

SOCIO-ECONOMIC AND CULTURAL LIFE OF SHERPAS IN SOLUKHUMBU: HISTORY AND EVOLUTION (1920-2020)

SUMMARY OF THESIS

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SUMMARY

Himalaya, the youngest mountain range on the earth, a marvel of nature is not only the sentinel of the north, a formidable geological feature but also nestles in its lap countries and communities where every aspect of life is impacted and determined by this stunning, imposing mass of snow. In the series of Himalayan countries starting from Pakistan, India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, Nepal stands out prominently due to the presence of Mt. Everest. Everest was discovered to be the highest mountain on the earth in 1852. Due to the subsequent race to bag the highest prize in the field of adventure, accentuated by the empirical glory associated with such accomplishments, Nepal's economy and development got irretrievably linked with the mountain. As the mountaineering expeditions started exploring the Himalayan peak, first entering from Darjeeling or Tibet side due to Nepal's closure for the foreigners, and later after 1950 directly into Nepal, another entity that came to limelight was a group of hardy people, physiologically more adapted to high altitude than their other counterparts from the plains. Settled at the base of Mt. Everest in high-altitude villages, these people called Sherpas caught attention of the westerners due to their exceptional load-bearing capabilities and the ability to stay fit at the high altitude. Gradually they became the backbone of any mountaineering expedition in the Himalaya. Today, mountaineering in Nepal Himalaya, especially on Everest is synonymous with the Sherpas and vice versa. These are the people who provide not only the logistical and climbing support but also the cultural hue and liveliness to the barren geography of Everest.

People from the East

Sherpas are an ethnic group of Tibetan origin. The term Sherpa has been derived from a Tibetan word *shar-pa*, *shar* denoting east and *wa* or *pa* meaning

‘people belonging to’. Thus, Sherpa means ‘people belonging to the east’ or ‘people from the east’.

As per the oral and recorded history of the Sherpas, their association with Everest began around 15th century when they migrated from the Kham region of Tibet to the upper valleys of eastern Himalayan peaks including Everest. They spread out to the entire Nepal Himalaya including the western region called Helambu or Yelmo, as well as the easternmost Nepal bordering the Indian state of Sikkim. However, their main settlement area was Solu Khumbu area, south of Mt. Everest where they established their villages at an altitude of 8000 feet to 13,000 feet, and herded their yaks at the pastures at around 15,000 feet. The upper Khumbu region was more rugged with snow-capped peaks around while the lower Solu was better suited to farming.

They grew mainly potatoes and Barley at the terraced fields. Till the beginning of the 20th century, they lived in the shadows of the great Himalayan mountains, endowing them with spiritual significance, never having the urge to scamper to their tops. However, with the entry of British mountaineers and other Europeans into the Himalaya, the Sherpas got involved into the mountaineering occupation, and by the virtue of their several special qualities, soon distinguished themselves.

From the times of pioneer Sherpas such as Ang Tharkay and Tenzing Norgay, Sherpas as a community have been transformed by a number of factors. Due to their role as the specialized guides on the Himalayan expeditions and their well-entrenched reputation, their economic standards have improved. Frequent interaction with the western trekkers, and mountaineers has left certain marks on their daily lives, which seems more driven by the requirement of work, as in learning to speak English or other foreign languages such as Korean. Technology has made them connected to the other

parts of Nepal, in contrast with their earlier existence when Nepal for them symbolized the lower parts of the country, especially Kathmandu. It has also connected them globally. They can now directly communicate with their prospective clients rather than having to queue up in the Himalayan Club in Darjeeling where the recruiters selected their Sherpa assistants, in the initial days. Many of them have settled abroad and many others harbour a desire to do so. Foreign trips to interact with prospective clients is not uncommon. Education has made inroads in the high-altitude Sherpa villages and a deep consciousness about the importance of education has seeped in. With the advent of education, better mobility and connectivity, more purchasing power and technological advances, the younger generation of Sherpas has entered other fields of profession also. There is a marked change in perception about career.

A drastic shift in terms of identity consciousness has been observed in recent times. From mere 'coolies and load bearing porters', the Sherpas climbed up the ladder to become 'climbing assistants and guides', but even more stunning is their recent emergence as 'mountaineers' in their own right, minus the overshadowing presence of the clients. There are now prominent Sherpas such as Ang Tshering Sherpa and Kami Rita Sherpa who have climbed Everest twenty-eight times and Mingma David Sherpa, a member of ExpedElite adventure agency established by a Nepali of Magar descent, and former British soldier Nirmal Purja, who with his team of Sherpas has set several records in the field of mountaineering, smashing the earlier speed records. These and some more Sherpas have emerged as legends in themselves and clients feel privileged to climb with them. The Sherpas seem to be moving towards dominating the scene in the field of mountaineering now, as equipped with their characteristic strength, stamina, adaption at high altitude, fortitude, and mountaineering skills they are almost unmatched. Their association with the Himalaya has come full circle and the centre

of power and action has shifted from the west to the east, revolving around the stoic people concentrated at the Base of Mt. Everest itself.

This research work has endeavoured to trace these developments, starting from the beginning, delving into the history and moving up till the recent times. The focus would be mainly on the period of the past hundred years from 1920 to 2020, a century in the beginning of which mountaineering was introduced in the Sherpa society and the widespread changes it led to, in the traditional agro-pastoral life of the Sherpas. These changes may be categorized into positive and negative both. This work has presented both the aspects of the entwining of the Sherpa life with mountaineering expeditions.

Origin of the Research Idea

The idea of this doctoral work was originated when I was climbing Mt. Everest in 2012 and had the opportunity to observe and interact with my Sherpas closely for two months and to know about their lives beyond the expeditions, the challenges in their day- to- day life, and their aspirations. Mountaineering as a commercial activity had changed the way the Sherpas led their life. I felt a humanly and scholarly urge to delve deeper into the lives of these human beings as an ethnic community. Thus, was conceived the idea of doing a systematized, institutionalized research on this ethnic group.

Research Methodology

This research work is primarily descriptive and analytical in nature. I have used ethnographic and oral-historical methods to collect the material. Both primary and secondary sources have been utilized for this purpose. It has also been supplemented by three field visits and surveys in Solukhumbu area.

Field Survey

Primary data was collected by direct contact with the Sherpas through interviews and questionnaires during a fourteen days field survey in Nepal through Sherpa villages and in Kathmandu. Structured questionnaire and semi-structured interviews were supplemented by field notes and photographs taken in Sherpa villages, along-with Nepal government reports, as well as the reports of various government organisations and NGOs.

Secondary Sources

I consulted various secondary sources such as books, memoirs, articles, records and reports written by early mountaineers, adventurers, ethnographers, research scholars, British officials who went on missions to Nepal, and anthropologists, including the two famous autobiographical books by the legendary Sherpas i.e. Ang Tharkay and Tenzing Norgay. I watched various documentaries made on Sherpas, and listened to podcasts on them. Material on Sherpas has been collected from the portal of indianculture.gov.in, Ministry of Culture, Government of India, as well as from Nepal government website. Journals of Nepal Mountaineering Academy were also consulted.

In India, the library of Indian Mountaineering Foundation, New Delhi was consulted for books on mountaineering history, memoirs, and the journals.

Hypothesis

During the evolution of their society through the impact of comingling with the outside world since 1920s, mostly through the western effect of mountaineering, Sherpas have assimilated modern lifestyle but have retained their core values.

Objectives of the Study

1. The objective of this study is to analyse the structure and patterns of settlements of Sherpas of Solukhumbu, taking into account the topography, the socioeconomic factors, the environmental factors and also their demographic structure.
2. The study will endeavour to present the historical factors that forged the growth and development of the Sherpas.
3. Sherpas' involvement and contribution in the growth of mountaineering in the Himalayas.
4. To understand their aspirations and examine the major challenges and constraints faced by them in the growth of their society.
5. To trace the new trends emerging in the Sherpa clan, and to ponder over the possibilities for the future.

Organisation of Chapters

The thesis has been divided in seven chapters, as below:

1. Introduction
2. Historical Background and Socio-Cultural Life
3. Traditional Economic Activities and Foray into Mountaineering
4. Impact of Mountaineering as a Commercial Activity
5. Migration, Image Makeover, and Sherpani Climbers
6. Analysis of Survey
7. Conclusion

The **first chapter 'Introduction'** gives a brief about the Sherpa people, the reason for the focus on this ethnic group, their history, their migration from Tibet into Nepal, and a note on their special characteristics. It also provides the origin of the idea

of this research work, the research methodology, objectives, review of literature as well the relevance of this work.

The **second chapter ‘Historical Background and Socio-Cultural Life’** traces the history of Sherpa people in detail, describing the reasons of their migration to Nepal, their settlement in Solukhumbu area, the geographical conditions of their villages and the impact it had on their psyche and way of thinking and living. It describes the Sherpa beliefs, Buddhist faith, their customs, traditions, their intimate association with nature, adaptation to high altitude living, their manner of dealing with hardships of life, their festivals, bonding with each other and interpersonal relationships etc. Overall, it provides a glimpse into the traditional life of Sherpas, a peep into the villages, communities and families of these people, an endeavour to understand them beyond their well-known image of mountaineering heroes. To develop a comprehensive understating of them rather than seeing them only as the hardy superhumans who have impressed the world with their climbing acumen is the aim of this chapter. It puts into perspective their roots and brings forth the understanding of what being a Sherpa means in all-encompassing manner.

The **third chapter titled, ‘Traditional Economic Activities and Foray into Mountaineering’** describes their traditional occupation of agro-pastoralism, and trade with Tibet. Thereafter it traces the process of their getting involved in working on the mountains in various capacities with the westerners. The history of Sherpas after 1920s is essentially the history of them getting drawn into mountaineering. The chapter provides a historical timeline of their new occupation with certain landmark events such as the Sherpas’ initiation into mountaineering by Dr. A. M. Kellas in 1920, their initial migration to Darjeeling for getting recruited for the expeditions as porters and cooks, opening of the Nepal border in 1950, Mt. Everest being climbed in 1953, the spurt in

mountaineering expeditions through Solukhumbu, beginning of trekking in 1970s, organization of commercial expeditions in 1990s.

The **fourth chapter titled, ‘Impact of Mountaineering as a Commercial Activity’** analyses the positive and negative effects of the burst of mountaineering expeditions in the Nepal Himalaya. It delineates the socio-economic, cultural and environmental changes as well as efforts to minimize the negatives while reaping the maximum benefit from this major shift in their lives. It also discusses about the NGOs working in the Solukhumbu in various sectors. It is based on government reports, scholars and mountaineers’ observations as expressed in memoirs, and books as well as the Sherpas’ accounts.

The **fifth chapter ‘Migration, Image Makeover, and Sherpani Climbers’** delves into the recent phenomena happening in the Sherpa society. Their new identity consciousness and flaunting of their mountaineering acumen and strength now matches that of the western climbers. This chapter describes the Sherpas’ claim to the mountaineering fame, along with the Sherpanis’ venturing into this erstwhile male dominated field. The matter of their migration to Kathmandu as well as abroad has also been discussed.

The **sixth chapter titled, ‘Analysis of Survey’** gives a detailed description and analysis of the field survey carried out by me in February-March 2022. It gives a representation to the Sherpa perspective on the aspects related to their life and society. The data collected has been presented in the form of pie charts and tables, along with their analysis. Providing a glimpse into the Sherpa society, it presents their challenges and aspirations in their own words.

The **seventh chapter ‘Conclusion’** sums up the research work, highlights the Sherpa’s contribution in Nepal’s progress and outlines the way forward for a more

equitable and sustainable future and advocates sustainable mountain tourism which along with being economically beneficial to the Sherpa community is also considerate of the environment, and the cultural preservation. The thesis concludes with the following findings:

1. There has been a major shift in the occupation for the Sherpas from agro-pastoralism to adventure tourism, including being trekking and mountaineering guides, porters, running lodges, teashops, and owning adventure agencies.
2. The economy has changed from being barter-based to cash economy.
3. There have been following positive and negative impacts of mountaineering as a commercial activity in Solukhumbu:

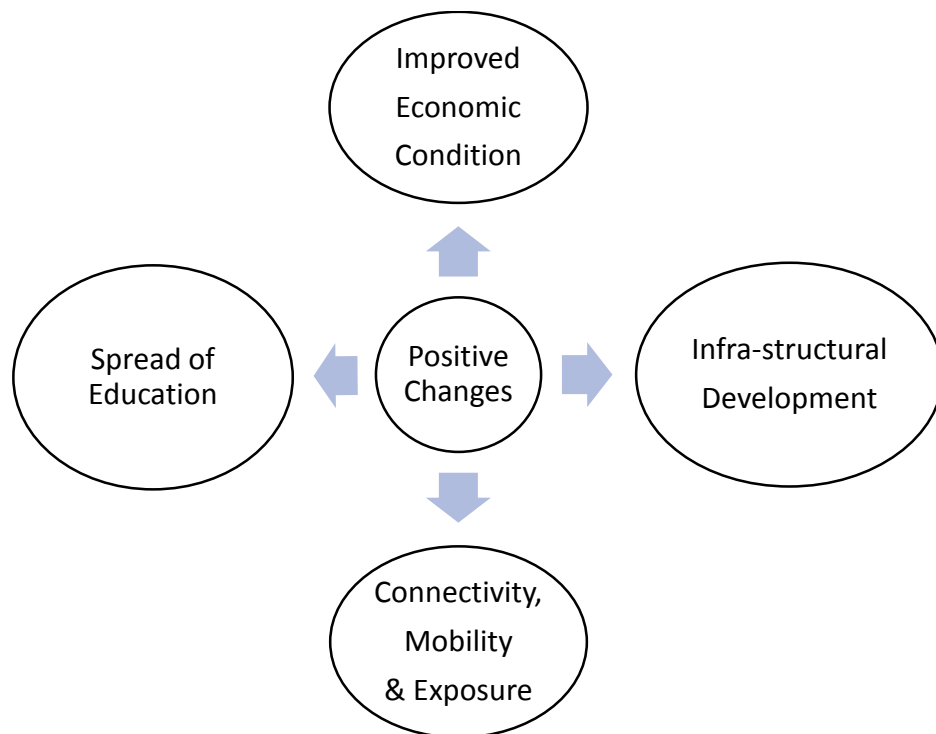


Diagram 1: Positive impacts of mountaineering as a commercial activity in Solukhumbu

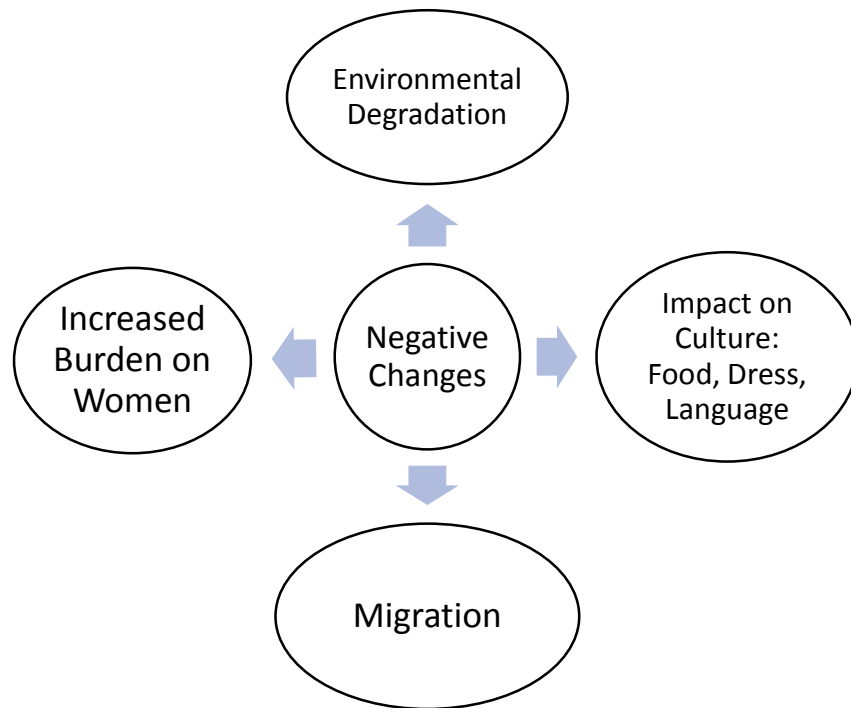


Diagram 2: Negative impacts of mountaineering as a commercial activity in Solukhumbu

4. Sherpas are not a ‘passive recipient’ of change; they have maneuvered smartly within the ambit of adventure tourism. They have transitioned from being the ‘hired local help’ to ‘expedition organisers’.
5. There has been a reversal of power equation. The erstwhile ‘sahibs’ and ‘coolies’ have transformed into ‘guides’ and ‘clients’ as the Sherpas have acquired technical climbing and guiding training while the adventure tourism has led to less-experienced adventure enthusiasts venturing onto the Himalayan peaks, taking the Sherpa support.
6. A major identity shift has taken place for the Sherpas, from being the ‘helpers’ to ‘climbers’, as all-Sherpa teams have started climbing the Himalayan peaks and creating mountaineering records. They are now climbing for ‘passion’ also, in addition for money.

7. A new phenomenon is the Sherpa women's entry into mountaineering as guides and climbers.
8. Awareness about the significance of and access to education has been enhanced and it has led to diversification of career opportunities for the Sherpas.
9. In the wake of adventure tourism boom, Sherpas themselves have taken the lead for environmental preservation, in the form of NGOs, now affiliated with the government ministries, and foreign organisations, such as SPCC (Sagarmatha Pollution Control Committee) and KEEP (Kathmandu Environmental Education Program).
10. Due to interaction with the western climbers, cultural acculturation has occurred, however at the same time there has been a cultural 'reconfiguration', as the Sherpas have re-modelled and interwoven their traditional beliefs and systems into adventure tourism, such as the *Jindak* system which has evolved into the 'client-patron' form. There has been an assimilation of modern lifestyle but deeper cultural values have remained intact.
11. The meaning of the term 'Sherpa' has been expanded to include climbing and trekking guides from other ethnicities of Nepal. Thus, Sherpa has an 'ethnic' as well as 'professional' connotation now.

Thus, by tracing the history and evolution of the Sherpas over a period of hundred years from 1920 to 2020, it can be said that Sherpas as a community have evolved on all the fronts- social, economic, and cultural. The factors behind their initial migration as well as their initiation into mountaineering and broader adventure tourism may have been external, but there has been an internal interaction with these factors and their response to these is an equal contributor in shaping the present Sherpa society. While the Sherpas have acquired a reputation for their hard

work, strength and loyalty, along with certain material gains, some challenges such as lack of inadequate infrastructure and career choices still prevail, while some new challenges have also presented themselves in the form of cultural and environmental preservation. How the Sherpas fulfill the aspirations of their new generation, amidst all the positive and negative factors surrounding them, would be a subject for further observation and research. However, the awareness and assertiveness of their unique identity, strengths, contribution and expectations from the government are clearly visible.

Relevance of the Study

Sherpas are a well-known ethnic group, and since the first ascent of Mt. Everest have consistently generated interest in the mountaineering enthusiasts, historians and anthropologists alike. Recently they have captured the limelight again by creating some historic climbing records on major Himalayan peaks. This study has provided a comprehensive view of the Sherpa community beginning with their history, society, culture, their initiation and achievements in the field of mountaineering. It has traced the recent developments also in terms of the changes brought by education, connectivity, mobility and exposure. It would be relevant for providing an understanding of the present shifts underway to identify future course of action for the welfare of not only these commendable people but also the vastly important Himalayan region- the Solukhumbu where they reside. It has advocated sustainable tourism and development which can fulfil the Sherpa aspirations along with satisfying the growing adventure sports demand. By reading this work, adventure enthusiasts would be able to know and respect the Sherpa community and the Himalayan ecosystem more and behave more responsibly and sensibly, while it would also act for an important source for policy makers, and scholars.