



CASTE, ETHNICITY, AND SOCIAL HIERARCHIES IN SIKKIM: AN ANALYTICAL STUDY OF HISTORICAL AND CONTEMPORARY DYNAMICS

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Abstract

This paper explores the intricate social structure and caste system in Sikkim, emphasizing the unique interplay between caste, ethnicity, and social hierarchy across the region's major communities—Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali. While the caste system in Sikkim is relatively more fluid compared to other Indian states, its influence remains deeply embedded in shaping societal roles, access to resources, and patterns of political representation. The study highlights how traditional caste divisions, particularly among the Nepali community, alongside status-based distinctions in the Bhutia and Lepcha groups, have historically defined economic, religious, and cultural practices. It further analyzes the impact of Sikkim's integration into the Indian Union post-1975, focusing on democratic inclusion, affirmative action, and the evolving political and social landscape. Despite these changes, caste continues to shape norms, behaviors, and opportunities in subtle yet significant ways, reinforcing long-standing hierarchies. The findings underscore the importance of addressing caste-based inequalities to build a more inclusive and equitable society in Sikkim.

Keywords: Sikkim, caste system, social structure, ethnicity, Bhutia, Lepcha, Nepali, hierarchy, affirmative action, social inequality, cultural identity.

Sikkim, like many other regions of India, has historically operated within a complex social structure, heavily influenced by its caste system. The caste system in Sikkim, though not as rigid as in other parts of India, has shaped social roles, relationships, and hierarchies within the community. This system has been a significant part of Sikkimese society for centuries, influencing interactions among various groups, as well as the distribution of power, land, and resources. The social structure in Sikkim is characterized by a combination of traditional caste distinctions, ethnic identities, and class-based divisions.

Overview of the Caste System in Sikkim

The caste system in Sikkim evolved in a way that reflects the region's unique historical and cultural context. Unlike the strict and formalized caste hierarchy in many parts of India, Sikkim's social order was influenced by a variety of ethnic groups, including the Nepali, Bhutia, and Lepcha communities. These groups followed different customs, traditions, and belief systems, but they were all influenced by the overarching framework of the caste system, which defined their roles and social positions.

The Nepali community, which became the largest ethnic group in the state, brought with it the caste system typical of the hill regions of Nepal. In this system, castes were divided into four broad categories: Brahmins, Kshatriyas, Vaishyas, and Shudras. These categories were then further subdivided into many smaller groups, each with its own social, economic, and religious roles. However, while the caste system played a role in shaping Nepali society in Sikkim, the social hierarchies were more flexible than in other parts of India.

The Bhutia and Lepcha communities, indigenous to Sikkim, followed their own social and religious traditions. While these communities did not have a formalized caste system like the Nepali community, social distinctions based on status, clan, and lineage still played a significant role. In these communities, a system of hierarchical relationships existed, though it was more fluid compared to the rigid caste stratifications found in the larger Nepali-speaking population.

The Social Hierarchy and Its Impact on Different Communities in Sikkim

The social hierarchy in Sikkim, shaped by a mix of caste, ethnicity, and clan-based distinctions, deeply influenced the dynamics between various communities in the state. These divisions were not as rigid as those in other parts of India, but they nonetheless defined social interactions, economic opportunities, and political power.

Ethnic Hierarchy

Sikkim's social structure was primarily influenced by the presence of three major ethnic groups: the Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali communities. Among these, the Bhutias and Lepchas, as the indigenous people of Sikkim, held higher social status, especially in the early years of Sikkim's history. The Bhutia community, largely of Tibetan origin, formed the aristocratic elite of the state. The Chogyal monarchy, which ruled Sikkim until 1975, was predominantly composed of Bhutia rulers, and their aristocratic status was deeply ingrained in the social hierarchy. The Lepchas,



another indigenous group, held significant cultural and religious influence but were often seen as subordinate to the Bhutias in the social order, despite sharing an indigenous status.

The Nepali community, which became the largest ethnic group in Sikkim over time, faced a different set of challenges within the social hierarchy. While the Nepali-speaking people, particularly those from higher castes, gained political and economic influence in the modern era, their status was often lower in comparison to the Bhutia and Lepcha communities. The Nepali community was stratified based on the caste system, with Brahmins and Kshatriyas at the top, followed by Vaishyas, and lower castes such as the Dalits at the bottom. The caste-based distinctions within the Nepali community played a significant role in shaping their social standing, even though the Nepali population formed the majority in Sikkim.

Caste-based Impact

Within the Nepali community, the caste system created clear divisions that impacted individuals' social roles and opportunities. The higher castes, such as Brahmins, Thakuris, and Chhetris, traditionally held more prestigious positions in society. They were the landowners, the priests, and the political leaders in the community. These groups had greater access to education, economic resources, and political power. In contrast, the lower castes, particularly the Dalits, faced significant social discrimination and exclusion. They were often relegated to the most menial jobs, such as cleaning, manual labor, and other forms of service. Their social mobility was severely restricted, and they were marginalized from many social, economic, and religious activities.

In the Bhutia and Lepcha communities, caste distinctions were less formalized but still played a role in the social structure. Within these communities, familial lineage and clan status were often indicators of one's social rank. Certain families were viewed as more prestigious due to their historical significance, wealth, or proximity to political power. However, the distinctions within these communities were generally less rigid than those found in the Nepali caste system.

Impact on Social and Economic Opportunities

The social hierarchy had a direct impact on the economic opportunities available to different communities in Sikkim. Higher-caste individuals, particularly from the Bhutia, Lepcha, and upper-caste Nepali groups, had better access to resources such as land, education, and wealth. These communities were often able to control agricultural production, trade, and local politics, which gave them a significant advantage in the economic sphere. They were also more likely to hold positions of authority in both the local administration and the religious institutions that shaped Sikkimese society.

In contrast, the lower-caste groups, including Dalits and other marginalized communities, faced significant barriers to accessing these same resources. They were often excluded from formal education and were limited in the types of employment they could pursue. The economic power of the lower castes was restricted, and they were largely confined to agricultural labor or other low-status work. This economic inequality reinforced the social divisions and perpetuated the status quo of the caste system.

Social and Political Consequences

The social hierarchy also had important political implications. The Bhutia and Lepcha communities, as the indigenous elite, were able to retain significant political power throughout the history of Sikkim, particularly during the reign of the Chogyals. However, with the rise of the Nepali-speaking majority, political dynamics began to shift, and the lower-caste Nepali groups began to push for greater political representation and social equality. Despite being the largest ethnic group, the Nepali-speaking communities, particularly those from the lower castes, were politically underrepresented for much of the state's history.

The post-1975 period, after Sikkim's integration into India, marked a significant change in the political landscape. The Indian Constitution's policies on affirmative action, which aimed to provide equal opportunities for historically marginalized communities, began to impact the traditional social order. The introduction of democratic governance brought greater representation for all ethnic and caste groups, especially through the mechanisms of elections and political participation. However, the social legacy of the caste system continued to shape how various communities interacted and how power and resources were distributed.

Cultural and Religious Impacts

Religion also played a significant role in reinforcing the social hierarchy. The Bhutia and Lepcha communities, with their Buddhist and indigenous religious practices, often held higher positions within the religious institutions that governed the spiritual life of Sikkim. In contrast, the Nepali community, which adhered largely to Hinduism, faced a different set of religious norms that were influenced by caste. Higher-caste Nepali individuals often held positions of authority within the religious institutions, while the lower castes were excluded from key rituals and religious practices.



The caste system's influence on religious life also extended to social practices such as marriage, festivals, and communal gatherings. Inter-caste marriages were generally discouraged, and individuals were expected to marry within their caste or ethnic group to maintain social purity. This practice further entrenched social divisions and limited the integration of different groups within the broader Sikkimese society.

Thus, The social hierarchy in Sikkim had a profound impact on the lives of its communities, shaping their access to resources, power, and social status. The divisions based on ethnicity, caste, and lineage influenced not only the political and economic opportunities available to different groups but also their social interactions and cultural practices. While the caste system in Sikkim was not as rigid as in other parts of India, its influence still remained strong, creating divisions that impacted the daily lives of the people.

However, the post-1975 changes, particularly the integration of Sikkim into India, brought significant shifts in the political and social structure, particularly through the implementation of affirmative action and democratic representation. Despite these changes, the social hierarchy's legacy continues to shape the community's dynamics in subtle but important ways. As Sikkim continues to evolve, addressing the historical and social implications of this hierarchy remains crucial for creating a more equitable and inclusive society.

Role of Caste in Shaping Societal Roles and Norms in Sikkim

The caste system in Sikkim, particularly among the Nepali community, significantly shaped the roles that individuals were expected to play within society. Social roles were traditionally divided along caste lines, with each group assigned specific tasks based on its position in the hierarchy. Higher-caste individuals were typically expected to take on roles of prestige and influence, while those from lower castes were relegated to more menial and labor-intensive work. This division of labor helped maintain the social order by ensuring that each caste fulfilled particular functions within the community. As a result, the caste system not only determined the work individuals could engage in but also dictated the nature of their social interactions, participation in public life, and access to resources.

At the top of this hierarchical structure were the Brahmins and Kshatriyas, who held significant authority in religious, social, and political spheres. The Brahmins were entrusted with conducting religious rituals, ceremonies, and maintaining spiritual traditions, which gave them a revered status within society. They were often seen as the custodians of religious knowledge and practices. The Kshatriyas, on the other hand, were associated with military and leadership roles, responsible for protecting the community and maintaining law and order. Both Brahmins and Kshatriyas enjoyed considerable respect, social privileges, and access to economic opportunities, which reinforced their elevated status in the community.

The higher castes in Sikkim also had the advantage of greater educational opportunities. They were more likely to receive formal education, which enabled them to participate in governance, administration, and other influential roles within society. Their access to resources allowed them to control land, wealth, and political power, further strengthening their social standing. This economic and educational advantage ensured that the higher castes maintained their dominance in Sikkimese society, where their roles were seen as vital for sustaining the religious, cultural, and political order.

In stark contrast, the lower castes, particularly the Dalits and Shudras, were confined to roles considered to be of lower social value. These individuals were often tasked with manual labor, agricultural work, or cleaning duties, which were deemed to be 'impure' tasks. As a result, they faced significant social exclusion and were denied the right to participate in higher social functions, including religious ceremonies, festivals, and political activities. Their roles were viewed as inferior and less important, reinforcing their marginalized position within the caste hierarchy. The restrictions placed on them prevented many lower-caste individuals from rising above their assigned roles, limiting their opportunities for social mobility and economic advancement.

The caste-based division of roles also had a profound effect on the social dynamics in Sikkim, particularly in terms of access to power and representation. Lower-caste communities were systematically excluded from decision-making processes, and their voices were often overlooked in political and social matters. This exclusion created a sense of inequality, as the higher castes retained control over the key aspects of governance and societal norms. The social stigma attached to being born into a lower caste also perpetuated these divisions, making it difficult for individuals to transcend their social status. As a result, caste-based roles and norms not only determined the daily lives of individuals but also shaped the broader social and political landscape of Sikkim.

Caste and Social Norms in Sikkim

The caste system in Sikkim, particularly within the Nepali community, deeply influenced the social norms that governed the daily lives of individuals. These norms played a central role in maintaining social divisions and reinforcing the caste-based hierarchy. One of the most significant social norms established by the caste system was the expectation that individuals would marry within their own caste. Inter-caste marriages were seen as taboo and strongly discouraged. Such unions were believed to threaten the purity and integrity of the caste system, challenging the traditional social order. This norm ensured that caste distinctions remained intact, as individuals were bound by



rigid boundaries of caste and ethnicity. It created a sense of belonging to specific social groups, which reinforced the hierarchical structure and limited the opportunities for social mobility across caste lines.

Religious practices in Sikkim also mirrored the divisions established by the caste system. Higher-caste individuals, such as Brahmins and Kshatriyas, were often the only ones permitted to perform religious rituals and ceremonies. These individuals held exclusive rights to conduct sacred rituals in temples or at home, and their participation in religious events was seen as essential for maintaining spiritual order. In contrast, lower-caste individuals, particularly Dalits and Shudras, were excluded from such practices. They were often forbidden from entering temples or taking part in religious festivals, as their caste was believed to render them spiritually impure. This exclusion was not just a reflection of social hierarchy but also reinforced the belief that higher castes were morally and spiritually superior, while lower castes were considered polluted and inferior. This practice perpetuated the caste-based notion of purity and impurity, further entrenching the social divides.

Beyond marriage and religious practices, caste also dictated the everyday social behavior and expectations placed on individuals. In public spaces, caste influenced the way people were expected to present themselves and interact with others. Higher-caste individuals were expected to carry themselves with a sense of dignity and respect, often holding themselves apart from others. Their speech, mannerisms, and interactions with others reflected their elevated status, and they were granted privileges in social settings. In contrast, lower-caste individuals were expected to behave humbly and submissively. They were often relegated to the margins in public spaces and were required to show deference to higher-caste individuals. This expectation of humility was reinforced by social norms that emphasized deference to authority and social order.

These caste-based social norms played a critical role in perpetuating the inequalities inherent in the caste system. By dictating how individuals interacted with one another, the system ensured that power dynamics were reinforced and that higher-caste groups maintained control over key aspects of social, religious, and political life. The rigid boundaries between castes shaped not only individual behavior but also societal expectations, reinforcing a culture of inequality that restricted the social mobility and opportunities of lower-caste individuals. The norms surrounding marriage, religious participation, and social behavior were designed to maintain the status quo, further entrenching the divisions that separated individuals based on their caste.

Caste and Economic Roles

Caste also played a significant role in determining individuals' economic opportunities and roles. The higher castes, particularly the Brahmins, Kshatriyas, and other upper-caste groups, typically controlled land, wealth, and economic resources. They were able to engage in profitable agricultural activities, manage trade, and hold administrative or political positions. These groups had greater access to education and skills training, which allowed them to secure higher-paying and more prestigious jobs. Over time, this economic dominance allowed the higher castes to maintain their privileged status within society.

In contrast, the lower castes had limited access to resources and were often restricted to low-paying jobs. Many of them worked as agricultural laborers, in menial tasks, or in cleaning services, which were considered "unclean" by the higher castes. This limited economic mobility created a cycle of poverty and dependence for the lower castes, preventing them from improving their social standing or accessing opportunities for advancement.

In the context of the Lepcha and Bhutia communities, while there was no formal caste system, social and economic roles were still influenced by lineage, family status, and tradition. For example, some families within these communities held more prominent positions due to their historical connection to the royal court or religious institutions. These families enjoyed greater respect and economic privileges, which gave them an elevated status within the community, while other families, despite being of the same ethnic group, had lesser status.

Impact on Political Participation and Representation

Caste has historically affected political participation and representation in Sikkimese society. The upper castes, especially from the Bhutia and upper-caste Nepali groups, were more likely to hold positions of political power and influence, particularly during the reign of the Chogyals and in the early years following Sikkim's integration into India. These groups controlled the political institutions and had the resources to influence political decisions.

The lower castes, however, had limited political representation and were often excluded from the political process. Although Sikkim's integration into India and the establishment of democratic processes provided new avenues for political participation, the legacy of caste-based exclusion continued to affect the level of political representation for marginalized communities. In the years following integration, efforts were made to address these imbalances through the application of affirmative action policies, but the political impact of caste divisions remained a challenge.

Caste and Cultural Identity

The caste system also played a key role in shaping cultural identity in Sikkim. The different caste groups within the Nepali community developed their own unique cultural practices, which were tied to their social status. For instance,



higher castes had access to more formal education, which influenced their participation in the arts, literature, and religious scholarship. In contrast, lower castes had their own cultural traditions, which were often more focused on manual labor, agricultural festivals, and oral traditions. These cultural distinctions helped reinforce caste boundaries and shaped the way individuals from different castes viewed one another.

The integration of Sikkim into India, along with its adoption of national laws on equality and affirmative action, has led to gradual changes in the way caste shapes societal roles and norms. However, the influence of caste on Sikkimese society is still evident in various aspects of life, particularly in terms of social interactions, economic roles, and cultural identity.

Thus, Caste has played a significant role in shaping societal roles and norms in Sikkim, particularly in the Nepali community. The caste system determined individuals' social positions, economic opportunities, and access to resources, while also reinforcing norms regarding marriage, religious practices, and social behavior. Although the political and social changes after Sikkim's integration into India have addressed many of the inequities associated with the caste system, its legacy continues to influence Sikkimese society in subtle but important ways. The ongoing challenge remains in addressing the historical inequalities and promoting greater inclusivity and social mobility for all communities.

Conclusion

The caste system in Sikkim, though less rigid than in many other Indian states, has significantly influenced the region's social structure, cultural practices, and distribution of power among its major communities—Bhutia, Lepcha, and Nepali. Deeply rooted caste-based and ethnic distinctions shaped access to education, economic roles, and political representation, with upper-caste groups historically enjoying privileges over marginalized ones, particularly the Dalits and lower castes within the Nepali population. The post-1975 integration of Sikkim into India marked a turning point with the introduction of democratic governance and affirmative action policies that sought to redress historical imbalances. Yet, despite constitutional reforms and social progress, the legacy of caste continues to influence societal roles, limiting social mobility and inclusion for many. The persistence of these social hierarchies underscores the need for sustained policy interventions and cultural change aimed at building a more equitable and inclusive society in Sikkim.

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