



The Khas Of Darjeeling And Sikkim: History, Faith, And Culture

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Abstract:

This paper investigates the history, beliefs, and cultural practices of the Khas community in the Eastern Himalayan region, particularly of Darjeeling and Sikkim. Historically, the community traces its roots to the western Himalayan region of Nepal, and later extended to the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim in the 19th and early 20th centuries. Their movement was driven by political uncertainties in Nepal and the growing demand for labour in colonial India. Over a period of time, the Khas people, comprising primarily Bahun and Chettri groups with Brahmin and Kshatriya status, adapted to the indigenous traditions of Darjeeling and Sikkim while preserving their Vedic religious foundations. The study further investigates the engagement of the Khas people with reformist religious movement, such as the 'Pranami Sampradaya' and its promotion of syncretic practices that reflect the plural religious milieu of the Himalayas. This research examines the linguistic shift of the Khas from Khas Kura to modern Nepali, analyzing oral traditions, festivals, rituals, and social status within the community. It also explores how caste, kinship, and language have continued to shape the life and identity of the Khas community while negotiating modernity, state, and identity politics. The study also scrutinizes the active involvement of the Khas Community in regional ethno-political movements, including 'Gorkhaland Movement' and political representation in Sikkim. Ultimately, the paper analyses how the Khas balance traditions with modernity and how their dynamic cultural identity connects past with present experiences linking local and diasporic contexts.

Introduction:

The Khas have been a historically important Community in the social and cultural settings of the Himalayas (Whelpton, 2005; Guneratne, 2002). It has occupied a significant position in the religious, cultural, and political narratives of South Asia, especially in Nepal. Remarkably, as the Khas increasingly assimilated into the socio-cultural settings of the region, their age-old practices began to shift in response to the evolving politics and growing Brahmanical influence. Further, this development was shaped mainly by two factors: the consolidation of regional politics and the expanding sanskritic traditions across the western Himalayas of Nepal. This facilitated new avenues for ritual acceptability, social mobility, and political representation (Subba, 1999; Whelpton, 2005). As a result, the Khas gradually associated with the dominant social and religious rules of the time, adopted existing social practices, and reshaped identity in

harmony with Hindu hierarchical structures (Bista, 1991).

In the 18th century, Nepal witnessed a major turning point in the face of political consolidation that altered the course of the history of the Khas people. The developing state-building processes sought to unify the varied hill people under one rule. As the Khas were already powerful through their cultural integration and expanding socio-political roles, they became increasingly central to the process of nation-building. Consequently, their assimilation with the values of Brahmanical traditions, presence in the administrative and military domains positioned them most advantageously within the new political order. This historical phase not only strengthened their social authority but also elevated cultural practices and gained state-wide recognition of their traditions.

The eastward migration of the Khas communities into Darjeeling and Sikkim in the mid-19th century was shaped by the colonial economic policies, and regional disturbances further accelerated the process. The expansion of the tea plantation economy in Darjeeling, the recruitment of Nepali-speaking hill people into the colonial military, and the increasing demand for educated administrators in both British India and the princely state of Sikkim further accelerated migration (Subba, 1999; Sharma & Thapa, 2013; Chettri, 2024). In the process, the Khas, particularly the Bahun and Chettri groups, became influential in educational institutions and in the bureaucratic apparatus in the region. It is notable that despite this significance, except for research on Gorkha identity formation and wider Nepali migration, the scholarly attention and focused studies on the Khas' distinct cultural and religious advancement are rare and remain underexplored.

The present research is looking at a significant gap in Himalayan and South Asian ethnographic studies and responds to the dearth of community-centered, regionally specific studies on the Khas people in the Darjeeling Hills and Sikkim. The remarkable works by Subba (1999) and Guneratne (2002) have examined the broader Nepali-speaking population's dynamism applying often homogenizing diverse groups under broad categories as 'Gorkha' and 'Nepali'. In such a generalization, the internal diversity, and distinct historical courses, exclusive ritual system, and identity debates of sub-communities like the Khas, are obscure and overlooked. Therefore, the present study aims to recover these distinctions, examine the way in which the Khas identity is practiced, maintained, and changed in the landscape of multicultural Eastern Himalayas.

The significant research question guiding present study are to know the Khas people in the Eastern Himalayas by focusing three core questions: the historical origin of the Khas in Darjeeling and Sikkim, how migration, settlement and Cultural collaboration have influenced the Khas religious beliefs and practices, and how their oral traditions, caste relations, kinship patterns and festivals have affected, changed and transformed over time. In response to these questions, this study traces the processes of migration of the Khas Community into Darjeeling and Sikkim, examines cultural practices and belief systems, and explores the role of rituals, caste, and language that shaped their identity formation over time, and considers how these traditions transformed within broader socio-political change.

The method of this study is a qualitative, historical-ethnographic approach, relies exclusively on the secondary sources and existing qualitative data. To achieve the objectives, this study synthesizes scholarly articles, journals, newspapers, government reports, and accessible historical records.

The importance of this study lies in its potential to reframe distinct cultural history by focusing on specific to a particular community. The region marked by different ethnic groups and political disputes, the labels such as 'Nepali', 'Gorkha', and 'Pahadi' are frequently politicized. In such a context, the Khas community offers a valuable case study in cultural conciliation, demonstrating identity statements and reflecting religious transformations. In domains like the history of colonial laborers, post-colonial nationalism, religious revivalism, and caste politics, the Khas experience interrelates. Understanding the Khas does not

just help to add to Himalayan studies but also informs wider discussions in South Asian anthropology regarding caste, migration, and marginal identity in multifaceted societies. This research sets the ground for an in-depth analysis of the historical origin, beliefs, and cultural continuity of the Khas community within a framework of the history of Darjeeling and Sikkim and, thereby, meaningfully contributes broader understanding in the mountain margins of South Asia.

Embedded in a broader historical context, the Khas lineage reveals both ancient heritage and continuous evolution in the Himalayan region. Their ancestors travelled through mountain corridors linking the western and eastern Himalayas long before the establishment of present-day political boundaries. Early textual sources identify them as a powerful hill tribe between the eleventh and fourteenth centuries that controlled much of the region under the Khasa Malla Kingdom, centred in the Karnali Basin. This political formation was instrumental in the development of early hill states and in processes of cultural assimilation in western Nepal (Whelpton, 2005). From a historical standpoint, the Khas are generally considered descendants of Indo-Aryan migrants who settled in the mid-hills of the Himalayas and gradually developed a distinctive linguistic and cultural identity known as Khas Kura, which later evolved into the modern Nepali language (Guneratne, 2002; Ghosh, 2015). Beyond linguistic developments, the Khas further transformed the process of Sanskritization during the late medieval period. This involved claiming higher caste status through the adoption of Brahmanical rituals and customs. As a result, caste-based social structures developed, leading to the formation of groups identified as 'Bahun' and 'Chettri' (Bista, 1991; Subba, 1999).

The intensification of Khas migration to the Eastern Himalayan region, particularly Darjeeling and Sikkim, began during the nineteenth century. The factors contributing to this migration included political uncertainty, land scarcity, British colonial rule, and expanding economic opportunities. In this context, it is important to note that the Anglo-Nepal War (1814–1816) and the subsequent Treaty of Sugauli limited Gorkha territorial control, triggering population displacement and migration. Simultaneously, the development of Darjeeling as a hill station and the expansion of tea plantations under British colonial rule encouraged increased labour recruitment and military enlistment from Nepal (Chettri, 2024). The Khas—especially Chhetris—were favoured for both plantation labour and recruitment into the colonial military. Many Bahun families migrated for educational and administrative opportunities in emerging urban centers such as Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and eventually into the princely state of Sikkim, particularly in the southern regions. The Khas very soon renegotiated their identity in response to the new social and political context as they resettled in the region. Gradually, they gave way to broader labels like 'Nepali' or Gorkha, which were more politically viable and culturally unifying in the multiethnic and multilingual Eastern Himalayan region (Chhetri, 2023). This identity transformation allowed broader social inclusion within the regional power structure, including the Sikkimese monarchy and the British colonial apparatus. An elite section of the Khas occupied important positions as teachers, clerks, and administrative intermediaries. Despite all these changes, the core cultural traditions of the Khas continued, and caste characteristics remained significantly intact. By emphasizing ethnic loyalty and solidarity, the Khas community redefined itself to associate with local narratives of modernity at the same time.

The Khas community in the region established belief systems characterised by a complex layering of orthodox Hindu practices, regional syncretism, religious reform, and contemporary spiritual change. In the context of the Khas, especially 'Bahun' and 'Chettri' castes, they historically followed Vedic Hinduism rooted in Brahmanical orthodoxy. Their religious life is centrally organised around caste-based priesthood roles. Among the Khas, the widely practised ancestor worship (Shraddha) is performed domestically, primarily by family 'purohits'. The religious calendar of the community is marked by rituals like life-cycle samskaras, pujas during festivals such as Dasai and Tihar, and 'Bratabandha' (sacred thread ceremony) for

the boys (Bista, 1991). The Hindu deities such as Shiva, Vishnu, and Durga are highly valued in the Khas households. In addition to these, the local divinities like 'Nag' (serpent deity) and ancestral spirits are also held as religiously important, especially in rural and semi-rural areas. Often, the Khas community incorporates shamanic traditions into spirit possession, ritual healing, and domestic worship, demonstrating flexibility in religious belief (Subba, 1999; Tamang, 2018).

As the Khas community settled in Darjeeling and Sikkim, their religious worldview was widely transformed in response to the plural and multiethnic religious landscape of the Eastern Himalayas. The interactions with the Lepcha animistic traditions, Bhutia Buddhist practices, and Christian missionary influence encouraged religious syncretism in the region through shared sacred places and festivals. For example, certain pilgrimage sites like 'Mahakal Mandir' in Darjeeling and 'Hanuman Tok' in Gangtok reflect the layered sacred landscape that coexist with Hindu and Buddhist symbols. A new religious reform movement within the Khas community was further witnessed in the 20th century. This reform movement, led by Mangaldas Guruji of the 'Pranami Sampradaya', proved to be highly influential among the Khas, which promoted monotheism, emphasizing universal scriptures, and supporting social equality across caste distinctions (Subba, 1999). As a result, it challenged ceremonial orthodoxy, questioned caste hierarchies, extended the role of women, and stimulated larger participation of the lower castes. On the other hand, this reform movement further promoted spiritual humanism, underlined ethical self-discipline, and encouraged communal harmony. In contemporary periods, Khas, particularly the youth, are increasingly moving away from complex religious ritualism (Chettri, 2023). Instead, the Khas express religiosity in individual ways, and community services and interfaith discourse have become important. The decline of daily puja rituals and the growing influence of digital and global spiritual trends mark a generational shift towards a more personal, de-institutionalized engagement with the sacred. Notwithstanding these changes, belief remains significant as a marker of cultural continuity and adoptive identity within the Khas community.

Both continuity and change characterise the cultural practices of the Khas in the Eastern Himalayas. This reflects a dynamic interplay of tradition, adaptation, and regional identity. Language has historically been a powerful medium of cultural expression (Zimba, 2022; Ghosh, 2015; Guneratne, 2018). Originating from Khas Kura, a dialect spoken in the Western Himalayan belt, the language evolved into modern standard Nepali, serving not only as a medium of daily communication but also as a marker of shared identity, especially in Darjeeling and Sikkim (Zimba, 2022). The works of writers like Laxmi Prasad Devkota and Parijat, and the rise of local Nepali-language newspapers and radio in Darjeeling, have contributed to fostering a sense of linguistic nationalism and cultural pride among Khas people. This linguistic development became central to asserting cultural visibility, particularly in a multilingual region.

Festivals serve as vibrant expressions of religious and social life. In the Khas Community, with their familial and agricultural symbolism, Dasai and Tihar are widely celebrated further with region-specific variations such as Kaag Tihar and Mha Puja in Sikkim. The solstice transition is marked by an important festival called Maghe Sankranti, closely connected to agrarian life, commonly celebrated. Life-cycle rituals such as Bratabandha, marriage, and cremation ceremonies remain culturally significant in upholding family traditions. However, the changes are visible among Khas youths to often reduce ritual intensity in the face of increasing modern sensibilities.

Oral traditions form a rich reservoir of cultural knowledge. Folk myths are widely shared, heroic epics like Satyaketu and Bhadrabahu are recited and remembered not only to transmit moral values but also to reflect social hierarchy and shape gender roles. The central role in this oral transmission has been played by the women, especially grandmothers. They have traditionally preserved these legacies through stories and songs. The practice of storytelling and singing ritual songs is the fundamental agent to sustain cultural continuity.

In the context of performing arts, traditional instruments like madal, murchunga, and sarangi accompany folk music and folk dances like Maruni and Deuda are commonly performed during festivals and weddings. The traditional dress, like Daura Surwal for men and 'Chaubandi Choli' for women, indicates ethnic identity. However, in recent times, the style of clothing has changed among the Khas in the face of increasing modern fashion as a reflection of both cultural innovation and preservation. Therefore, the Khas cultural practices in Darjeeling and Sikkim demonstrate an ongoing balance between heritage and modernity, symbolizing both rootedness in tradition and flexibility in a changing socio-political landscape.

In the Eastern Himalayan landscape, especially in Darjeeling and Sikkim, the Khas community presents a complex social structure shaped by the fabric of caste hierarchy, community dynamics, and ever-changing political aspirations. The community, particularly dominated by 'Bahuns', associated with Brahmin status, and 'Chettris', linked to Kshatriya backgrounds, represents the traditional caste order, reflecting the transposition of the Hindu varna system of stratification transferred to hill society, shaped by the social status. Based on the purity of ritualism and occupational status, the social hierarchy determines ranks and surnames and repeatedly specifies caste identity. The surnames of the 'Bahun' included Sharma, Bhattarai, Poudyal, Neupaney, and surnames such as Basnet, Katwal, and Thapa, of the 'Chettri' group, indicate ancestral lineage and caste status. It is to be mentioned in this context that in the outskirts of Kalimpong and rural areas of South Sikkim, a strong domination of the caste is visible, where the Brahmanical authority determines religious rituals, controls temple administration, and confers social prestige. (Bista, 1991). In urban settings, however, there are signs of relaxed caste rigidity, increased inter-caste interaction, and more flexible ritual hierarchies.

Inter-community and inter-caste relations have undergone gradual transformations. On the one hand, traditional orders discouraged marriages outside caste groups. However, diasporic movements, modern education, and increasing urbanization altogether reduced endogamy, altered the norms, and enabled greater social mobility. Nevertheless, caste-based occupational roles persist among the Dalit Khas groups who continue to face structural marginalization, despite constitutional protections (Chettri, 2024). These communities often face exclusion from temple rituals and suffer from residential segregation in some villages. Especially compared to the 'Bahun' and 'Chettri' groups, there remains limited access to upward mobility for these communities. However, in the face of growing political awareness, the expansion of educational access has sparked movements among Dalit Khas youths for asserting their rights, particularly in Darjeeling's students' union and civic spaces.

The politics of classification and reservation have become the central issue in contestation and community assertion. In the political landscape of Darjeeling and Sikkim, Khas subgroups, especially Dalit Khas groups, are active, mobilizing their demand for recognition as 'Schedule Caste' or 'Schedule Tribe' by citing historical disadvantage and socio-economic backwardness. In the region of a distinct ethno-political context of Sikkim, these demands are complex, where identity claims intersect with indigenous rights of the groups, including the Lepchas, Bhutias, and the Limboos. On the other hand, the Khas 'Bahun' and 'Chettri' communities follow a different strategy, often aligned with the Other Backward Class (OBC) movement to access reservation benefits while simultaneously negotiating with their dominant status and balancing traditional privilege. So, in the wider state politics of multicultural recognition in the region, caste-based dynamics are closely intertwined. The changing hierarchical structure of the Khas community not only shows continuity with their traditional past but also reveals adaptation to adjust identity, status, and opportunity in a competitive socio-political landscape.

It is evident in the Eastern Himalayas, particularly in Darjeeling and Sikkim, that the ethnic and political identity of the Khas has evolved within broader regional movements, shaped by ethnic contestation and state-led negotiations of multiculturalism. The core Khas, 'Bahun', and 'Chettri' groups, historically, are

Indo-Aryan settlers rooted in the Western Himalayan region. They played a prominent role in shaping a wider Gorkha identity that developed into a major socio-political force in the Darjeeling Hills in the 20th century. Central to this process was the ‘Gorkhaland Movement’, which demanded a separate state for Indian Nepalis and relied heavily on Khas linguistic resources, their use of Nepali language, and their association with the military legacy of the Gorkha regiments (Chhetri, 2023). Encompassing all the communities of the Hill, the term ‘Gorkha’ functioned as an umbrella identity. Even in this inclusiveness, the Khas leadership in the political parties, leading roles in the literary associations and students' union gave them a strong representational power.

However, in Sikkim, the politics of identity developed in a complex and layered state with constitutional protection of “Original Inhabitants” that includes the communities like the ‘Lepchas’, ‘Bhutias’, and the ‘Limboos’ with special recognition as Schedule Tribe (Hachhethu, 2023). Being relatively late settlers, the Khas ‘Bahun-Chettri’ groups were denied recognition as an indigenous community. Despite this, the Khas are politically influential, have substantial participation in the state administration, are active in educational institutions, and hold leadership in political parties. The key positions in the political organization of Sikkimese politics have been held by the prominent ‘Bahun’ and ‘Chettri’ leaders, who also lobbied for Other Backward Class (OBC) status both at the state and the central levels. Nevertheless, their claims for recognition are often contested by the other indigenous inhabitants, resulting in debates focused on land rights, cultural legitimacy, and demographic entitlement.

The multicultural landscape of Darjeeling and Sikkim requires careful identity negotiations. The interactions of the Khas people with the Lepchas, Bhutias, Limboos, Rais, and other Nepali-origin communities have fluctuated between competition and cooperation. On the one hand, inter-community marriages strengthen ties, shared festivals promote social cohesion, a common linguistic heritage supports unity, and, on the other, access to state resources, recognition-based political competition, and representation intensify conflict at the same time. In such a context, youth forums, literary societies, and civic organizations have provided critical platforms for the Khas to assert their existence, preserve the history of their own, and articulate collective aspirations (Chhetri, 2023). The political parties and their wings, and the Nepali Literary Society in Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Namchi have worked toward the Khas collective identity and acknowledged regional diversity at the same time. Eventually, the journey of the Khas community in the Eastern Himalayas demonstrates both experience of flexibility and reinvention, seeking solidarity within a diverse society while asserting their individuality through language, culture, and politics to shape their identity.

The culture of the Khas in Darjeeling and Sikkim is marked by a vibrant balance between hereditary traditions and contemporary change. The core social values and social institutions like caste order, rituals, and Brahmanical religious practices remain significant in shaping daily life, especially among ‘Bahun’ and ‘Chettri’ communities. Annual festivals like Dasai and Tihar, ancestor worship, and life-cycle rituals continue to be an important marker in community life to reinforce family ties, moral values among the groups. In the rural social landscape, patrilineal families, age-based authority, and caste associations still work as key mechanisms of social order and cultural regulation.

Along with these continuities, rapid socio-economic changes have reshaped the Khas society. Increasing urbanization, education, and growing mobility have transformed patterns of occupation, lifestyle, and social expectations. The gender roles have undergone particular changes in the context of urban and semi-urban areas, where Khas women greatly participate in education, professional employment, businesses, and local governance. These shifts contested the traditional house-centered roles and contributed to more flexible family and social relationships.

The cultural life of the youths represents one of the most visible signs of transformation. The Khas, particularly the young ones, increasingly express hybrid identities through modern music, digital media, and wider social networks. These new forms of expression often challenge traditional authority and reinterpret cultural and religious symbols in new ways. Further, migrations across borders have expanded these changes; diasporic connections promote a global Nepali identity that reshapes ideas of belonging and cultural heritage.

However, these changes also generate tensions. The spread of global languages and digital communications has reduced everyday use of Nepali among younger generations, increasing concerns about language erosion and cultural dilution. Migration has fragmented extended family networks but reducing the transmission of oral traditions and customary practices. Religious observances are still symbolically valued but often coexist with secular and pragmatic lifestyles, producing cultural uncertainty rather than a complete break from traditions. Therefore, in the context, the Khas experience reflects ongoing negotiations between continuity and transformation, where traditions are neither fully abandoned nor kept unchanged but constantly adapted to shifting social realities.

Conclusion:

The study of the Khas community in the Eastern Himalayas, particularly across the diverse landscapes of Darjeeling and Sikkim, highlights a complex history marked by continuity and change, assertion and negotiation, and a balance between tradition and modernity. Right from the Brahmanical traditions of 'Bahun-Chettri' households to the margins of Dalit Khas communities such as Kami, Damai, and Sarki, the internal stratification of the Khas reflects broader South Asian caste dynamics. Simultaneously, involvement of the Khas communities in regional politics, the Gorkha identity movement, and socio-cultural domains is indicative of continuous struggle by the groups to get noticed and recognized in a pluralistic landscape.

What emerges most significantly is the dynamic and adaptive nature of the Khas identity. While in rural settings, ritual purity, family hierarchy, and ancestral worship remain important in determining daily life, in the urban context, education, mobility, and digital usage are reshaping values and cultural practices. Gender positions are being renegotiated, youth expressions are becoming increasingly global, and linguistic identity is rearticulated in the face of contemporary pressures. This dynamic of persistence and change is non-linear and multidirectional; it expresses how communities like the Khas negotiate their place in an increasingly trans-locally linked but locally grounded world.

This study underscores the importance of region-specific ethnographic research. Broad Himalayan generalizations are often limited and hide experiences of distinct communities like the Khas, whose history is determined by imagined histories about their caste background and regional particular identities as well. Understanding the Khas not merely as part of a homogeneous 'Nepali-speaking population' but as culturally diverse and socially stratified groups allows for a more precise and respectful representation of their lived realities.

Future research needs to take a broader and deeper perspective. Intensive studies into the experiences of Dalit Khas can bring out the underlying inequalities that are inherently obscured in 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha'. Likewise, analyses of Khas women's changing roles – as students, migrants, actors, and housekeepers – also would help see the assumed aspects of cultural transformations. Moreover, the ever-changing significances and routines of ritual practices among the young, particularly in diasporic and urban settings, also merit attention from scholars. In this region, the Khas identity is not merely an artifact of history but also a continuing living weave and pattern of experience configured by the memory, resistance, and aspirations.

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