a multi-ethnic setting: An analysis of ecology and social structure in the Dooars region of West Bengal*. PhD Thesis, Centre for the Study of Social Systems, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi.

O'Malley. 1907. *The Bengal district gazetteers: Darjeeling*. Alipore: Bengal Government Printing Press.

Pradhan, K. 1991. *The Gorkha conquests: The process and consequences of the unification of Nepal, with particular reference to eastern Nepal*. Calcutta: Oxford University Press.

Rao, R.P. 1978. *Sikkim, the story of its integration with India*. New Delhi: Cosmo.

Risley, H.H. (ed.). 1894. *The gazetteer of Sikhim*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.

——. 1905 (1969 reprint). *The people of India*. Delhi: Oriental Book Reprint Corporation.

Rose, L.E. 1978. 'Modernising a traditional administrative system: Sikkim 1890-1973', in J.F. Fisher (ed.): *Himalayan anthropology: The Indo-Tibetan interface* (205-26). The Hague: Mouton Publications.

Sengupta, N. 1986. *The march of an idea: Evolution and impact of the dichotomy tribe-mainstream*. Madras: Madras Institute of Development Studies.

Siiger, H. 1967. *The Lepchas: Culture and religion of a Himalayan people. Part I.* Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.

Siiger, H., and J. Rischel. 1967. *The Lepchas: Culture and religion of a Himalayan people. Part II*. Copenhagen: National Museum of Denmark.

Singh, A.K.J. 1988. *Himalayan triangle. A historical survey of British India's relations with Tibet, Sikkim and Bhutan*. London: The British Library.

Singh, K.S. (ed.). 1994. *The scheduled tribes*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

Sinha, A.C. 1975. *The politics of Sikkim: A sociological study*. Delhi: Thompson Press.

——.1981. 'Resource distribution and multiple ethnic identity in Sikkim', in C. von Furer-Haimendorf (ed.): *Asian highland societies* (183-202). New Delhi: Sterling Publishers.

Sinha, A.C., and T.B. Subba. 2003. *The Nepalis in Northeast India: A community in search of Indian identity*. New Delhi: Indus Publishing Company.
Sprigg, R.K. 1995. '1826: The end of an era in the social and political history of Sikkim', *Bulletin of Tibetology (n.s.)* 31 (1): 88-92.
Strang, V. 1997. *Uncommon ground: Cultural landscapes and environmental values*. Oxford: Berg.
Subba, T.B. 1989. *Dynamics of a hill Society: The Nepalis in Darjeeling and the Sikkim Himalayas*. Delhi: Mittal Publications.
——. 1999. *Politics of culture: A study of three Kirata communities in the Eastern Himalayas*. Chennai: Orient Longman.
Sundar, N. 1997. *Subalterns and sovereigns: An anthropological history of Bastar 1854-1996*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.
Tamsang, K.P. 1983. *The unknown and untold reality about the Lepchas*. Kalimpong: Lyangsong Tamsang and Mani Printing Press.
Thurgood, G.; J.A. Matistoff and David Bradley (ed.) 1985. *Linguistics of the Sino-Tibetan area: The state of the art*. Canberra: Department of Linguistics, the Australian National University.
Waddell, L. A. 1891. 'Place and river names in Sikkim and the Darjeeling hills', *Journal of the Asiatic society of Bengal,* 60 (2): 53-79.
——. 1894. 'Lamaism in Sikhim', in H.H. Risley (ed.): *The gazetteer of Sikkim* (241-391). Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press.
——. 1899. *The Buddhism of Tibet: or, Lamaism with its mystic cults, symbolism and mythology, and in its relation to Indian Buddhism*. London: Luzac.
Wangyal, S.B. 2002. *Sikkim and Darjeeling: Division and deception*. Phuentosholing, Bhutan: Wangyal and KMT Press.
Xaxa, V. 1999a. 'Transformation of tribes in India: Terms of discourse'. *Economic and political weekly,* 34 (24): 1519-24.
——. 1999b. 'Tribe as indigenous people of India', *Economic and political weekly,* 34 (51): 3589-96.
——. 2005. 'Politics of language, religion and identity: Tribes in India', *Economic and political weekly,* 40 (13): 1363-70

Vibha Arora, Assistant Professor, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology (Delhi), Hauz Khas , New Delhi – 110 019
Email: vibhaaurora@yahoo.com

[The final revised version of this paper was received on 19 September 2006 – Managing Editor]