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Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Nepalis of Darjeeling

Situated in the eastern side of the Himalayas, Darjeeling offers a panoramic view. Tiny it is, but it offers a rich mosaic of people, having different languages, cultures and traditions. It has undergone various changes from being a part of Sikkim earlier to have been given to British India in 1835 to being integrated as a part of Bengal. The people residing here, majority being the Nepalis, have always felt different from Bengal culturally, traditionally, physically and geographically. They have always craved for their own identity and to be known as the Nepalis of Darjeeling, having Indian citizenship and also want to distinguish themselves from the Nepalese of Nepal and also the Bengalis, the majority linguistic group of Bengal.

On Defining Identity vis-à-vis Language, etc.

Before going further, it is necessary to know the meaning of identity. The term *identity* means a state of being identical. Freud defines *identity* as the expression of emotional ties with another person or group. In a sociological sense, a person's identity is always with reference to a social group with which she identifies herself.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

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Identity of a group as such has no meaning. It is only with respect to some other groups that a particular group distinguishes itself and thereby asserts its own identity.

This process can be stimulated by social, economic and political situations. If we see identity in terms of ethnic identity, it is this that provides an individual or group a requisite base for interaction through identification. People tend to identify themselves by the ethnic group to which they belong, rather than by the place from where they come.

Taking this into consideration, people from the same linguistic group have a particular way of identifying themselves with their language rather than region, and speakers of different languages are called outsiders. Language is more important in India being a federation and has different dominant linguistic groups or various marginalized linguistic minority groups. But 'language is not only a symbol to unite groups, but its effective use or abuse can catapult an ethnic movement.'

Language provides a strong bond of unity among its speakers and marks off one speech community from another. It not only is a means of communication but often language can be used as a strong weapon in the achievement of political power.

A situation of conflict may take place between two different language speaking groups and it is mainly because of the insecurity or fear of losing one's linguistic and cultural identity that conflicts take place. In India, various linguistic groups have put forth various demands based on language or ethno-linguistic upheavals, asking for linguistic re-organization of states. For some people, there is an apprehension that their cultural heritage would be lost, once another language becomes official.

Importance of Language Identity

Ethnic movements or leadership in India deploy linguistic ethnicity as one of the first strategies in their competition for greater access to power and resources. Therefore, it can be said that language has assumed a very important place in today's political situation and is one of the most important marks of identification. Language demands in modern India have been expressed in various levels from demands to replace the colonial language (under the British colonial rule) to replacement of Hindi as the chief official/national language. Demands also aim at making the regional languages as media of instruction and governance as well media for judicial proceedings, etc.

At the regional level, a very important feature of language demands is the reservation of employment opportunities for the 'sons of the soil'. This demand was equally important in those areas where immigrants from the regions were employed in the upper sections of the job structure. In the beginning of the 20th Century, various organizations were formed, social, economic and political, to promote the interests of the communities.

Language demands in independent India were concerned with various issues like Official language of the Central Government, the re-organization of the states of the federation along linguistic lines, Official language of the states of the federation and language of the states of the federation and language policies relating to education, public employment and general communication.

Constitutional Provisions and the Linguistic Re-organisation of States In India

If we look into the provisions regarding the language issue in the Constitution, Part XVII entitled 'Official Languages' under Articles 343 to 351 deal with it. Chapter I- Language of the Union (Articles 343, 344), Articles 343 recognizes Hindi as the Official Language of the Union, Clause 2 of the same article states that English shall continue to be used for such purposes as may be specified by law up to 1965. Chapter II – Regional Languages (Articles 341-347), Chapter III Language of the Supreme Court and High Court- Special Directives (Articles 350-351). To Article 344(I) and 351, the VIII th Schedule has been added. Originally there were only 14 languages in the VIIIth Schedule, namely, Assamese, Bengali, Gujarati, Hindi, Kannada, Kashmiri, Malayam, Marathi, Oriya, Punjabi, Sanskrit, Tamil, Telegu and Urdu. Sindhi was added in 1967, Nepali, Konkani and Manipuri were added in 1992 taking the number to 18. Moreover Article 350 A lays down that it is the responsibility of the Centre to safeguard the cultural interests of the minorities and to see that they have adequate facilities for receiving at least the primary education in their mother tongue. Articles 29 and 30 also confer broader rights upon linguistic minorities to preserve their distinct language, script and culture (Article 29) and to establish and administer educational institutions of their choices (Article 30).

If we examine the case of India, the Indian states were not pre-existing autonomous units brought together after 1947. In fact the demand for linguistic re-organization was made even before India achieved independence.

Bal Gangadhar Tilak had written on 17th November 1891 in Kesari, 'that if the present administrative units, created on linguistic bases each of them will be to some degree, homogenous and will facilitate the development of the people and the language of the respective languages.' (Robert. D. King, *Nehru and the Language Politics of India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1988, pp.10).

H. H. Rishley had laid down that language should be the criteria for territorial redistribution. The Simon Commission also had not accepted language as the only criteria for redrawing the provincial boundaries. However later, the JPV Committee, appointed by the Congress in 1948, (consisting of Jawaharlal Nehru, Pattabhi Sitaramayya and Sardar Patel), soon realized the importance of linguistic states and delay in this regard would harm the unity and integrity of the country. The Telugu speaking people wanted a separate state, different from the Tamils. After a great deal of violence, the state of Andhra was created in October, 1953. It was after this that the States Re-organization Commission was formed in 1956 to create states on linguistic basis.

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling

(Some references in Language in India www.languageinindia.com relating to the evolution of re-organization of Indian provinces into linguistically re-organized states and on the evolution of language policy within the Indian National Congress are as follows:

<http://www.languageinindia.com/dec2005/languagepolicy1936-1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/oct2004/languagepolicyearlycongress1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/july2005/prepartitionlanguagepolicy1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/april2005/earlygandhi1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/may2005/motilalnehrureport1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/jan2006/constituentassembly1.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/dec2002/karnatakaeducationpolicy.html>,

<http://www.languageinindia.com/feb2005/lingreorganization1.html>

<http://www.languageinindia.com/april2006/constituentassemblylastdays.html>)

Soon the bi-lingual state of Bombay was split into Gujarat and Maharashtra in 1960. Punjab was divided into two, Punjabi speaking state of Punjab and Hindi speaking state of Haryana in 1966. Various other linguistic states have been created from 1956 till today.

In Dravidian India, we have Andhra Pradesh (Telugu), Kerala (Malayam language), Karnataka (Kannada language) and Tamil Nadu (Tamil). There are Madhya Pradesh (Hindi language), Rajasthan (Hindi, Rajasthani language), Uttar Pradesh (Hindi language), Bihar (Hindi), West Bengal (Bengali), Assam (Assamese) and Orissa (Oriya).

Taking all these into consideration, this paper will see how the Nepalis of Darjeeling have made Nepali language as one of the main issues in their quest for identity.

The Growing Importance of Nepalis and the Nepali Language in Darjeeling

It is believed that the Lepchas were the original inhabitants of this place, i.e., the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim. A large influx of Nepalis came into the Darjeeling area, mainly with the encouragement of the Britishers. Moreover the Britishers had seen the martial characteristics in the Gorkhas. The Nepalis had to live side by side with the indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias. The Nepalis were efficient agriculturists and it was they who introduced the terraced cultivation in the Darjeeling Hills. The Lepchas practiced Jhum or slash and burn cultivation, fishing and hunting. The Bhutias were mostly traders and herders.

Regarding religion, majority of the Nepalis were Hindus. Although amongst them are the Rais and Limbus, who practiced shamanism, akin to Bon religion, which was a pre-Lamaist religion in Tibet. There are also Buddhists amongst the Nepalis like the Sherpas, the Tamangs and also some Newars (who are divided into Buddhamargis and Shivamargis). The Bhutias are followers of Lamaist Buddhism. Lepchas were initially animists but, later on, many of them converted to

Lamaist Buddhism. A vast majority of them also converted to the Christian faith under the influence of the Christian missionaries.

In spite of their differences in culture, tradition, economy and values, all the hill communities comprising the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis started living together in harmony and co-operation. Different Nepali communities became bi-lingual, speaking their own mother tongue as well as Nepali language, which became the link language. However today, many know only the Indo-Aryan language, i.e. the Nepali language.

Amongst the Lepchas living in the urban areas, a large number of them are fluent in the Nepali language. Few know their Lepcha language and the rest know just a few words. Amongst the Tibetans, even though they know Nepali, they are encouraged to speak the Tibetan language.

The Origin, Growth and Development of the Nepali Language and Literature

Nepali was known by different nomenclatures, Khas Kura, Parbatya, Pahari and Gorkhali. It is said that it was known as Khas Kura because it was the language of the Khasas, a warrior race, who were of Aryan descent. Perhaps it was during the earliest centuries of the Christian era, that these people made their entry into central Nepal, where the Magars and Gurungs lived. The Khasas also spread to the Kirati and Limbuan territories in the East of Nepal. The close proximity of various tribes resulted in the absorption of Khasa language, an Indo-Aryan language, having its origins in Sanskrit, by the Tibeto-Burman tribes, as the various dialects were unintelligible to each other.

The consolidation of the Kingdom of Nepal, under the Gorkha King, Prithivi Narayan Shah, also resulted in the adoption of the Khas language but it was known as the Gorkha language. In Darjeeling, even though education was not initially given in the Nepali language, the people had already developed social consciousness. This was especially because of the impact of the Nepali language, which had developed into a 'Jatiya Bhasa'. The Nepali culture was made rich by its long tradition of oral folklore, in which were depicted the various feelings of man, their hopes, aspirations and disillusionment. But the growth of nationalist sentiments amongst them was first manifested to loyalty to the Nepali language. This, in turn, produced a whole lot of Nepali writers. They wanted to improve the quality of the language, to produce a body of literature and to give it a status on par with other literary languages of India.

Many people of Nepali origin under the influence of the Christian missionaries converted to Christianity and received a fair deal of education. Names of Ganga Prasad Pradhan, Bhimdal Dewan and Sukhman Limbu can be mentioned.

Leaders among Writers

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling

Amongst many who have contributed to the growth of Nepali language and literature, Ganga Prasad Pradhan's name comes first in this regard. For primary schools, he published the first and second books and other short story books. He was the first Nepali preacher and he worked ardently with Macfarlane in 1875, with Turnbull from 1879-1898 and R. Kilgour from 1905-1914, in translating the Bible into Nepali. He also started his own printing press mainly for the publication of Christian literature. He also started his own journal, 'Gorkha Khabar Khagat, 1901- 1932. His efforts were 'laudable as he put the Bible and other Christian literature into their own hands in their own language, by linking the many small congregations through the Gorkha newspaper and magazines, by strengthening their identity as a community.' (Cindy Perry, *A Biographical History of the Church in Nepal*, Nepal Church History Project, Kathmandu, Nepal, 1990, pp.26).

A great deal of work in the Nepali language was contributed by foreign authors. J. A. Ayton published *A Grammar of Nepalese Language* (1820) from Fort William, Calcutta. In 1887, A. Turnbull published *Nepali Grammar, Manual of Khas Gorkhali or Parbatiya* by Major A.G. F. Brown, G.A. Grierson's research book, *Linguistic Survey of India*, Volume IX Part IV was published in 1916. R.L. Turner's *A Comparative and Ethnological Dictionary of Nepali Language* (1931) is also worth mentioning. Another work, *Grammar of the Nepali Language* by Major W.R.J. Hughes appeared in 1947.

Paras Mani Pradhan (1898-1986) was the first among the Nepalis to write about Nepali Grammar. He had started Chandrika (magazine) from Kurseong (1917-1918). Some of his works include, *Nepali Hamro Matri Bhasa* (1953), *Nepali Muhawara* (1954), *Nepali Rachana Bharati* (1956), *Nepali Byakran Ko Choto Itihas* (1968), *Nepali Bhasa ko Utpati Ra Bikash* (1961), *English- Nepali*, *Nepali - English Dictionary* and many others. He had indeed played a very important role for the standardization of the Nepali language and contributed greatly for official recognition of the Nepali language.

It was mainly through the efforts of the trio, namely, Suryubikram Gywali, Dharnidhar Koirala and Paras Mani Pradhan or 'Su-Dha-Pa,' the formation of the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan on May 25th, 1924 was made possible. Its sole aim was to promote the Nepali language and literature.

In 1932, the intellectuals began publishing the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patrika monthly, which functions till today under the name *Diyalo*. Other literary associations Apatan Sahitya Parishad, Sahityakar Samparka Samiti, Yuva Pustakalya in Sikkim, and Nepali Sahitya Parishad in Manipur, all have contributed a great deal to the growth of Nepali literature. Christian Missionaries have also contributed their share in the development of Nepali language in the hills. The Serampore Missionaries published the *Nepali Bible* in 1882. Rev. William Carey, the first Missionary of Serampore along with Rev. Joshua Marshman and W. Ward gave a detailed report of the languages in India in 1816 and mentions thirty-two languages, of which Nepali is one. Though one of their intentions was to spread the Christian religion, they have

played a vital role in the spreading of education and igniting the ethno-linguistic identity of the Nepalis.

There were other magazines and journals too. There was *Gorkha Sathi* (1907) from Calcutta, *Chandrika* from Kurseong (1917-1918), *Chandra* (1914) and *Gorkhali* (1916-1917) from Benares. From Kalimpong there was *Adarsha* (1930), *Nebula* (1935-1936) (mainly to foster unity among the Nepalis, Bhutias and Lepchas) and *Gorkha* (1945-1955). From Darjeeling, *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan Patrika* (1932-1937), *Khoji* (1940), *Sathi* (1949?), *Bharati* (1948-1958) were there. In Dehradun, Thakur Chandan Singh had established the Gorkha League in 1921. *Gorkha Samsar* (1926) and *Tarun Gorkha* were published from here which mainly sought to bring social reforms. The All India Gorkha League had been established in 1943. The publication of *Gorkha* (1945), the mouth piece of AIGL added a definite flavor to Nepali literature.

The Nepali Linguistic Movement

The medium of instruction determines which group can get access to the best jobs even as the choice can also give them a sense of security. So also the Nepalis living in the Darjeeling hills wanted Nepali to be the medium of instruction in the hill schools. It was already accepted by the Calcutta University that Nepali could be used in Matric, IA and BA Examinations on 24th July, 1918. Since Matric exam could be written in Nepali, it was necessary that Primary education be taught in Nepali. However, there was a group of people who were against Nepali being used as a medium of instruction. Among them were the Bhutias, represented by S. W. Ladenla and the Lepchas represented by Dr. Yen Singh Sitling and the Hindi people represented by Mathura Prasad Babu. The other ethnic groups like Lepchas and Bhutias felt insecure because of the numerical superiority of the Nepalis. But none the less in 1957, the demand to make Nepali as the medium of instruction till the Matriculation stage in the Darjeeling District primary schools was accepted.

Demand for Making Nepali as the Official Language in Darjeeling

The demand to make Nepali as the official language in Darjeeling was only natural because it would open up more economic and educational opportunities for the Nepalis. The movement became more intense after the Indian Independence, probably because they wanted to establish their strong identity as Indians. It was mainly to protect the interests of the relatively large minority groups in such states, that the States Re-organisation Commission (1955) recommended that “only states in which the speakers of one language formed about 70% or more of the total population should be considered as unilingual states, with that language superseding the official state language.” (*Report of the SRC, 1955, Manager of Publications, Delhi, pp.212*). This further boosted the aspirations of the Nepalis. However, there was opposition from the ruling Congress State Government, saying that, in 1967, Nepalis formed only about 19.98% in the hill districts and only 25.32% in the hill areas of Darjeeling excluding Siliguri and therefore did not conform

to the required percentage as laid by the SRC. On the contrary in 1941, the Nepali speakers comprised 67.6% of the population, numbering about 2,54,708. When we look into the Nepali population, it is a heterogeneous group comprising of different categories like the Newars, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs and others. They have their own mother tongues but they all speak the Nepali language, which has become the lingua franca of the region. They altogether constitute 85% of the total population.

There was pressure from all sides on the Bengal Government. All India Gorkha League, Congress, the Socialist parties and students all voiced the same demand. Finally on 25th December 1961, the West Bengal Official Act was passed, recognizing Nepali and Bengali as the Official Languages in the three sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong.

Movement for the Constitutional Recognition of Nepali

The Nepalis numbering about ten million in the whole of India wanted their language to be included in the VIIIth Schedule of the Indian Constitution. In this, they saw a very important requisite for the establishment of their Indian identity.

The movement for recognition of Nepali in the VIIIth Schedule began as early as 1952. Anand Singh Thapa, Editor of *Jagrat Gurkha* from Dehradun raised this issue in a letter to the then President of India. In 1967, an organization called Nepali Bhasa Sangarsha Samiti was established under the leadership of Mr. Guman Singh Chamling. It worked to give an even higher place to the Nepali language in the Universities. In 1969, Nepali Bhasa Prayog Gara Abhiyan Samiti was formed under the Presidentship of Mr. Prem Sherpa with Mr. Haren Allay as Secretary.

The All India Gorkha League formed in 1943 repeatedly demanded the inclusion of Nepali in the VIIIth Schedule. The All India Nepali Bhasa Samiti (AINBS) formed on 31st May 1972 spearheaded the language movement. They laid down that “the inclusion of Nepali represents the long cherished aspirations of over 5 million Indians with Nepali as their mother tongue and the non-inclusion of Nepali in the VIIIth Schedule has created a sense of deprivation in the minds of a large section of people in the country. It is natural for them to suffer from a sense of insecurity. Many privileges accruing from the Constitutional recognition of Nepali will help the development of a linguistic minority and will go a long way to bring about a deep emotional integration in our Nation.” (Memoranda put forth by AINBS, signed by Prem Kumar Allay, General Secretary on 29th September, 1977).

The demand for the Constitutional recognition of Nepali was also carried on unabated in Sikkim under the leadership of the then Chief minister, Mr. Nar Bahadur Bhandari. The Bharatiya Nepali Rashtriya Parishad had been formed in Gangtok in June 1990, with Bhandari as Chairman. He claimed the organization to be an organization of Nepalis from all over the country. There were organizations not only in Darjeeling and Sikkim but elsewhere too like

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling

Assam Nepali Students' Union, Guwahati, Akhil Bharatiya Nepali Bhas Samiti, Dehradun, Meghalaya Nepali Students' Union, Nepali Parishad, Dehradun and others who supported the same cause. Various political parties also gave support to the demand like the Congress, CPI(M), BJP, DMK, Telugu Desam and others.

A total of 19 Private Bills were passed for Constitutional recognition of Nepali. One of the most elaborate was the one placed by Mrs. D.K.Bhandari of Sikkim Sangram Parishad on 28th February 1992, which finally led to the Constitutional recognition of the Nepali language on August 31st 1992 together with Manipuri and Konkani.

Demand for Gorkha Language, Not Nepali?

But the issue of the Nepali language did not end here. Subhas Ghishing, leader of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, had demanded the formation of a separate state of Gorkhaland. He was in favour of the Gorkha language, not Nepali. His argument was that if the Nepalis of Darjeeling want an identity of their own, separate from the Nepalese of Nepal, it would be possible only with the recognition of the Gorkha language. Ghishing wanted to project himself as the champion of the cause of the Nepali language and of the Nepali community in the whole of India. However, the long demand for Constitutional recognition of Nepali had got its due share and boosted the confidence of the Nepalis as being part of India's pluralistic society.

Language Development Activities Since Constitutional Recognition

In 1999, in order to give concrete shape to recognition of the Nepali language, it was laid down that sign boards, hoardings and car number plates, with English letters and numbers were to be pulled down in the Darjeeling hills and Nepali language was to be used instead.

Even though the main objective of the linguistic movement was to integrate the Nepalis with the rest of India, we cannot rule out the economic connotation behind it. Nepali today has been accepted as a subject in various examinations for jobs both in the Centre and the states (e.g. UPSC, WBCS) and has opened up vast employment opportunities.

Moreover various schools and colleges in Sikkim, Darjeeling District and Dooars and the North East have Nepali as the medium of instruction. About ten Universities in India like North Bengal University (NBU, set up in 1962), Benares Hindu University (BHU), North Eastern Hill University, Guwahati University, Tripura and Patna Universities have recognized Nepali for under graduate and Post-Graduate courses. (The Department of Nepali for Post-Graduate studies opened in NBU in 1978). In 2002, Darjeeling Government College opened up a Nepali Post-Graduate Department. NBU and BHU offer PhD Degree in Nepali. The West Bengal Board of Education, CBSE, ICSE, ISCE Boards of Education teach Nepali as a vernacular subject.

Conclusion

Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling

Looking at the Nepali language issue, it can be said that language has played a vital role in the assertion of the Nepali political identity. This is so not only of the Nepalis of Darjeeling in particular, but of the Nepalis as a whole. The Constitutional recognition of the Nepali language has armed the Nepali speaking population to write various examinations conducted by the Centre and states in their own language, thus opening up more employment opportunities. How many realize that the Nepalis today can speak in Nepali in apex bodies like the Parliament? How many of them know that the Language Commission has to submit its various reports in all the 18 languages mentioned in the VIIIth Schedule including Nepali? The Constitutional recognition of the Nepali language has helped the Nepalis to further carve out and strengthen their identity as Indian citizens. No one can now claim to classify the language as a foreign language or to call the Nepalis foreigners. The Nepalis of the Darjeeling hills, a linguistic minority group residing in the State of West Bengal, have got their due share.

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Language in India www.languageinindia.com

10 : 9 September 2010

Alina Pradhan, Ph.D.

Language in Politics of Recognition: A Case of the Nepali Language in the Creation of Political Identity of the Nepalis in Darjeeling