

RITUAL AND IDENTITY IN THE DIASPORA:
THE NEWARS IN SIKKIMBAL GOPAL SHRESTHA
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The Newars are the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu Valley in Nepal. The word *Newar* is derived from the name of the country *Nepal* itself. Despite the 1769 Gorkha conquest of the Nepal Valley and their subjugation by the state, the Newars managed to maintain their distinct arts, crafts, culture and traditions. Their culture has remained highly influential throughout the history of Nepal (Toffin 1984 and 1993; Levy 1992; Gellner 1996). The Newars are also considered to be a skilled and successful trading community, and their involvement in trans-Himalayan trade was already well established many centuries ago. They have succeeded in maintaining this image in Sikkim also (Subba 1989: 134; Sinha 1981: 192). As an educated community, the Newars also occupy many important administrative posts in both Nepal and Sikkim.

The Newars of Nepal have been widely studied (e.g. Nepali 1965; Toffin 1984, 1993; Levy 1992; Gellner 1996; Shrestha 2002). Ample literature exists on the Nepali diaspora both in India and Bhutan (Subba & Datta 1991; Timsina 1992; Hutt 1994, 1997) and on Sikkim as a state (Temple 1977; Nakane 1979; Jha and Mishra 1984; Bhasin 1989; Subba and Datta 1991; Dhamala 1991; Lama 2001 and Sharma and Sharma 1997). However, no research has yet been carried out on the Newar diaspora in Sikkim. This is partly due to the fact that Sikkim remained largely closed to outsiders even after it merged with India in 1975. In fact, little research has been carried out on the Newar diaspora in general and the few studies which exist refer to the Newar diaspora inside Nepal (Lewis & Sakya 1988).

Although the Newars of Sikkim are numerically very few they have played an important role in ethnic politics and are active in trying to promote their language, culture, rituals, traditions and religions across Sikkim. At a time when Newars in the homeland are facing various problems including threats to their language and culture because of state negligence and globalisation, the Newars of Sikkim are actively preserving their cultural heritage and language. In 1998, the

State Government of Sikkim introduced several laws and sanctioned state budget lines to facilitate the promotion of the languages and cultures of the Newars and other groups (Pradhan and Josee 1998). The school curriculum now includes the Newar language, and language interpreters are employed in the State Legislature to translate speeches delivered in Newar into other languages. In 2003, the State Government of Sikkim also recognised the Newars as an Other Backward Class (OBC), for whom a percentage of jobs and higher studies are now reserved. It is notable that in their homeland, Nepal, Newars and other ethnic groups have so far achieved very little recognition of their cultural and linguistic rights (Kraemer 1996; Gellner 1997; Shrestha 1999). Against this background the Nepalese minorities' achievements in Sikkim are significant.

From January to March 2004, I travelled to and resided in Sikkim and Kalimpong to conduct anthropological research on the Newars of India. During my stay in Sikkim, I was able to gather a wealth of information on various aspects of the Newar diaspora community resident in the state. More specifically, this fieldwork gave me a good opportunity to meet members of the community who were active in reviving their language, culture and rituals. I was permitted to observe their religious and ritual activities and to experience how the diaspora Newars are determined to revive and preserve their heritage. My findings are presented in this paper.

Historical background

Although the question of early migration is still to be addressed by historians, it is believed among Newars of Darjeeling and Sikkim that some of their ancestors began migrating to the region soon after the Gorkha conquest of Nepal in 1769. Tanka Subba writes: 'a few family histories of the Newars of Sikkim reveal that their ancestors migrated to Sikkim at the time of consolidation of Nepal by the Gorkha King Prithivi Narayan Shah' (1989: 1). This suggestion remains problematic because the Gorkhas had not entered the south-western regions of Sikkim until the first Gorkha-Sikkim war of 1788-1789. They were further made to evacuate following the Anglo-Gorkha Treaty of Sugauli (1815).

Many have suggested that with the arrival of the legendary Laksmidas Pradhan (Kasaju), a Newar from Bhaktapur, in Sikkim, many other Newars migrated there also. There are a number of stories in circulation about how and when Laksmidas left Nepal. While some

suggest that Laksmidas escaped from the Nepal valley to save his life right after the Kot massacre of 1846, others believe that he left Nepal long before this incident. According to Bhuvan Prasad Pradhan, Laksmidas and his family had already moved from Bhaktapur to Kathmandu and were engaged in business there when he escaped from Nepal (Pradhan 1993: 4-5), but Cakraraj Timila believes that Laksmidas and his family were living in the Inaycho quarter of Bhaktapur at the time of his departure.¹ Both Cakraraj and Bhuvan Prasad provide vivid accounts of Laksmidas' tribulations after he left home and before he ended up in Sikkim. According to Cakraraj, Laksmidas first began his trade in Darjeeling by selling *gundruk*, a form of dried and fermented vegetable. Bhuvan Prasad Pradhan (1993: 9) writes that the location where Laksmidas used to sell *gundruk* is still known as Gundri Bazaar to this day. Only later did Laksmidas succeed in establishing himself as a successful businessman in Darjeeling.

On 1 February, 1835, the East India Company took over Darjeeling, ending Sikkim's control of the area. While in 1839 Darjeeling was home to only 100 people, within ten years its population had reached 10,000. In the following thirty years, Darjeeling saw a rapid population growth with the continuing influx of Nepalese migrants. In 1901, the Newar population of Darjeeling was 5,880 of a total population of 249,117 (O'Malley 1907: 43). The British government also made Laksmidas the first Municipal Commissioner of Darjeeling.

Daya Prasad Pradhan writes that Laksmidas and his brother Chandravir arrived in Sumbuk around 1850 (1997: 2). Similarly, Pranab Kumar Jha states: 'Laksmidas Pradhan with his uncle Keshav Narayan came to Darjeeling in 1853 from Nepal and probably no other Newar had come to Darjeeling before them' (1985: 130). He further suggests that they settled in Sikkim in 1867 in order to work at the copper mine in Tukkhani in South Sikkim and went on to work in a number of other copper mines later. Some Newars of Sikkim have suggested that the then king invited Laksmidas to Sikkim to act as the collector of land revenues, as Laksmidas had become famous in Darjeeling as a successful businessman.

After the 1861 treaty was signed between British government and Sikkimese authorities, the British began to encourage Nepalese settlers

¹ In 2004, noted Nepali folklorist, Kesar Lal Shrestha kindly supplied me with an unpublished family note written by Cakraraj Timila.

in Sikkim.² Some ministers, Lamas and Kazis, including Chebu Dewan as well as Maharaja Sidkeong Namgyal and his sister, were opposed to Nepalese settlers in Sikkim. However, Pranab Kumar Jha writes, in 1867, during the reign of Maharaja Sidkeong Namgyal the Sikkimese authorities accorded a formal lease grant to Laksmidas Pradhan. In an appeal to the Government of Bengal to protect his land rights and possessions in Sikkim, Laksmidas had received the lease from the Lama Shahib of Phodong and the Rajah of Sikkim.³ Lal Bahadur Basnet also mentions the formal granting of a lease in 1867 to two Newar brothers (1974: 44). Daya Prasad Pradhan has published a family note outlining the partition of the lands received in 1867 by Laksmidas and his son Laksminarayan Pradhan, Chandravir Pradhan and his son Maheshwor Pradhan, Kancha Chandravir Pradhan and his son Laksminarayan Pradhan, Lambodar Pradhan and his son Laksmidas Pradhan (1997: 37, Appendix Ka). Despite this documentation, I could not trace any formal written deeds regarding the 1867 land lease to Laksmidas.

The lease of lands to Laksmidas was continued in latter years by Khansa Dewan and Phodong Lama, both of whom were considered to be pro-immigration leaders. A deed dated 1874 states that Phodong Lama and Khangsa Dewan leased lands to Laksmidas, Chandravir, Jitman and Lambodar in exchange for payments of Rs. 500 to the Rajah and Rs. 700 to Lama and Khangsa Dewan. The area of land mentioned in the deed was as follows:

Boundary of land on the North of East from Rooe Naddi to its confluence to the Tista River, on the East South all along the Tista river, on the South and West all along the Burra Rungit up to its suspension Bridge over the Rungit river, on the North-West from the Rungit suspension Bridge along the old road up to Pukka village along the Government Road to Koolow Ektompani, from the Jhora of Koolow Ektorppani up to the Manfur river, on the East from the North of Manfur all along the Manfur Jhora up to its source.⁴

² The 1861 treaty obliged Sikkim to comply with British wishes relating to internal and external affairs. See Basnet (1974: 192-98), Appendix 'B', for the full text of the treaty.

³ The letter was dated 20/10/1889, but there is mention of a land lease received about 22 years earlier. See Jha (1985: 56 & 128) Appendix I. See also Sharma and Sharma (1997: 13) Vol. 1.

⁴ See Jha (1985: 55-7 & 128-29) Appendix II and III. See also Sharma & Sharma (1997: 13-14) Vol. 1.

The deed also authorised the Newar settlers to investigate and fine criminal acts according to Nepalese legal custom, with the exception of murder cases. The Newar migrants in Sikkim were also responsible for introducing a range of new technologies and crops in the agricultural sector in Sikkim.

Laksmidas invited his brother, Kancha Chandravir Pradhan (Kasaju), from Nepal to assist him as his own responsibilities increased. There are a number of stories in circulation about this Chandravir. According to Bhuvan Prasad Pradhan, Chandravir was a wrestler and to this day, people in Sikkim tell of how, with this great physical strength, he overpowered individuals who went against the rules, denied paying revenues or even attacked Nepalese settlers.

As the head of Nepalese settlers in Sikkim, Laksmidas began inviting hundreds of Nepalis to Sikkim to look after the lands under his control, including Magars from the hills and Newars from Bhaktapur of a variety of different castes. In this manner, a large number of Newars were migrating to and settling in Sikkim by the beginning of the 1870s.⁵ Quoting a passage from the *History of Sikkim*, Chie Nakane confirms that Sikkim saw an influx of Nepalese Gorkhalis from 1871 (1966: 251).

In the 1870s, mining copper was added to the responsibilities held by Laksmidas. The Sikkimese court was divided on the issue of Nepalese migration. On account of these divisions, Jha writes, trouble and riots sometimes broke out between Laksmidas Pradhan, the head of the Nepalese community, and Lasso Kazi, the Sikkim Vakeel in 1872 (1985: 56). A document dated simply as 3rd day of the 3rd month of the Tibetan year Iron Dragon (1880?) under the king Thutob Namgyal, describes a riot in Rhenock between pro- and anti-Nepalese groups. The same document also mentions the fines slapped on those who disobeyed the Newar leader given authority to collect taxes and govern.⁶

The exact date of the birth and death of Laksmidas remains unclear. His son Lambodar owned the largest landed property in Sikkim and the British honoured him with the title Rai Saheb for his service and loyalty to the colonial authorities. Quoting family papers, Jha offers the following copper mines as ones in which Laksmidas and his family worked in: Tuk Khani near Turuk in South Sikkim, Rinchi Khani in Rinchinpong in West Sikkim, Bhotang Khani near Rangpo

⁵ See Jha (1985: 130-32) Appendix IV. See also Kotturan (1983: 82)

⁶ See Sharma and Sharma (1997: 53-55) and also Basnet (1974: 46).

Bazar in East Sikkim, Pachey Khani near Rhenock in East Sikkim and Rathok Khani in Namthang in South Sikkim (1985: 130).

In the past, traders in Sikkim had practiced the barter system. The British authorities later granted them permission to use Nepalese currency in Sikkim as some Nepalese traders requested for it to be permitted in 1849 to ease their trade.⁷ In 1881, following a request from Nepalese traders, the king of Sikkim formally sought approval from the British authorities in India to begin minting Sikkim's own coins. On 4 June 1881, the Bengal Government replied granting the Sikkimese authority to mint their own currency (Sharma and Sharma 1997: 45-47). Subsequently, on the 3rd day of the 10th month of the Water-Sheep year in the Tibetan calendar, the Palace in Sikkim wrote to Laksmidas granting him permission to start minting. The relevant portion of the text translated from the original Tibetan is provided below:

Be it known to all the Monks and laymen residing within the Kingdom in general and those led by the Newar trader Lakshmidar in particular that in accordance with their request made in the petition submitted by the latter requesting for permission to mint coins (*doli*) we had written to Lord Eden Saheb through the Political Officer and obtained his concurrence. In pursuance thereof order has been issued to Lakshmidar, the Newar Trader, and others communicating grant of permission to mint coins.⁸

In 1883, having been given the contract to mint for five years, Laksmidas introduced the first Sikkimese coins into the market.⁹ The mint did not last long: it was ended in 1887.

There are also a number of stories about Chandravir Pradhan (Maske), another Newar in Sikkim, who is also believed to be one of the earliest Newars to settle in the kingdom. According to Daya Prasad Pradhan, Chandravir Pradhan came from Nepal to Darjeeling with his father at the age of five in 1830, and later moved to Sikkim for business in 1845.¹⁰ He cooperated with Laksmidas in various contracts (*thekedārī*) and they also collaborated in mining copper and minting coins for the Sikkimese government. The title of *taksārī* 'minter' was bestowed by the Sikkimese government on Laksmidas, Chandravir

⁷ See Jha (1985: 130) and Sharma and Sharma (1997: 56).

⁸ The text is reprinted in Sharma and Sharma 1997: 49.

⁹ See Bhattacharyya (1984) for more on coinage in Sikkim.

¹⁰ See the genealogy published by one of his descendants in Pradhan (1997: 1).

Kasaju, Chandravir Maske, Jitmansing Pradhan, Marghoj Gurung and Pratapsing Chetri for their contributions in minting coins for the state.

British officers found Laksmidas, Chandravir and their families to be extremely reliable partners. There are a number of testimonials written by British government officers to Laksmidas and Chandravir dated between 1875 and 1895. One such testimony dated 31 May, 1875, states that the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal was satisfied with Chandravir's performance at the copper mines of Katong Ghat in Sikkim. A similar testimony dated June 1895 praises Laksmidas for his contributions in road construction in Sikkim.¹¹

Laksmidas was also engaged in lending money to government officers in Sikkim. A handwritten document dated 1882 preserved by Mrs. Kalpana Pradhan of Tadong tells that a person named Yamthang Kaji, a high-ranking Sikkimese government officer, borrowed money from Laksmidas and did not pay him interest nor return the money he had borrowed. In a formal letter, Laksmidas requested the then king of Sikkim to take the necessary steps to arrange for the loan to be paid, including the accrued interest.

Laksmidas and his family owned many estates in Sikkim. Jha provides the following list of their holdings in 1913: Kitam, Chidam, Namthang, Singtam and Chakung owned by Rai Saheb Lambodar Pradhan; Pakyong, Rungpo, Pedang, Rigoo, Pathing and Temi owned by Rai Saheb Laksminarayan Pradhan; Ney and Broom owned by Suriman Pradhan; Pachey Khani and Taza owned by Dalbahadur Pradhan; Rhenock owned by Ratnabahadur Pradhan and Marming owned by Sherbahadur Pradhan (1985: 132).

Many of the descendants of Laksmidas, Chandravir Kasaju and Chandravir Maske received the prestigious title of Rai Saheb from the British administration. They were also renowned as landlords (*zamindar*) or contractors (*thekedār*). One among them was Rai Saheb Balkrishna, popularly known by the name 'Baburam', and the grandson of Laksmidas. He built the famous *baunna dhokā darbār* 'the palace with fifty-two doors' in Namthang. The then king of Sikkim found this construction embarrassingly ostentatious, as it was only fitting for kings of Nepal to make palaces with fifty-two doors. Consequently, Baburam was fined a rupee, a large amount for the time. Baburam, however, being a wealthy landlord, chose to rather pay one thousand rupees and close one of the doors of his palace (Pradhan 1998: 55).

¹¹ Family documents in the possession of Mrs. Kalpana and Mr. Deepak Pradhan of Tadong.

Baburam's historic mansion still stands in Namthang, where his grandson Dharma Pratap Kasaju and his family now reside. It is interesting to note that the Chief Minister, Pawan Kumar Chamling, inaugurated the first Institute of Newar Language and Culture in Sikkim at this very site in 2000. Local Newars tell that whenever Baburam left his house a band would accompany him and that any British officers who visited the area were also received with a band. A song was even composed with his name: *kasko bājā, kasko bājā, Bāburāmko bājā* 'Whose band is it? Whose band is it? It is the band of Baburam', and is still popular among the people in Sikkim.

A house similar to the Palace in Namthang was also built in Pachey Khani by one of Chandravir Pradhan's descendants. A Newar styled *jhingate ghar*, a house with a tiled roof, was also constructed by the descendants of the late Chandravir, but the historic building is now in a dilapidated state. The chairman of the Sikkim Newar Organisation has suggested that the building be renovated as one of the important Newar heritage sites.

Several of the descendants of Laksmidas, Chandravir and Chandravir Maske also built temples, health centres and schools in different parts of Sikkim. Nowadays, the descendants of Laksmidas, his brother Chandravir and Chandravir Maske, who can be found across Sikkim, are still considered to be quite socially well-to-do.

In the course of my research, it became clear that the Nepalese migration to Sikkim continued through the twentieth century. An unpublished family genealogy which I received from Dhruba Pradhan Bhansari tells that his forefathers moved to Sikkim from Boya Bikhumca in eastern Nepal in 1870. In a brief unpublished memoir, Chakraraj Timila, who has now returned to Nepal and lives in Bhaktapur, writes how his grandfather, father and uncle left Bhaktapur to set up grocery shops in the Tista area in 1917. In 1918, his father and uncle married the daughters of Sikkimese Newars, and then settled down there. For some people it is still a living memory. For instance, the 63-year old Mr. Maniklal Pradhan of Tashiding told me that he came to Sikkim with his father when he was only five years old. For a period, he remembers travelling back and forth to Nepal to his ancestral home in Banepa. Others, however, do not remember when their ancestors moved to Sikkim and from which part of Nepal they came. Many have just a vague sense of which part of Nepal their forefathers inhabited before coming to Sikkim, and they have never returned to their ancestral homeland in Nepal.

The Newars of Sikkim appeared engaged not only as traders and landlords but also as officials in the Sikkimese government, serving at the Palace and the royal court in Gangtok since 1910. Some Newars became magistrates of towns and villages, with the authority to adjudicate in dispute settlements. A few also became councillors, a post similar to that of Minister during the rule of the Chogyal.

After the merger of Sikkim with India, a few Newars succeeded in occupying ministerial positions in the State Government of Sikkim. Other Newars are also known as social reformers and educators in Sikkim. To honour such individuals, the Government of Sikkim named roads after them, for instance, the Kashi Raj Pradhan Marg (Road) in Gangtok, named after Kashi Raj Pradhan who is remembered across Sikkim as a reformer and an educator.

The 1891 census of Sikkim returned 727 Newars out of a total population of 30,558 Sikkim.¹² In 1994, the total population of the Newars was 20,000 while the present Newar population is estimated to lie between 30,000 and 35, 000.

Socio-economic position

The Newars of Sikkim are engaged in various occupations, including governmental service, politics, teaching, agriculture, trade and business. According to Keshav Chandra Pradhan, from the 1910s until the 1980s, Newars occupied many important administrative posts, but the figure has been dropping steadily as members of other groups have gradually replaced them. At present, Mr. Rajiv Shankar Shrestha and Mrs. Jayshree Pradhan serve as Principal Secretaries, and are among a handful of Newars still occupying high-level posts in the Sikkimese administration. During my field research, two Newars were present as elected members of the 32-seat Sikkim Legislative Assembly. Both were members of ruling Sikkim Democratic Front, and for some time one had been a cabinet minister. In the May 2004 election, however, only one of them was able to contest the election and was returned as a MLA from the constituency of Gangtok.

The Newars are still renowned as traders and remain engaged in diverse businesses and industries. Many are engaged in tourism, hotels, handicrafts, bakeries, transport and the publishing media. Among them, the Bhansari family's Tripti bakery is one of Sikkim's most prominent industries. Similarly, Babu Kaji Shakya, a Gangtok-based sculptor, has

¹² This was the first census conducted in Sikkim, see Risley (1972: 27).

won many prestigious Indian national awards for his contributions to the handicraft industry of Sikkim. Shakya produces traditional Nepalese-style Buddhist and Hindu images, statues and jewellery. He owns a workshop in Rumtek and has a showroom in Gangtok, and one of his sons is following in his father's footsteps. A few Newars, such as R.K. Pradhan of Rhenock, are engaged in the film industry.

A number of Sikkimese Newars have made their reputation in the garden nursery business. The late Chandravir Kasaju's son Rai Saheb Ratnabhadur initiated a nursery in Rhenock under his father's name, which is still known throughout Sikkim as the 'Chandra Nursery'. Already in the middle of twentieth century, some Newar traders had begun exporting flowers, plants and fruits from Sikkim to India and other countries. Some such entrepreneurs, such as Keshav Chandra Pradhan, a former Chief Secretary of Sikkim are world-renowned in the field of plant husbandry and have won international awards from Australia, the United Kingdom, the United States and Japan for their work in this field. Pradhan is now retired and grows many varieties of orange and hybrid flowers in his well-tended garden.

Newars are also found in the grocery business in many settlements across Sikkim, while others are engaged in agriculture. Newars were the first to introduce cardamom farming in Sikkim, now one of Sikkim's most popular cash crops. Ganesh Kumar Pradhan of Rhenock is well known for his antique collection. Through personal initiative, he has gathered old coins, notes, historical documents, manuscripts, books, driftwood and drift stones. Mr. Pradhan also grows bonsai and hybrid plants in his family garden. His contributions have not only won many prizes but also admiration and praise from all over Sikkim. During my fieldwork in 2004, I had the good fortune to view his archival collections. The Newar community of Sikkim are rightfully proud of Mr. Jaslal Pradhan, who participated in the Olympics as a player and boxing coach for India.

Data from 1989 would suggest that 27% of the total Newar population of Sikkim own less than 5 acres of land, while 66% are landless and that only 10% of Sikkimese Newars possess assets in urban areas (Shrestha 1996: 8). This survey, conducted among 7,025 Sikkimese Newars in 1994, revealed that 33% percent were illiterate and only 5% had a graduate qualification. Educated Newars are for the most part concentrated in Gangtok, the state capital.

While many believe that most of Newar society is rich and as some individuals occupy high government posts, the reality is quite different. According to former chairman of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, Mr. Keshav

Chandra Pradhan, less than 5% of the Newar population in Sikkim once served at the Chogyal's court, have high government positions or run business houses that can be considered to be affluent. The rest are comparatively poor. Analysing demographic data for Sikkim, Bhasin and Bhasin showed that 40% of the Newar population lived on less than 500 rupees income per annum and that only 4% had an annual income of between IC 20,001 and 25,000 (1995: 119).

Within the Newar community, then, there is a genuine schism between the wealthy and the economically depressed families. To a certain extent, there is little mutual trust between these two classes. One of the aims of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* is to help the poorer sections of Newar society through financial assistance and other means. However, despite the best efforts of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, very little sign of cooperation between the poor and affluent Newar communities is noticeable. As one of my informants put it, "Unlike other communities in Sikkim, the Newars lack a feeling of mutual cooperation, instead they envy each other's success". While other communities in Sikkim generally view the Newars as a hard-working people, some portray them as oppressors, since during the time of the Chogyal they worked as contractors and landlords and used harsh measures to collect revenue and were authorised to whip people who failed to provide forced labour (*jhārā*). Older people such as Daya Prasad Pradhan dismiss such claims and suggest rather that Newars, in their capacity as contractors and landlords, were responsible for much development, such as opening schools and health centres, constructing roads and making rest places.

Newar castes

Traditional Newar society in Nepal is a complicated structure with caste divisions and internal hierarchies. The nineteenth century chronicle, the *Bhāṣāvamśāvali*, credits the fourteenth century king Jayasthiti Malla with introducing the caste system to the Nepal Valley (Lamsal 1966: 37-50). In Nepal, caste discrimination is still felt in all traditional Newar settlements and Newars still use their caste or occupational names.

Against the background of Nepal, the disappearance of caste hierarchies among Sikkim's Newars is remarkable and may be the single most salient feature of the diaspora population. With a few exceptions, all Newars in Sikkim are now called Pradhan. The term *Pradhan*, the family name of one caste of Nepal's Newars, has come to stand for all Newars in Sikkim and Darjeeling. At certain period, this

was not without controversy. During a dispute between two rival groups in Darjeeling, each claiming higher status over the other, the Nepalese authorities wrote a letter stating, 'Pradhan is among the highest classes of the Newars' (Singh 1991: 102). According to Bhuvan Prasad Pradhan (1993: 13), the British Government in India awarded the title of *Pradhan* to Laksmidas for his excellent service in 1913. Laksmidas later asked for all Sikkimese Newars to be permitted to use this title as their family name to prevent caste divisions within their community. A different interpretation is advanced by Khagendra Pradhan, who believes that Laksmidas ordered all Sikkimese Newars who had escaped Nepal to exclusively use Pradhan as a surname to protect their lives after the 1846 Kot massacre, thereby helping them hide their actual identity (1998: 57).

Changing all Newar surnames to Pradhan helped to eliminate caste hierarchies among the Newars of Sikkim. During my fieldwork, when I asked about their former castes divisions and names, many did not know as they had lost contact with their relatives in Nepal. However, some of the Newars who continue to have regular contact with their relatives in Nepal were aware of having caste names other than Pradhan. Among them, I recorded Vajracharya, Shakya, Tuladhar, Shrestha, Kasaju, Maske and Karmacharya, among others. Some have also adopted the word 'Newar' as their family name, particularly in Kurseong, where all Newars seem to call themselves Newar. Recently, even though a few families in Sikkim have begun tracing their former caste names, and some Shresthas, Shakyas and Tuladhars have started to use their family names, it does not seem likely this will revive the caste hierarchies which were so effectively eliminated among the Newars in Sikkim.

It is interesting to note that while caste hierarchies have all but disappeared among the Newars of Sikkim, the term 'Pradhan' has become a new caste in Sikkim's existing ethnic hierarchy. Pradhans have acquired a high status alongside Bahuns and the Chetris and it is widely believed that the political association between the Bahuns, Chetris and Newars of Sikkim is a long established one, predating the famous NBC (Newar-Bahun-Chetri) political grouping under the Chief Minister, Nar Bahadur Bhandari.

Guthi: socio-religious associations

The system of *guthis*, or socio-religious associations, is one of the most important components of Newar society.¹³ In the traditional context, *guthis* are responsible for organising the religious and ritual activities of a community. In Nepal, Licchavi inscriptions from the third to eighth centuries refer to *goṣṭhī*, the Sanskrit word from which *guthi* is derived, carrying out rituals and social work. Many inscriptions from this period describe *goṣṭhī* financial arrangements and their tasks. It appears from these inscriptions that such associations were important not only from the viewpoint of establishing and maintaining the temples, monasteries, shrines and rituals but were also instruments of development in the fields of water supply, agriculture, health and public entertainment. Among the *guthis*, the *sī guthi*, the funeral association, is most important because membership in this *guthi* determines the local affiliation and social position (in particular caste status) of a person. The *sī guthis* are a unique institution of Newar society. The main function of a *sī guthi* is to carry out funeral processions when a death occurs in the house of one of its members.¹⁴

When migrating to Sikkim, the Newars brought their religion, culture and rituals with them. Daya Prasad Pradhan (1997: 2) mentions the formation a *guthi* in Sumbuk when the Newars settled there around 1850, but he does not elaborate on it. Historical evidence shows that Rhenock, a small town in East Sikkim, was one of the earliest Newar settlements in the region. In the past, Rhenock was considered to be a gateway between Kalimpong and Nathu-la pass, as it lay on the trade route to Tibet. The Newars who settled in Rhenock established a traditional *guthi* before 1900. This *guthi* consisted of eighteen household members at its initiation and its main function was to gather at a Shiva temple every evening where devotionals songs (*bhajan*) were sung. The Rhenock *guthi* also organised performances of *lākhe* dances and the worship of Krishna every year during the *gāi jātrā* festival. Most significantly, members of the *guthi* were obliged to help others when someone in their family died, which is also the main feature of a Newar *sī guthi* in Nepal. It is the task of the eldest member of the *guthi* to inform all the members as soon as someone dies and then all are obliged to attend the funeral procession. On the fourth day after death, members must bring certain foodstuffs and a specific amount of money to the bereaved family. *Guthi* members also assist the grieving family

¹³ See Gellner (1992: 235-47); Nepali (1965: 191-7); Regmi (1967: 2) and Shrestha (2002: 32-35).

¹⁴ See Toffin (1984: 209-13); Quigley (1985: 30-49) and Ishii (1996) for the functioning of *sī guthis* in Nepal.

during the *gāi jātrā* festival when a cow procession in the name of the recently deceased person is organised. Those who fail in fulfilling their *guthi* duties are penalised. Rhenock is the only place in Sikkim where the Newar *sī guthi* is kept alive. However, unlike the *sī guthis* in Nepal, the Rhenock *guthi* does not restrict membership to one caste but rather includes all the Newar families in Rhenock.

In January 1990, the Newars of Rhenock restructured their *guthi*, introducing new regulations such as financial support for the bereaved families of dead members and providing interest-free monetary loans. At the same, the *guthi* is committed to reviving Newar culture and language in the area and has been involved with religious activities and traditional dances. Unlike the first Newar *guthi*, the revived *guthi* also now functions as a branch of the *Sikkim Newāh Guthi*, which means that it has become active in the process of achieving ethnic rights for Newars.

After the formation of the *Sikkim Newāh Guthi*, in all settlements where a branch office of the organisation exists, financial contributions by *guthi* members to the family members of the dead for the funeral costs have been made mandatory. It is notable that when a death occurs in a Newar family in Sikkim, all the neighbours and friends come forward, without caste or ethnic restriction, and provide physical comfort and financial support to the grieving family. This tradition of supporting bereaved families already existed among the Bhutia and Lepchas, and its adoption by Newars may be taken as a sign of their effective integration in Sikkim. The financial contributions to bereaved families may be quite substantial: one such family told me that they had recently received a total of IC 150,000 (about US \$3000) from their relatives, neighbours and friends.

Aside from the example at Rhenock, there is a notable absence of traditional Newar *guthis* in Sikkim. Particularly surprising is the absence of *sī guthis*, the funeral associations, not only in Sikkim but also in other parts of India. The only exception appears to be Kalimpong. According to Yogvir Shakya, Newars who settled in Kalimpong for trade with Tibet initiated a funeral society (*bicāh guthi*) around 1930. This *guthi* included all Newar castes and the organisational minutes were written in the Newar language.¹⁵ While a minute dated 1955 shows that there were 43 members in the *guthi* at the time, nowadays the organisation consists of only eighteen members. Other local Newars, who also called themselves Pradhan, do not

¹⁵ See Kesar Lal Shrestha (2004: 3) for more on this *guthi*.

participate in this *guthi* but have rather established a Kalimpong branch of the *All India Newar Association*.

The Newars of Darjeeling never initiated a *guthi* as such but rather a *Newāḥ Samāj* or Newar Society back in 1921. Although the *Newāḥ Samāj* did not carry out the task of a Newar *guthi* or *sī guthi*, it was nevertheless active in social and religious work. A decade after its foundation it was renamed *Nepāli Asamartha Sahāyak Samiti*, or the Committee to Help Deprived Nepalese, but since the 1970s it returned to its original name of *Newāḥ Samāj*. Its members regularly gather to sing devotional Newar songs (*bhajan*) and have helped destitute Nepalese in Darjeeling on several occasions. The Society has also organised the celebration of Newar festivals such as *Mha pūjā*. In 1991, when it celebrated its 75 anniversary, *Newāḥ Samāj* invited a large number of Newar artists from Nepal and organised a Newar food festival in Darjeeling. The organisation built a house of its own at Chandmari in 1965 and since then has been providing meeting space to Newars as well as members of other communities. In June 1993, aiming to promote Newar language, culture and rituals, the Newars of Darjeeling established a new organisation called *Darjeeling Newar Sangathan*, which succeeded in opening twenty branches in West Bengal by 1998. It has now been renamed the *All India Newar Organisation* and has established branches across India in many of the settlements where a sizable number of Newars reside. Since 1997, the Kalimpong branch has been publishing a news bulletin known as *Sukundā* (a traditional oil lamp used in Newar rituals) under the editorship of Yogvir Shakya, a local teacher and a social worker. In 2004, *Sukundā* was turned into a news bulletin of the *All India Newar Organisation*.

Religions and rituals

Though there are a few Newar Christians and Muslims, Newar society in Nepal can as a whole be considered a Hindu-Buddhist mix. In Sikkim, however, there are a fair number of Christian Newars alongside Newar Hindu and Buddhist practitioners. The mixture or blending of Hindu and Buddhist religious features is prevalent among the Newars in Sikkim as it is among the Newars of Nepal. The majority of Sikkimese Newars nevertheless identify themselves as Hindu. The process of Hinduisation has a long history among the Newars of Nepal, particularly after the implementation of the 1856 legal code, the Muluki Ain. Although most lay Newars practice both Hindu and Buddhist

rituals without making much distinction, they prefer to be referred to as Hindu because it is the religion officially propagated by the state in Nepal. It is likely that the Newars may also have followed this same trend in Sikkim. The adoption of 'Pradhan' as a surname, even though the name used by both Hindu and Buddhist Newar families in Nepal, is particularly prominent among the Hindus, and may have helped the Newars to label themselves as Hindu in Sikkim. Newars with a Buddhist priestly background, however, such as a family I met in Pakyong, despite using Pradhan as their surname define themselves as Buddhist because their ancestors were Buddhist Vajracharya. Similarly, most Shakya families in Sikkim and Kalimpong practice Buddhism and refer to themselves as Buddhists.

Christian Newars do not practice any Hindu or Buddhist rituals or traditions, but are nevertheless proud to call themselves Newar. Rather, they follow the life cycle and death rituals according to the Christian traditions. In certain cases, when a Christian Newar is married to a Hindu Newar they follow some of the Hindu rituals along with their Christian rituals. Since all the Newars once were Hindu or Buddhist, even if they later converted to Christianity, some are of the view that Christian Newars should return to the Hindu and Buddhist religious path. So far only a few have done so. Catholic and Evangelical Christians whom I interviewed said that they were not inclined to discard their present religious affiliations and adopt Hindu or Buddhist practices. Both were born into Christian families as their grandfathers had already converted to Christianity. The Newar organisation in Sikkim is flexible enough to include all religious denominations in its membership. Only at one location did a Newar activist tell me that their branch office did not extend membership to Christian Newars.

The religious and ritual life of Newars in Nepal is guided by calendrical festivals, and many spend a good part of their time participating in feasts and organising festivals. Newars in Nepal observe one or another festival, feast, fast or procession of gods and goddesses almost every month. A common feature of all Newar cities, towns and villages is that they are home to a specific annual festival or procession (*jātrā*) of the most important deity of that particular locale. Besides such observances, and making pilgrimages to important religious sites, another important feature of Newar society is the masked dance portraying various gods and deities.

In Sikkim, however, aside from a few places such as Rhenock, the Newars have lost most of their rituals and traditions. While major festivals such as Dasain and Tihār are celebrated with much fanfare,

many small festivals are no longer followed, and the feasts and festivals which have survived have been fundamentally transformed. In fact, one could say that they are not celebrated according to Newar tradition. Unsurprisingly, those Newars who are in regular contact with their relatives in Nepal and who continue to visit Nepal from time to time follow the calendrical festival cycle more rigorously, in line with Newar practices in Nepal. Such families are, however, very few in number.

What remains of the Newar ritual calendar in Sikkim is not particularly different from the one used in Nepal, even if Sikkimese Newars do not observe many of the festivals and rituals. *Mha pūjā*, the worship of the self, is one of the most important Newar festivals in Nepal, but has been largely forgotten by the Sikkimese population. Only since 1995, with the aim of promoting Newar religion, has the Newar Association of Sikkim, the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, started to celebrate *Mha pūjā*. Since 2000, the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* has also revived festivals such as *Indra jātrā*, another important Newar event.

Daya Prasad Pradhan of Tadong, aged 86, remembers dragging away a straw effigy of Gathe Magar (*gathāṃmugaḥ*) together with a sweeper in Pakim and even seeing month-long *lākhe* dances when he was a young boy (Pradhan 1997: 30). The tradition of dragging away of effigies of *gathāṃmugaḥ* together with a scavenger is still a living tradition in Kathmandu.¹⁶ Most of the Newars I interviewed in Sikkim, however, did not remember celebrating the festival of *gathāṃmugaḥ*, even though they do celebrate *guṃpunhi* or *janai pūrṇimā* by drinking *kvāti*, an special soup made of different beans. Aside from Rhenock, there is no other place in Sikkim where the traditional cow processions in the name of recently deceased relatives still takes place during *gāi jātrā*.

While many Sikkimese Newars know about father's day and mother's day, only a few families celebrate these events as they are followed in Nepal. The festival of *pañjāraṃ*, when alms are given to Buddhist monks, is not practiced in Sikkim. Most of my informants did not know of the festival of *cathā*, during which the crescent moon and Ganesh are worshipped, even though the tradition of *svarha srāddha*, the sixteen days dedicated to offering ritual food to deceased ancestors, is still widely observed in Sikkim. Except for one or two families I met, the tradition of offering lights to the heavens during the month of *kārtik*, a ritual known as *ālamata*, is not observed.

¹⁶ See van den Hoek (2004: 23).

Very few Newar families in Sikkim still observe all the Newar feasts and festivals, but *Ghyocākusalhu* (*Māghe Sankrānti*), the eating of molasses and ghee in January, *Śrīpaṃcamī*, the beginning of spring and the worship of *Sarasvatī*, the goddess of knowledge in January/February, *Shiva Rātri* (*Silācarhe*) in February, *Holipunhi*, the festival of colour in February/March, and *Caitradasain* and *Rāmanavamī* in March/April are still celebrated by many. Large portion of the Newar community of Sikkim do not celebrate the festival of *Sithinakhaḥ*, the worship of the lineage divinity, but some still do. Some are even said to sacrifice a goat during this festival. When an animal is sacrificed, the division of the head of the sacrificed animal into eight parts and its distribution among the elder members of the household is an important ritual element for Newars in Nepal but in Sikkim is unknown to almost all.

As in Nepal, Bhimsen is considered to be one of the main gods for Sikkimese Newars and many worship him as a lineage deity. Other Newars regard Durga or Buddha as their lineage deities. As a part of some rituals, the Newars in Sikkim worship the mountain deity Kanchenjunga. All those who consider themselves to be Sikkimese recognise and worship Kanchenjunga in some form.¹⁷ Religious Newars may also go on pilgrimage to the sacred sites of Sikkim, such as to the Kheocheplari and Tsomgo lakes.

Now that many are searching for their Newar identity, Sikkimese Newars are keen to revive traditional festivals. Alongside cultural promotion by the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, there are some impressive individual initiatives such as that launched by Suryavir Tuladhar who is building a remarkable Newar temple.

The temple of Svayambhū Bhimākālī

As stated above, the mixture of both Hindu and Buddhist religious features is prevalent among Newars in Sikkim as it is among the Newars of Nepal. In this regard, the establishment of a Svayambhū Bhimākālī temple in Gangtok is noteworthy. This temple is famous for its presentation of features of Newar religion, but is also filled with all manner of deities including a statue of Sāi Bābā, a modern living god in India. People from all Sikkimese communities and from further afield visit this temple. Mr. Suryavir Tuladhar, the founding priest of the

¹⁷ Balikci-Denjongpa has elaborated secular and Buddhist perceptions of the mountain deity Kanchenjunga among the Lhopos (Bhutia) of Sikkim (2002: 31).

temple, is one of the most active Newars in Sikkim promoting Newar culture and language. He is also one of the few Newars in Gangtok who actually speaks the Newar language. For a period, the temple grounds were used to teach the Newar language as well as Nepalese *carya* dances. Suryavir's combining of Newar Hindu and Buddhist religious practices including Tantric and Tibetan Buddhist (Lamaist) forms all in one temple is particularly unique.

As a Newar, Suryavir's aim was to decorate the temple with Newar features. Being born into a Tuladhar family, he was not supposed to perform any priestly duties at the temple, but succeeded in turning himself into a priest because there were no other Newar priests in Sikkim. This should be seen as a significant departure from the traditional concept of priesthood as practised among the Newars of Nepal and can be understood as the invention of a religious identity in a diaspora community. Most interesting is the mixing up of Hindu (Śaiva, Vaiṣṇav), Tantric, Newar Buddhist and Tibetan Buddhist practices in Suryavir's way of worshipping the deities. In this regard, the structure of the temple is very inventive, with a pagoda-styled roof, enshrined Svayambhū Caitya and a temple altar with images of Śiva and Kālī beneath the Caitya.

Every morning, the priest performs a *nitya pūjā* for more than two hours as a form of daily worship at this temple. Some of his followers live there as his pupils, including a girl who becomes possessed by a divine serpent every morning and every day treats a number of patients while possessed. The priest Suryavir himself is also a faith healer and treats patients after completing his daily worship. He is believed to have the power of communicating with the gods.

Among the Newar population of Nepal, animal sacrifice during festivals and rituals is common, particularly at the temple of Kālī. In Sikkim, however, animal sacrifice is rare and is virtually forbidden at most temples in the state. Vegetarian offerings, replacing of animal sacrifice with fruit or coconuts, have become common in Sikkimese temples. Similarly, no animal sacrifice is permitted at the temple of Svayambhū Bhimākālī.

When performing fire sacrifices, Suryavir blends Vedic, Tantric and Buddhist components, a form of performance which would be impossible in Nepal, but which is tolerated in Sikkim because the system has been created in accordance with local needs. Such creative ritual inventions are necessary and accepted, in large part because the Newar migrant populations in Sikkim lack not only the appropriate priests, but also knowledge of the traditions of rituals practice. In fact,

it is only in recent years that Sikkimese of Nepalese origin have begun to reassert their ethnic identities thus compelling them to invent rituals of their own. Through the rituals that he performs at the temple, Suryavir wants to demonstrate not only a separate Newar or Nepali identity, but also to prove that the Nepalese of Sikkim are flexible, tolerant and ready to adopt elements from all other religions. Such invention is necessary to attract devotees from all communities, since Sikkim is home to many Nepalese communities as well as to its original inhabitants, the Bhutias and Lepchas.

Devotees from all communities regularly visit the temple to pay their respects to gods and goddess. The priest states he exists in order to perform righteous (*dharma*) tasks and thus serve disadvantaged people.

Life cycle rituals

The diffusion or erosion of language and culture are some of the most challenging problems faced by minorities in any multinational or multicultural society. In the case of migrants, such challenges are all the more pronounced. I discovered that many life cycle rituals observed by the Newars have all but disappeared in Sikkim. Only a few people, whose regular contact with ancestral relatives in Nepal remains uninterrupted, have maintained all the Newar life cycle rituals. Otherwise, the Newars of Sikkim are completely dependent on the Parbate Brahmins for the performance of life cycle and death rituals. Consequently, we may speak of a major ritual transformation. It also appears that there are not a sufficient number of Parbate (Hindu hill dwellers) Brahmins working as priests in Sikkim, so most of them are actually invited from Nepal. Some of these Brahmin priests remain in Sikkim for years while their families stay in Nepal, with the result that the priests travel back and forth a great deal. Because of the policies of the State Government of Sikkim, these Brahmin priests are not permitted to receive Indian citizenship.

In their attempt to reintroduce Newar life cycle and death rituals, the Sikkim Newar Organisation is considering inviting Newar Brahmin and Vajracharya priests from Nepal. How feasible such a plan is, and how soon they will be able to do so, is still unclear. All over India, Newars are facing the same problem. In the recent past, in their attempt to revive life cycle and death rituals, Indian Newars have not only consulted experts from Nepal, but have also translated ritual manuals from Newar into Nepali, the *lingua franca* among the Newars in India, in order to facilitate distribution and comprehension within their

communities. In this context, the publication of the books *Newar Jāti* (the Newar Nationality) by Bhaichanda Pradhan (1997) and *Janma-dekhi Sījyāsammako Saṃskār Paddhati* (A Manual of Lifecycle and Death Rituals) compiled by the Indian Newar Organisation, Central Committee Darjeeling (2003) are particularly noteworthy.

While life cycle rituals are still very important to some Newars in Sikkim, they do not follow the rituals in the manner of Newars in Nepal. For instance, some do observe *Macābu Byaṃke*, the birth purification rite, *Macā Jaṃkva*, the rice feeding ceremony, *Ihi*, the ritual marriage for female children, *Bārhā Tayegu*, the twelve-day confinement for girls, *Busaṃ Khāyegu*, the shaving of heads, and *Kaytā pūjā*, the worship of loincloth. In most cases, however, the rituals performed during these ceremonies no longer follow the Newar tradition because Parbate Brahmins are employed as priests, who simply do not know about Newar rituals.

After childhood and adolescent rituals, marriage is the most crucial series of life cycle rituals in Newar society. Similarly, the *Burā Jaṃko*, an old age ceremony, is very important ceremony for Newars. It can be observed many times: first, when one turns 77 years, 7 months, 7 days, 7 hours and 7 minutes; the second time when one reaches the age of 83 years; the third when one turns 88 years and 8 months, and so on. This old age ceremony has long been abandoned by Newars in Sikkim. Most recently, in 2000, the *Karunadevi Smārak Dharmārtha Guthi* attempted to revive this tradition by observing the *Burā Jaṃko* of Mr. Jay Shankarlal Shrestha in Rhenock, when he turned 83. The *Jaṃko* was observed as a public ceremony for three days with various programmes attached, and the event was widely publicised across Sikkim so that others would think of following suit.¹⁸

Death rituals

In Newar society, rituals are as important for those who have died as for those who are alive. In Sikkim, even after death, the Newars employ Parbate Brahmin priests. Funerals may take place on the day of death, but in most cases occur the following day. As far as possible, sons of the deceased must bear the dead body to the cremation ground, but relatives and neighbours may also help to carry the body. At the cremation ground, the chief mourner lights the body and it burns down

¹⁸ See the *Smārikā* (2000) published on the occasion.

to ashes. The chief mourner and any other sons then shave their heads and bathe in the river.

Returning home, sons of the deceased keep their distance from others for ten days during which time no one can touch them. They also cook their own food. Every day for ten days, they may perform *śrāddha* at a nearby river. On the tenth day, a purification rite is performed and close relatives may also shave their head. On the eleventh day, 365 floating bowls made of leaves (*khochi bagāune*) are prepared. On the twelfth day, *piṇḍa* are offered to the deceased. On the thirteenth day, a *śrāddha* is performed, and beds, sheets, dresses and utensils (*saryā dāna*) are given to the priest in the name of the deceased. Those who joined the family in the funeral procession and extended their condolences must be invited for a feast meal on this day. All of these visitors give the family an amount of money as a gesture of their support. Such a feast may not contain meat. Nowadays, many stop wearing the mourning dress on the thirteenth day, but some continue to wear mourning clothes until they perform a *śrāddha* on the 45th day. Monthly *śrāddha* is no longer common, but most Newars in Sikkim do perform a *śrāddha* at sixth months and a year after the death. Wearing white for the whole year has now become a rare practice. Such rituals performed after death in Sikkim, as expected, do not match to the rituals performed by Newars in Nepal.

Newar ethnic identity in Sikkim

While the Newars of Sikkim feel themselves to be distinct from other ethnic groups because of their separate culture and language, as has become clear from the discussion above, most have failed to maintain their language, culture, rituals and traditions.

Only in 1982 did a group of Newar youngsters, led by Rajiv Shankar Shrestha, for the first time take the initiative to establish a *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, an Association of the Newars in Sikkim, with the aim of achieving ethnic rights for the Newar community residing in Sikkim. This earliest attempt at organising the Newars of Sikkim for the pursuit of ethnic rights faced some initial obstacles and thus ended without any success. A few years later, in 1990, several planning meetings were held at the residence of Mr. Daya Prasad Pradhan (Maske) in Tadong culminating in a large meeting at the auditorium of *Sikkim Sāhitya Parisad* on 3 October 1993, at which an *ad hoc* body of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* under the chairmanship of the late Mohan Pratap Pradhan (Kasaju) was formed. Later that year, this organisation

succeeded in turning itself into a state level-Newar association in Sikkim, the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*.

The *Guthi* also launched a campaign to have the Newars recognised as an Other Backward Class (OBC), but as the 1998 OBC report prepared by the State Government ignored their campaign, they had to wait for a further five years for this recognition to be achieved. In 1996, while waiting, a group of dissatisfied members of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* formed the *Newar Kalyān Tadartha Samiti* (Newar Welfare Ad Hoc Committee) under the chairmanship of Khagendra Pradhan, even though this organisation reunited with the mother organisation, the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, in 1999. At the annual convention of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* in 2000, the organisation chose a new name: *All India Newar Organisation, Sikkim* (Akhil Bhāratīya Newar Saṃgaṭhan, Sikkim), to link it with other Newar organisations of India of the same name. This name change aroused some controversy. Those in favour of the new name argued that it was necessary to give the organisation a broader perspective and appeal, since in other regions of India also the Newars were organised under the *All India Newar Organisation*. Those against the name change, however, argued that it was inappropriate because it discarded the word *guthi*, a fundamental term for a Newar organisation. Especially those who had initiated the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* did not appreciate the new name, but for the sake of Newar unity did not openly contest it.

All Newars in Sikkim are in principle members of the *All India Newar Organisation, Sikkim*. In most places that I visited, people told me that they believe it necessary to have a national-level Newar organisation promoting their welfare and the revival of their threatened culture and language. However, some Newars I spoke to felt an ethnic organisation to be inappropriate because it would eventually separate them from other populations in Sikkim. While I was observing the *Sikkim Mahāsānti Pūjā* (Sikkim Great Peace Worship) in Gangtok in 2004 January, a Newar participant even suggested that I not disclose to others that my study was on the Newar community since the *Sikkim Mahāsānti Pūjā* was a four-day joint effort by over two dozen religiously-motivated youth clubs, trade unions, workers organisations and business houses. During this grand event, Hindu, Buddhist, Muslim, Christian, Sikh and Sāi Bābā followers were all actively involved. I was informed that the main aim of the *pūjā* was to showcase the religious harmony among Sikkim's peoples, and to appease wandering souls of all the beings who had died an unnatural death in the recent past. In this capacity, according to Mr. S.K. Pradhan, the

spokesman of the event, while a major objective of the *pūjā* was to bring peace to Sikkim, its ultimate aim was to bring about peace and tranquillity in the whole world. Followers of the different religions each had their own room and altar at which they could perform appropriate religious activities for their faith.

Nepali is now well established as a lingua franca in Sikkim. Among Sikkimese Newars, the practice of speaking the Newar language at home is extremely low: most use Nepali as their mother tongue. In particular, those families who have lost contact with Kathmandu Newars have completely lost the ability of speaking the Newar language. Only a few families in Gangtok, Rhenock, Namthang, Namchi, Jorethang, Legship, Tashiding and Geyzing still do speak Newar. Tashiding, a small village situated in West Sikkim, is the only place where I found several families still speaking Newar with one another. However, with the establishment of the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi*, Newars of Sikkim have begun to feel it necessary to learn their ancestral language. In a bid to teach Newar to Sikkimese Newars, the *Sikkim Newāḥ Guthi* started sending students to Kathmandu to learn Newar and also invited language teachers from Kathmandu to Sikkim to teach the tongue. From 1998, the *Guthi* also supplied two Newar language schoolteachers: one at Aritar in East Sikkim and another at Mallidanda in South Sikkim. Sadly this venture did not last long. In February 2000, the Institute of Newar Language and Culture was established in Namthang Kothi in South Sikkim to revive the Newar language and its culture. The government also introduced the Newar language as a subject at some schools, appointed Newar language teachers and published course books in the Newar language.

The *Newar Organisation of Sikkim* is also keen to maintain cross border contact and cultural exchange between the Newars of Nepal and Sikkim. Prominent Newar leaders, such as Padma Ratna Tuladhar, Malla K. Sundar, Naresh Bir Shakya and Laksmidas Manandhar have been invited to Sikkim to participate in their programmes. On occasion, cultural teams from Nepal, and well-known Newar language, dance and music teachers, have also been invited. Similarly, Newar leaders in Sikkim have visited Nepal to participate in programmes organised by the *Newar National Forum* (Newāḥ De Dabu) and the *Newar Association* (Nepālbhāṣā Mamkāḥ Khalah) of Nepal.

The emergence of the *Sikkim Democratic Front* (SDF) as the largest party in the Legislative Assembly of Sikkim has played an important role in empowering the state's ethnic groups. The SDF government introduced various regulations in favour of the different

ethnic groups of Sikkim, including giving equal rights to all languages spoken in the state. In 1994, the local government designated Newar to be a state language along with all other languages spoken in Sikkim, and further introduced a regulation permitting Newar to be spoken at meetings of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly (SLA). In this regard, since 1994 the SLA has employed a Newar language translator and editor and has been publishing proceedings of parliamentary meetings in the Newar language using Newar scripts. I was able to collect a *Proceedings of the Sikkim Legislative Assembly* translated into the Newar language using the Newar script, an important document because it speaks of the Sikkimese government's practical commitment to supporting languages from different communities. Sadly, no other Newar language proceedings have been published since. *The Sikkim Herald*, a government weekly, is released in Newar and other official languages of the state, another example of Sikkim's liberal policy towards minority languages.

In 2003, the Sikkim government included the Newars in the Other Backward Class (OBC) category, together with Bahuns, Chetris, Sanyasi and Jogis. This means that the government now reserves a total of fourteen percent of jobs and seats for higher studies for these groups. While the State Government of Sikkim has now recognised these groups as OBC, the Central Government of India has yet to do so.

Concluding remarks

I have found the people of Sikkim to be generally happy about the State Government's policy towards their languages and cultures, and most believe that this policy has increased mutual understanding between Sikkim's different ethnic groups. At first glance, one notices peaceful and harmonious relations between the different ethnicities in Sikkim, but competition and envy among these groups can be sensed as soon as one delves a little deeper. Almost all communities in Sikkim have their own ethnic organisations and are actively organising themselves to struggle for their rights.

Some are of the opinion that the policy of empowering small communities with rights to their languages and cultures is divisive. They believe that the Nepalese communities of Sikkim were for a long time seen as one group but are now fragmented because each one is seeking a separate and distinct ethnic identity. Only politicians, they argue, benefit from such a 'divide and rule' policy. Kumar Pradhan, a prominent Nepalese scholar in India expresses a similar opinion about

Darjeeling (2005: 24). The majority of Nepalese in Sikkim are nevertheless pleased with the State Government's policy towards their cultures.

Nepalese populations in Sikkim, who have been living there for almost one and a half centuries, believe themselves to be no less indigenous than those officially declared as indigenous. The Bhutia and Lepcha populations of Sikkim are considered to be the most indigenous and the Indian government has consequently accorded them the status of Scheduled Tribes meaning that a higher percentage of government jobs, higher studies and political seats are reserved for them. All the Nepalese communities, such as the Bahuns, Chetris, Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Gurungs, Magars and Newars are generally considered to be outsiders, despite their long term residence in the state. Consequently, a division between the Nepalese communities and the Bhutias and Lepchas can be felt, and the Nepalese communities feel themselves to be somehow closer to each other than to the Bhutias and the Lepchas. Not everyone agrees with such a perception, and some Newars suggest that their food habits are much closer to those of Bhutias and Lepchas than to a traditional Bahun or Chetri diet.

The Newars in Sikkim are proud to be referred to as Newar. With their long history of a distinct culture and language hailing from the valley of Nepal, the Sikkimese Newars want their heritage to be accorded due respect wherever they live. While they are legally Indian, Sikkimese Newars are culturally Newar and since the 1990s have been actively researching their roots and are presently striving for a reinforced sense of their Newar identity.

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