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Mountain tourism and the Sherpa: Interface between environment and existence

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Abstract

Tourism is a journey to a place distant from residence for recreation normally for a short while. Man has an addiction to gather knowledge about the world away from his place of residence and beyond his vicinity. This addiction provokes some people to set a target, hard to reach if not impossible. It is hard to achieve the target without immense groundwork and physical, material as well as mental preparation. Man has accepted the challenge of high mountains and conquered number of mountains throughout the world. The mountaineers of different parts of the world have come to conquer Himalayan peaks with the help of some others who are Naturally Selected to live with acute adverse habitable conditions. Hardship has made these helpers more efficient and their experiences have made them legends. This study deals with such an efficient and experienced group of helpers —

the Sherpas. Sherpa is an ethnic group, habituated in high-altitude living. Their physical strength and ability to climb have given them an alternate occupation other than high-altitude farming. This ethnic group is going through a crucial situation. Their religious prescription prevents them to climb and socio-economic reality provokes them to help the climbers. In order to help the climbers a Sherpa climbs a mountain peak just like spending leisure in high-altitude like a tourist. Their efficiency as a porter-cum-guide made the climbers' training less significant and mountaineering has gradually become mountain tourism. This indispensability turned the peace-loving docile ethnic group into a overconfident and professional agents. The Sherpa are challenging their lives. They are bringing high mountain environment in the cross road through converting mountaineering into mountain tourism. This study is an enquiry about the extent to which mountain tourism and the socio-economic condition of the

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Sherpa are facing challenges and to what extent mountain environment is intervened.

Introduction

To know the unknown and to see the unseen is inherent to man. People roam around the world and witness the natural wonders at the cost of money, hardship and even life. Journey to a distant place for recreation normally for a short while is considered as tourism. Tourism can be graded according to the cost it demands. It may be a luxury simply through spending money. It may be a less comfortable, offbeat travelling with some hardship. It may be an amateur moderate trekking or it may be adventurous mountaineering. Whatever be the type tourism at present plays a twofold role. It gives pleasure to the tourists and revenue to the agencies related to different kinds of tourism. For this reason tourism undergoes continuous modification towards perfection to provide utmost satisfaction to the travelers. This study deals with such a modification of a specific type of tourism. Conquering mountain peaks is a painstaking desire of the mountaineers for a prolonged period. This desire is designated as mountaineering. The beginning of mountaineering as a systematic sport is generally dated to the ascent of the Wetterhorn in 1854 by Sir Alfred Wills who made mountaineering fashionable, especially in Britain. This inaugurated the Golden age of alpinism, with the first mountaineering club – the Alpine Club, founded in 1857 (Cox, 2009). Since then several technical modifications have been done and mountaineering became a matter of glory. The mountaineers carried on

repetitive attempt to conquer unclimbed peaks and left no stone unturned to achieve success. Mountaineers have taken fatal attempts and rectified their shortcomings but they were not naturally selected to climb mountains with all the necessary belongings. Hence especially while conquering Himalayan peaks the eminent mountaineers have chosen some high-altitude dwellers, who are naturally selected to climb mountain with luggage weighing multiple times of their body weight. These helpers are the members of Sherpa ethnic group residing in high altitude villages of the Himalaya. Hardship has made these helpers more efficient and their experiences have made them legends. These Sherpas were initially chosen as the load carrying porters by the mountaineers coming from different parts of the world. Sherpa were getting money in exchange of their immense labour and never expected anything else. Gradually Sherpa guides became indispensable for mountaineering for their efficiency, courage and knowledge. Conquering mountain is now a package of coexistence between the Sherpa guides and the mountaineers. Climbing through the routes opened by the Sherpa guides is now almost like roaming over the mountains. Mountaineering, thoroughly dependent upon the Sherpa guides, has been transformed to mountain tourism.

The Sherpa People

Sherpa is a tribe of Tibet. It is believed that the Sherpa first came to the Northern part of Nepal from Tibet that presently comprised region of Helambu and Solukhumbu and established their permanent settlement there only after

being migrated to the eastern regions. The Sherpa were nomadic people, first settled in the Solukhumbu District (Khumbu), Nepal then gradually moved westward along salt trade routes. According to Sherpa oral history, four groups migrated out of Solukhumbu at different times, giving rise to the four main Sherpa clans: Minyagpa, Thimmi, Sertawa and Chawa. These four groups have since split into the more than 20 different clans that exist today. About 1840 Sherpa ancestors migrated from Kham. Mahayana Buddhism religious conflict may have contributed to the migration in the 15th and 16th centuries. Sherpa migrants travelled through Ü and Tsang, before crossing the Himalaya.

Sherpa Religion and culture

In Solu-Khumbu the most common sect of Tibetan Buddhism is the Nyingmapa, the oldest tradition. Sherpa and Tibetan lamas taught this religion to the people and organized the communities.

Sherpa Language

The Sherpa language belongs to the south branch of the Tibeto-Burman languages.

Sherpa Occupation

The Sherpa basically were high-altitude farmers and salt traders before they became involved in jobs of porters, guide, trekking, mountaineering and tourism.

Cash economy and the Sherpa

Sherpa were first employed as porters in 1909 by Kelas, father of Himalayan climbing. (Smythe, 1946). By the time of the first

Everest Expeditions, the Sherpa dominance in high-altitude work had been established. The prestige element, however, entered into their willingness to serve. The 'Tiger' badge, awarded to those who exceeded 2500 feet during a climb, was a precious symbol of ability. By 1933, high-altitude portering had become a Sherpa profession. Since 1953 the word 'Sherpa' has become synonymous with mountain guide, especially to Westerners. As a matter of fact plenty of Sherpa people survive simply through farming till date. Due to different political issues, mountaineers coming from different parts of the world had to initiate their climbing to different unclimbed Himalayan peaks from Darjeeling. To get job, number of Sherpa moved towards Darjeeling from Nepal. This movement is reflected in change of Sherpa population structure in Darjeeling. In 1901, there were 3450 Sherpa in Darjeeling District: in 1931 the number had increased to 5295 in 1940 to 6929 and in 1951 to 8998. Mountaineering brought significant economic changes to Khumbu (Tobin, 1954). The young porters represented a secondary source of income to the families at home. Mountaineering has helped the Khumbu Sherpa and Darjeeling Sherpa to rejoin into kin bondage (Miller, 1965).

The Darjeeling Sherpa have been most marked for mountaineering and have become a highly specialized technically trained group. The element of prestige has become extremely important to Darjeeling Sherpa. Sherpa specialization has been recognized by the establishment of the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute under the auspices of

the Indian Government. Under the leadership of Tenzing Norgay, The Sherpa Buddhist Association of Darjeeling has become The Sherpa Climbers' Association, a mutual aid organization. Tenzing has become the most prominent Sherpa in Darjeeling. The West Bengal District Handbook for Darjeeling devotes considerable space to review the participation of Sherpa in mountaineering and picks out for mention the various Tenzings of earlier days.

The Sherpa have found an alternate source of earning through mountaineering. The Sherpa have initiated as the porters but Tenzing Norgay, probably the most famous Sherpa so far, agreed to assist Edmund Hillary in his Everest Expedition, not merely as a porter but as a climber companion. This perception of prestige and status may be the outcome of value system prevalent in the Sherpa culture. The Sherpa success may lie in his cultural background and may not be duplicated in other cases. The traditional training of load carrying as a child, the willingness to struggle against adverse conditions, the attractions for the mountains, all fit the Sherpa for his new position and have favoured the process of change in a certain direction. Tenzing himself expresses: "We came originally from the mountains. Now we go back to the mountains. But it is in a very different way that we go to them, and between expeditions our lives are different too" The relatively long, easy and intermittent contact of Sherpa with Europeans in this kind of enterprise may have been a critical factor in the development of change without expensive disruption. But the new

values to which the Sherpa have been educated is not expected to be lost.

It was Tenzing's wishful thinking that the Sherpa occupation may change but that will not affect the Sherpa value system. He expresses: we are a people in the midst of a change and what will happen in the future is hard to say. But so far, though we have left our homeland, we have stayed pretty much together and there has not been much intermarriage with outsiders. Tenzing's descendants are drawn to mountaineering despite the Buddhist injunction against willingly placing one's life, one's precious human rebirth at risk. The young Sherpa climbers no longer consider mountain as abode of God rather consider it as a source of earning money. This change of cognition has brought the Sherpa into a cross road. Sherpa now climb for earning, for spending leisure and even for fun. They can challenge their lives only for being famous as a Sherpa who can run an agency after repetitive success in climbing peaks. Gradually some eminent Sherpa have become legends in the sphere of mountaineering.

The Sherpa legends

One of the most well known Sherpa is Tenzing Norgay. In 1953 he and Sir Edmund Hillary became the first people known to have reached the summit of Mount Everest. Norgay's son Jamling Tenzing Norgay also climbed Everest in honour of his father with the famous mountaineers Ed Viesturs and Araceli Segarra during the disastrous year of 1996. In 2003

Sherpas, Pemba Dorjie and Lhakpa Gelu, competed to see who could climb Everest from base camp the fastest. On 23 May 2003, Dorjie reached the summit in 12 hours and 46 minutes. Three days later, Gelu beat his record by two hours, reaching the summit in 10 hours 46 minutes. On 21 May 2004, Dorjie again improved the time by more than two hours with a total time of 8 hours and 10 minutes (New Everest Speed Record Uphold, 2007). On 11 May 2011, Apa Sherpa successfully reached the summit of Everest for the twenty-first time, breaking his own record for the most successful ascents (Apa Sherpa Summits Everest for the 21st time, 2011) He first climbed Mount Everest in 1989 at the age of 29 (Since the Age of 12, 2011). One of the most famous Nepalese female mountaineers was Pasang Lhamu Sherpa, the first Nepali female climber to reach the summit of Everest, but she died during the descent. Another well-known woman Sherpa was the two-time Everest summiteer Pemba Doma Sherpa, who died after falling from Lhotse on 22 May 2007 (Famous Female Nepal Climber Dead, 2007). Lakpa Tsheri Sherpa is one half of a Nepali duo that was voted "People's Choice Adventurers of the Year 2012". In April 2011, Lakpa Tsheri and Sano Babu Sunuwar made the 'Ultimate Descent': a three-month journey in which they climbed Everest, then paraglided down the mountain and proceeded to kayak through Nepal and India until they reached the Indian Ocean (Sherpa L. , 2012). On 19 May 2012, 16-year-old Nima Chhamzi Sherpa became the youngest woman to climb Everest; the previous record holder was Nimdoma

Sherpa, who summited in 2008, also at 16 years old. Chhurim Sherpa (Nepal) summited Everest twice in May 2012. 12 May and 19 May. *Guinness World Records* recognized her for being the first female Sherpa to summit Everest twice in one climbing season.

Environment and existence

The Sherpas not only became legends but became martyrs also while climbing. Still they are going to be more and more kin towards mountaineering. During the past century 99 Sherpas and Nepali have been killed. About 40% of the total climbing death was of the Sherpas' so far (Broughton, 2014). Yet Sherpa continue to work on the mountain mostly because it is a source of earning huge money within a very short period. The Sherpa guides have to spend only three to four months in a year to earn this huge amount. Ordinary Sherpa guide earns \$125 per load per climb in a country where the average per head per annum income is \$700. High-altitude guiding and load carrying could be compared with the crab fishing in Alaska (Broughton, 2014), do it while you are young, get in and get out quickly, pocket bulk coin and invest in a business. No need to worry in future, children will go to private school and numerous opportunities can be grabbed during rest of the life. The Sherpa have chance to earn money even after completing an expedition. Climbers coming from foreign countries leave their climbing gadgets to the Sherpa guides. The guides further resell the gadgets to other climbers and earn a good amount of money throughout the year. After getting retired the Sherpa guides launch their business mostly

related to tourism and mountaineering which will lead them towards a peaceful life.

In order to get a steady future the young Sherpa people are accepting the challenge to fight against all the environmental, technical as well personal hazards. Father of a Sherpa guide get himself prepared to receive the heartbreaking news of his son's death while sending him off for an expedition. The Sherpa consider joining the job of mountain guide is like joining the Army. As a person sign to join the Army with mental preparation of losing life in battlefield, a Sherpa guide sign the agreement of mountaineering with mental preparation of losing life in environmental disaster or technical mistake.

Conclusion

Man has accepted several challenges in order to fulfil his desire to know the unknown and to see the unseen. He has explored miles and miles across countries and continents just to reach his goal of gathering knowledge. During this course of travel the travellers have faced problems which they have solved in their own way with the help of other people. These ways ultimately gave birth to new opportunities for ethnic groups. This study deals with such an ethnic group who have found a new meaning of existence from the travellers' desire to reach their destination. Mountaineers especially coming from the western world have provided a new way of survival to the people of Sherpa community. Their expertise of climbing stiff mountain carrying huge load on their back was identified by the westerners specially while climbing Mt. Everest. These powerful Sherpa

individuals helped them as porters and due to their indispensability in climbing Everest 'Sherpa' became an identity for ethnic groups in general surrounding forest. In reality Sherpa is a tribe survive through farming and trading along with high-altitude mountain trade-routes. For these Buddhist people Mt. Everest is the residence of God which may be polluted through human footprint. This belief weakened since 1933 when profession of high-altitude portering became a Sherpa monopoly. Sherpa ability in high-altitude work was established since 1909 when Kelas first employed Sherpa as porters. Since then Sherpa were in search of an alternate source of earning because farming in high-altitude climate is not worthy for survival and market for trading was going to be less profitable. Nature has given them a hidden treasure of immense physical ability for which they can carry huge weight smoothly in high-altitude. This treasure has helped them to survive. Overutilization of this treasure have brought them at the cross road where they are in a situation of transition. Their cognition regarding mountain varies from person to person according to age and wisdom. The young Sherpa intends to convert their physical ability into money simply ignoring the Sherpa value system. Tenzing Norgay was the first Sherpa to conquer Mt. Everest along with Edmund Hillary in 1953. This event was a turning point for the Sherpa entry in the sphere of mountaineering. The Sherpa got opportunity to train themselves with modern technicalities of climbing. Modern training and ethnoscientific wisdom helped the Sherpa to be indispensable partner of the mountaineers

coming from alien areas. Gradually low-paid, physically strong Sherpa porters became well-paid physically as well as technically strong Sherpa guides. In course of time load-carrying followers of the mountaineers became route opening leaders of the expedition team. Mountaineers coming from different parts of the globe with different ability of climbing are getting equal honour of reaching the summit by holding the safe hands of the Sherpa. Painstaking unforeseen adventure of mountaineering is losing its glory. Climbing mountains is going to be like taking a tour towards the summit. *Mountaineering* becomes *mountain tourism*. Mt. Everest is the highest peak of the world and highest no. of climbers (around 3000 since 1953) has reached the summit so far. Sagarmatha National Park, at the foot of Mt. Everest, received 25000 visitors in 2012. In 2013, more than 800 people attempted to scale Mt. Everest according to Nepal Tourism Ministry. Climbing Mt. Everest is just like a package tour not only for the mountaineers, but for the Sherpa too. Sherpa like Pemba Dorji and Lhakpa Gelu climbed Mt. Everest like running through an athletic track. Some Sherpa became legend by climbing Mt. Everest for multiple times.

The Sherpa guides have transformed their profession and challenged the traditional cognition regarding climbing, prevalent among the members of the ethnic group. They have done it only to accumulate more money within short period. Good numbers of Sherpa guides have sacrificed their lives during climbing. Continuous interface is going on between environmental disaster in the mountain and

Sherpa existence. Still the Sherpa guides are ready to climb just to provide their children a peaceful future through their hard-earned money. The Sherpa guides are earning money multiple times than the holder of a white-collared job but with immense uncertainty and hardship. The Sherpa guide cannot handle the money before completion of a successful expedition. What happen to the family a Sherpa guide leaves behind, if he does not come back! The Sherpa guides are in a crucial situation. They have to climb, have to face harsh environment and have to die. As climbing is going on just like a package tour, proper documentation of the expedition team along with Sherpa guides are not flawless. Families of the Sherpa guides are not even getting insurance claim after their death due to faulty documentation. The Sherpa has transformed themselves a lot, have gone miles away from their ethnic value system. But probably a thin realization comes forward into their minds – what next! To carry on with mountain tourism! To carry it on in exchange of lives, in exchange of smile of the families, in exchange of future of the children, in exchange of acute environmental degradation of the World's highest land – or to look behind! The goddess who resides on Everest, Miyolangsangma, is depicted carrying a mongoose that spits wish-fulfilling gems, representing the bounty that she provides when respected and worshipped. These precious gems, some Sherpas say, have continued to issue forth in the form of income from the pockets of mountaineers and trekkers. Deities can be polluted and defiled, too—even

inadvertently—and some Sherpas worry that this can contribute to calamities that befall those travelling on Everest's hem. "None of us should ever take the mountain, and the blessings she bestows upon us, for granted," Sange Sherpa said. "It is too difficult to predict how and when your karma will ripen, when the unexpected will happen, and when the goddess will become angry."

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