

# A Brief History of Chettri Community in Darjeeling

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**Abstract:** *Among different communities, Chettri being one of the prominent communities living in Darjeeling hills has a unique history and cultural heritage which makes it unique and gives a distinct identity. This paper aims to investigate the different aspects of the Chettri community living in Darjeeling, through a comprehensive study of their socio-economic and cultural dynamics.*

**Keywords:** chettri, dashain, tihar, kuldevta

## 1. Introduction

The word Chettri is derived from a Sanskrit word Kshatriya which means a warrior class as per the Hindu varna system and it has various sub castes like Bista, Basnet, Khadka, Budhathoki, Panday, Upreti, Chauhan etc. Chettri community finds their affiliation to the Khas community which is comprised of Chettri, Bahun, Thakuri and Sanyasi. It is believed that Khas are from Central Asia and with the passage of time they migrated towards the Himalayan region of Southern Asia where they lived nomadic life and domesticated cattle and over the last 3500 years, they have spread across various North Western and North East Indian states, including Kashmir, Uttarakhand, West Bengal, Manipur, Arunachal Pradesh, Bhutan as well as in Nepal. Particularly people from this community live in Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Jalpaiguri, and Alipurduar districts of West Bengal.

## 2. Socio Economy

Traditionally people from Chettri community have been involved in agriculture, owning and cultivating land as their primary source of income. They engaged in animal husbandry and sometimes they too engaged in small businesses but with the passage of time, a small number of people of this community has increasingly pursued education and has entered into various professions like teaching, military and public services etc but majority people are still suffering low wages, unemployment and poverty. In present scenario, Darjeeling, despite being a centre of large working forces in Tea estates, tourism and education but still this community is facing economic hardship and striving to save their culture.

## 3. Dress and Marriage

Generally, men wear Topi and Daura surwal and women wear Saree, Cholo and Khaddar's Patuki. Accepted nature of Marriage is monogamy and marriage between the same community is preferred.

## 4. Belief and rites

Since most of the people from chettri community are Hindus, it is obvious, they believe in Hindu practices but what makes them unique in the society is their belief and devotion to their Household deities known as Kuldevta and

it is known as Dewali puja where Kuldevta is offered sacrifices and offered prayers for the peace and prosperity for the family. Another important ceremony is Bratabanda ceremony and it is celebrated when a boy or child belonging to this community reaches 8 -12 yrs which marks the sign of maturity or starting of an adulthood. In this ceremony, boys shave their heads, dressed in saffron cloths, head is wrapped with the same saffron cloth and finally a boy is asked to beg for rice which reflects the life of a hermit. This Bratabanda ceremony is celebrated with great zeal and is considered to be the greatest responsibility on the part of their parents. It is also believed that a person who has not done this bratabanda ceremony is not able to perform the last rites of cremation rituals of their parents.

Apart from this, Chettri being Hindu too observed many old traditional Hindu practices such as Sora Sanskars. According to Hindu mythology there are sixteen elaborate cultural practices called Sora Sanskars (16 life cycle rituals) which is observed and fulfilled in one's life like Garvadhan sanskar which is done for attending a child, **Punsavan sanskar** is done for the development of the baby in the womb of the mother, **Simantonayan sanskar** which is done for the completion 4 to 8 months of a baby, **Jatkarma sanskar** that is to be done to release the baby from the curses of remaining in the womb of the mother, **Namkaran sanskar** where the baby is taken out for the darshan of five elements like vayu, prithvi, jal, tej and akash, **Anna prasan sanskar** where the baby is offered food, **Chaul sanskar** where the shaving of head ceremony is done, **Vidyarambha sanskar** where the education of a child starts, **Karnavedh sanskar** where the ears of a child is pierced, **Upnayan sanskar** is a sacred thread ceremony which is offered to a child, **keshani sanskar** is done just before the starting of education at gurukul where the head of a student is shaved, **Samavartan sanskar** indicates the returning of a child after acquiring education, **vivah vivah sanskaris** a marriage ceremony and lastly **kriya sanskar** which is done after the death of a person where the body of the death person is offered to the agni (fire). As a Hindu, this community follows maximum number of rituals and worship deities associated with Hinduism.

## 5. Festivals

The major festivals celebrated by the Chettri community as part of their cultural and religious practices are DASHAIN which is not only celebrated by the Chettri community but also celebrated by entire Hindu community. It symbolizes

the victory of good over bad and honours Goddess Durga. It involves extensive rituals, animal sacrifice, family gathering and receiving blessings from elders. Another important festival is TIHAR which is also known as Depawali where the Goddess Laxmi is worshipped and houses are adorned with lights and flowers. Another is MAGHE SANKRANTI where the people from this community get together for feast, believing that it marks the end of bad times and inauspicious times and have a special kind of food which is prepared by women like sesame seed sweets etc. Another important is TEEJ which is dedicated to the Goddess Parvati and her union with lord Siva. On the occasion of TEEJ women observe fasting, wear red dresses and pray for marital blessings.

## 6. Death and after life

The cremation process of the death is observed with great austerity in Chettri community. Being mostly Hindus, they follow traditional Hindu rites. If someone dies or whose death appears to be imminent is taken to riverside since river is considered sacred in Hinduism but in hilly areas like Darjeeling it is not possible. After the death of a person, the body is washed and dressed in white clothing, chanting mantras and prayers, applying tilak on forehead and lastly taken to the cremation site and the body is set to fire and lastly ashes are collected and drawn into the river. For thirteen days, related of the deceased person follow hard rituals and pray peace for the departed soul.

## 7. Language

Chettri, being one of the oldest communities in Darjeeling speak Nepali language as their mother tongue. This is an Indo-European language closely related to Hindi and other north Indian languages. It is written in Devenagiri script and it acts as a Lingua Franca among different communities living in the society.

## 8. Objectives behind the study

- 1) The main thrust of this study is to know about the Chettri community and their socio-economic conditions and its historical roots.
- 2) Chettri, being one of the oldest communities in Darjeeling but not much work has been carried out by scholars so a study was needed.
- 3) To know about their religious practices and customs
- 4) To know about the present scenario and condition of this community in Darjeeling.

## 9. Literature Review

- 1) T B Subba, in his work 'Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study Of Gorkhland Movement In Darjeeling' makes a comprehensive study of the Chettri community where he examines the different historical, social and political factors that contributed to the sense of identity and belongingness within the Chettri community. He gives insight into the social organizations of the Chettri community including their family structures, their occupations and their social

activities in the society leading to their participations in regional politics like in Darjeeling.

- 2) Ludwig Stiller, his work 'The Rise of The Gorkha Kingdom: A Study In The Unification Of Nepal', throws lights on the migration origin of the Chettri community, possibly suggesting their migration from Central Asia into the Indian Subcontinent and Nepal. This theory align with broader migration theories about the Indo-Aryan peoples' movement into south Asia.
- 3) Rachana Bista, in her work, Dewali through sociological lens: Ancestor worship among the chettri of Gaurada in Nepal gives a comprehensive study about the origin, religious practices where she studies the Dewali puja of Kuldevta of chettri community and writes about the socio- economic aspects of Chettri community in a broad way. She examines the beliefs and several Rites performed by chettri community and do studies about the kinship terminology that was in prevalent within the chettri community.

## 10. Methodology

To achieve the objectives, the research followed both the exploratory and explanatory approaches based on the interpretation of both the primary and secondary data. As a part of primary data, interviews were taken from the people belonging to chettri community and as a part of secondary data, literature review and historical data analysis was done.

## 11. Challenges

Despite having a rich culture and heritage, Chettri community is continually facing several challenges such as Low literacy rate where there are large no of dropouts and illiterate people who could not take education due to financial hardship and early engagement in economic pursuits to sustain their lives. Recent research shows almost 80% males, majority of female and children are engaged in labour intensive work and agriculture for earning their livelihood. Another important challenge which is directly linked to the first one is the Bad Economic condition. Recent research shows an average monthly income of this class of people is within the range of RS 4500 to 5000. Added to this it is shown that majority people of this community live in rental houses and some live in kachha houses etc which makes their lives miserable during rainy seasons and being mostly dependent on agriculture, this community has to face several problems in winter and rainy seasons due to no production and excessive rainfall which lead to the decaying of vegetables growing for the markets.

## 12. Conclusion

The Chettri community in Darjeeling holds a significant place in the socio-economy and cultural development of the region. Originally hailing from central Asia, this community has made its mark differently in the hilly regions of Darjeeling, kalimpong and siliguri plains etc. This community is known for its rich culture, religious practices, customs and festivals which gives it different coloring and uniqueness from other communities in the region. Despite having a rich culture and heritage, this community is

continually facing challenges in a form of lack of education, unemployment and economic hardship etc. however there are some associations like Gorkha Hitkari Sangathan which was formed in 1942, and are working for the preservation of culture and all-round development of the people of Khas community in Darjeeling

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