



Locating the Locals, Home and Identity: A Study of Tibetan Muslims of Darjeeling Hills

Phupu Wangdi Bhutia

Research Scholar Centre For Himalayan Studies University of North Bengal RajaRammohanpur,
Darjeeling, email id-agyaa18@gmail.com.

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ABSTRACT

The concept of “local” carries multiple meanings and generally refers to people or communities associated with a particular place or region. In this study, the term is used to examine the Tibetan Muslim community, commonly known as the Kache, who have been residing in the Darjeeling region of the Eastern Himalaya for more than six decades. Following their migration, the community has negotiated life in a new socio-cultural environment while preserving its distinctive religious, cultural, and social identity. Over time, they have created a sense of belonging and established a social space within the region. This paper explores how the Kache community constructs and negotiates identity and develops political consciousness in their adopted homeland. It also examines how these processes influence their socio-cultural and political positioning within the regional context. By engaging with the community’s historical experiences and lived memories, the study offers an alternative perspective for understanding Tibetan history, culture, and identity in the Eastern Himalayan region.

Introduction

The idea of “local” is often associated with people, identities, and practices that are rooted in a specific geographical space. However, locality is not only defined by physical presence but also by historical experiences, migration, cultural practices, and the development of a sense of belonging. In regions such



as the Eastern Himalaya, where multiple communities have migrated and settled over time, the concept of locality becomes complex and layered.

Darjeeling district is the Northernmost district of the state of West Bengal of India. The district has four subdivisions, Darjeeling and Kalimpong being two of those. Both the subdivisions are hilly and form part of the Eastern Himalayas. Though small in size, the district has a varied history, gone through several administrative reforms and also a diverse population composition. Both Darjeeling and Kalimpong formed a part of the state of Sikkim at one point of time, 1706, to be more precise. The region that is known as Kalimpong now, was taken over by Bhutan following a war between two countries in 1770. It was returned to East India Company after Anglo- Bhutan war in 1865, who then merged it with the district of Darjeeling Kalimpong has been of Darjeeling from then. Darjeeling itself was part of Sikkim till 1835, when the British East India Company managed to make it a gift to the Company from the Chogyal i.e. the king of Sikkim. In those years of British rule the region was often called British Sikkim. Because of location both Darjeeling and Kalimpong had close contact with Tibet Both the regions had close trade and economic contact with Tibet through the mountain passes of Nathula and Jelep la which lead to the Chumbi valley of Tibet that was directly connected with Lhasa in Tibet via Phari. The route through Jelep la passes via Pedong close to Kalimpong. The other route enters Sikkim by Nahula –la pass through Gangtok, the capital of Sikkim. Both the routes were widely used for trade and population movement but in course of time Tibet-Kalimpong trade via Jelep la became more popular and more widely used with Kalimpong developing as the centre of famous wool trade of Tibet. The route was closed after the Sino Indian war of 1962(Malley,1907). Nathu-La bridge road was the route by which Tibetan Muslims repatriate to India in 1960s. The Tibetan Muslims who have settle in the urban pockets of eastern Himalayas' can trace their origin from various migrant groups of four major regions: Kashmir, Ladkhah, Nepal and China. This is because Islam was carried to Tibet by various traders who in course of time settled down in Tibet and married local Tibetan women who then adopted Islam giving birth to new ethnic community of Tibetan Muslims in Tibet. The Muslim minority associated with numerically much larger Buddhist population for more than 600 years. Actually the bulk of Muslim population in Tibet was from the adjoining regions of Kashmir and Ladakh.(Sheikh,1991). In late 1960s, after crossing the border towns of Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Gangtok these refugees had predicament of choice between settling in Kashmir and Darjeeling their ancestral homeland as India. Many of them decided to choose Kashmir because of their old linkages with that place while some decided to settle down in various parts of the Himalayan towns like Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Gangtok in Sikkim and Kathmandu in



Nepal. Tibetan Muslims in this part of the hills basically preferred the urban places i.e. Darjeeling Sadar and Kalimpong I division.

Research Gap

An overview of the history of the community post immigration shows that most of the members of the community opted to settle in Kashmir but some came back to the Himalayan towns of Kalimpong and Darjeeling in the Indian state of West Bengal. A sizeable number also went to Nepal. In this way, the *Khache* spread throughout the Himalayan belt. A group whose history was primarily formed by trans-Himalayan regions ultimately spread out again into all these different regions. Although the majority of the *Khache* have relocated to Srinagar, there may be some in other parts of the world as well. Like in the past, this group has settled and taken certain traits from the local culture and created an almost peculiar way of living that spans across the Himalaya from Tibet to Darjeeling hills. Not many research works have been done on Tibetan Muslims. Earlier works conducted on the theme only provide a generalized view. The works that have been undertaken on their history since immigration has focused on the region of Kashmir. The Eastern Himalayas in particular have been almost overlooked by the scholars so far. There is scope to analyze their socio-political identity, their political consciousness, their occupational pattern and the changes that have set in the community over the past few decades. In other words, there is a lack of literature on their socio economic status in general and their present way of life in a multiethnic and multicultural social milieu.

Literature Review

Appadurai Arjun., (1996) in *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization* views locality as a socially produced process shaped through everyday practices, memories, and cultural interactions rather than merely a geographical space.

Giddens Anthony., (1991) in *Modernity and Self-Identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age.* argues that individuals develop a sense of identity and belonging through routine social interactions within particular places, which gradually become meaningful as “home.”

Brah Avtar.,(1996) in *Cartographies of Diaspora: Contesting Identities* terms the diasporic consciousness a homing desire. For her home; “is a mythic place of desire in the diasporic imagination. In this sense it is a place of no return, even if it is possible to visit the geographical territory that is seen as the place of ‘origin’” (1996, p. 188). So, she discusses the homing desire instead of homeland. Home has become the homing desire and home becomes into an essentially placeless Brah’s idea of “homing



desire” suggests that there is no such place of origin diasporans can return to nor a destination they can declare as home since the territory-based home, subject to change in history and mediated by their desire and memory, is different from what they have yearned for in their fantasy.

Butt Massod.,(2005) in his article titled *“Dalai Lama and the Muslims of Tibet”* focuses on the life of Tibetan Muslims before and after 1959 i.e. after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. He discusses about the various rights and benefits awarded to the Muslims residing in Tibet. Apart from that, the contribution of Muslims on the Tibetan culture particularly in the field of music has also been mentioned in this paper. He also points out that the population of Tibetan Muslims is a mere 3000 worldwide therefore for the social upliftment of the community and to remain in contact with the Mainstream Tibetan Youth Congress, Tibetan Muslim Youth Association has been formed.

Sekh Rahim Mondal has worked on the Muslim communities not only of Tibet but of Bhutan and Sikkim as well. These articles help one to understand the status of the Muslims in the Buddhist milieu of the mountain kingdoms in general. There are discussed below.

“Muslim minority of Tibet Retrospect and Prospects” (1999) is a brief history about Muslims in Tibet in terms of their socio-economic and cultural profile in historical and present context. More emphasis has been given here to highlight their history, economy and society as well as with the social frame-work of Tibet and how they integrated and maintained cultural boundary of Islam in an heterogeneous social environment of Tibet. The ethnocentric bias has been quite visible in Tibetan studies which show this region as a Buddhist periphery. It also focuses on the existence of parallel social structures of Buddhists and Muslims in Tibet. In another article *“A Note on Tibetan Muslim Refugees in India: Problems and Prospects”(2000)* examine the situation of Tibetan Muslim Refugees in India. He firstly discusses about their history, economy, society and culture in relation to Tibet. He further highlights their migration, magnitude of migration, mode of rehabilitation and adaptive strategies. In this paper, a special emphasis has been given to probe the problems of Tibetan Muslim Refugees in the light of human rights issue. The author points out that though Tibetan Muslims share many cultural traits with the local Buddhist Community but at the same time they also maintain social boundary and religio-cultural identity through their own social and religious institutions. All these have led to the emergence of “cultural duality” among the Tibetan Muslims

Shah Afdar.,(2007) in his article titled *“Tibetan Muslims in exile: A sociological Profile* highlights the status of Tibetan Muslims residing in Jammu and Kashmir. In this paper he further enlightens on the problems and plights that they have faced after their migration to India. He has also tried to enlighten



about the literary, education and population of Tibetan Muslims in Jammu and Kashmir. Regarding the problems the author points out that despite separate cultural and ethnic identity, expert observations reveal that identity crisis and personality crisis, problems of recognition are some of the factors which prompt the Tibetans specially the youngsters to transform with the new modernity and to keep them at par with natives and their neighbours.

Shah Afdar.,(2012) in his another article titled “*Exploring Ethnicities: A Sociological Profile of Tibetan Muslim Community in Kashmir Valley – Analysis*” discusses the social transformation that the Tibetan Muslims have undergone since 1959. His basic objective is to discuss their sociological profile to see the pattern of change, adaptation and conformity with the local culture, socio-economic change and development etc. The paper delves into the aspect that they are being treated as refugees by locals and struggling for identity in the land which they believe to be their ancestral homeland.

Proposed Study Area

The proposed study area includes the towns of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, where the Tibetan Muslim community (Kache) is primarily concentrated. Professionally, many members of this community are engaged in trade and business, which has led them to settle mainly in urban centers.

Both Darjeeling and Kalimpong are multi-ethnic towns characterized by a long history of migration and cultural interaction. These regions have witnessed continuous migration from neighboring areas such as Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, and Tibet, as well as from the plains of India. As a result, the region represents a diverse social and cultural landscape where different ethnic and religious communities coexist. In addition to the Tibetan Muslim population, there are also Muslim communities from other parts of India residing in these towns.

Objectives of the Study

The specific objectives of the study are as follows:

To trace the historical background and settlement of the Kache (Tibetan Muslim) community in the region.

To examine how religious and cultural factors influence their worldview and shape their identity and sense of belonging.



To understand how the community negotiates its social and cultural identity within a multi-ethnic environment.

Methodology

To fulfill the research objectives and questions, data for this study has been collected from both primary and secondary sources. Primary data has been gathered through interviews and participant observation, which form an essential part of ethnographic research. These methods help in understanding the lived experiences, social practices, and cultural perspectives of the Tibetan Muslim community.

Fieldwork was conducted among members of the Tibetan Muslim (Kache) community residing in Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Interviews with community members provided valuable insights into their history, migration experiences, identity formation, and socio-cultural practices. Participant observation also allowed the researcher to gain a deeper understanding of everyday life within the community.

In addition to primary data, secondary sources such as books, journal articles, archival materials, and other available printed documents related to Tibetan Muslims have been thoroughly consulted to understand the historical background and current situation of the community

Tibetan Muslims Identity In Larger Darjeeling Hills: A Political Perspective

These interactions shape how individuals perceive themselves and how they are perceived within society. The question of identity is therefore not only a cultural or social issue but also a political one. Identities are not singular or fixed; rather, they are multiple and constantly evolving across different social and political contexts. Identity is closely connected to how groups define themselves as a collective community and how they differentiate themselves from others within a broader political and social environment.

In political theory, ethnic identity has often been understood through two major frameworks: the primordial perspective and the situational or constructivist perspective. The primordial perspective argues that ethnic identity is deeply rooted in ancestry, culture, and historical continuity, suggesting that it is an inherent and relatively stable characteristic of a community. In contrast, the situational or constructivist perspective views ethnic identity as socially and politically constructed. From this perspective, the meaning and boundaries of identity are constantly negotiated and reshaped through social interaction, political processes, and historical change (Assimilation and Ethnic Identity, Asain Nation, www.asiannation.org).



These perspectives are particularly useful for understanding the identity formation of the Tibetan Muslim community that migrated from Tibet and later settled in towns such as Darjeeling and Kalimpong. As a minority community living in a multi-ethnic region, their identity is shaped not only by cultural traditions and religious practices but also by broader political processes related to recognition, belonging, and representation. Over time, the community has negotiated its place within the social and political landscape of the Darjeeling hills, developing a sense of locality and belonging while maintaining connections to its historical and cultural roots. As Tibetan Muslim community can be understood as both a political process, cultural shaped by migration in host society with negotiation on ones identity belonging within region.

Locality and the Idea of Home

The concept of locality is not merely defined by geographical boundaries but is also shaped by social relations, cultural practices, and shared experiences within a particular space. Scholars have argued that locality is produced through everyday interactions and the collective practices of communities that inhabit a place. For instance, Arjun Appadurai explains locality as a social process that is continuously created through human activities, memories, and cultural practices (Appadurai, 1996). In this sense, locality is not simply a physical territory but a lived experience that develops through the relationships between people and their environment.

Likewise Anthony Giddens highlights that social identity and a sense of belonging are deeply tied to the place where people live and engage with others. Through routine social interactions, communities develop feelings of attachment and belonging to a certain place, which eventually becomes their “home” (Giddens, 1991). This is particularly important for migrant groups. This is particularly important for migrant groups, for whom the idea of home often goes beyond a single geographical location.

For the Tibetan Muslim community who migrated from Tibet and later settled in towns such as Darjeeling and Kalimpong, locality is shaped through both memory and everyday experience. While their historical and cultural roots remain connected to Tibet, their long-term settlement in the Darjeeling hills has gradually created a new sense of belonging. Over time, the community has established social networks, economic activities, and cultural practices that link them closely to the region. Thus, the idea of “home” for the Tibetan Muslims is not limited to their place of origin but is also constructed through their lived experiences and participation in the social life of the Darjeeling hills.



Home as concept for migrant communities is often complex and multilayered. Scholars studying migration and diaspora argue that home is not only a physical place but also an emotional and cultural space shaped by memory, identity, and belonging. According to Avtar Brah, the idea of “home” in diaspora communities exists concurrently as a place of origin and as the site where migrants build new social and cultural lives (Brah, 1996). Similarly Tibetan Muslims who migrated from Tibet and later settled in towns such as Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the meaning of home reflects both memory and lived experience. As Tibet remains an important historical and cultural reference point, the Darjeeling hills have gradually become a new space of belonging where the community has built social networks, economic activities, and cultural practices. Thus, the very opinion of home for Tibetan Muslims represents a continuous negotiation between past memories and present locality.

Political Participation

Tibetan Muslims in Darjeeling region are represented by the Tibetan Muslim welfare Association(TMWA), which was founded in 1975 with its main office at Darjeeling. In 2005 it became politically aligned with the greater Indian Muslim community reflecting the community’s integration in to the nation state. The community splits in to two centers in the 1980s one in Darjeeling and one in Kashmir Tibetan Muslims have access to political and social rights due to their schedule Tribe status and TMWA’s support for the **Gorkhaland Movement** reflects a collective identity based on shared struggles with Nepali ethnic groups for autonomy. The community’s involvement in this movement highlights their **ethno- political unity** within the regional framework. The **Anjuman-E-Islamia** connects Tibetan Muslims to broader political and religious networks, while their **"home"** is preserved through social and religious institutions that maintain their **cultural distinctiveness** within a larger **Indian political structure**.

Conclusion

The **Tibetan Muslims** of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, living in the **Darjeeling Himalaya** region, have successfully preserved their religious, cultural and national identity while integrating into the local Nepali and Buddhist society. They have adapted to the local language, dress, and cultural practices without losing their core traditions, including their **mother tongue** and **Islamic customs**. The community is highly educated, with a strong sense of **ethnic pride** and a lifestyle aligned with religious values. Politically, Tibetan Muslims maintain a **functional independence**, adapting to the broader Nepali customs while nurturing a sense of belonging. Although not highly politically active, they participate in regional political movements for **separate statehood** and support local demands for autonomy. Their



small community association plays a vital role in preserving their **intra-community cohesion** and cultural identity. Tibetan Muslims are now integrated into the **Pahari culture**, also known locally as **Bhote Musalman**, and are recognized for their entrepreneurial success, particularly in **garment and hotel businesses**, contributing significantly to the local **tourism industry**. Despite their integration, they continue to hold onto their distinct cultural markers, reinforcing their "**home**" in the Darjeeling hills.

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