

Sherpa: An Insight into Their Lives, Aspirations, Challenges and the Path Ahead

Toolika Rani

Research Scholar, Department of History, Babasaheb Bhimrao Ambedkar University, Lucknow, UP, India

Abstract

Mountaineering in Himalayas has been inextricably linked with the hardy and pleasant people called Sherpa. Known for their remarkable performance at high altitudes, they are the focus of awe and research. Though they have been benefitted by the climbing industry financially, there are cultural and environmental concerns. This paper delves into the salient aspects of the lives of these resilient people, the impact of cross-cultural exchange, their aspirations and the way forward. It endeavours to provide a more humane and closer glimpse into the hearts and minds of these stoic and warm people of Everest who gained Edmund Hillary's admiration and continue to enchant the climbers with their welcoming smiles and stunning stamina.

KEYWORDS: Sherpa, Mountaineering, Aspirations, Culture, Environment

To most of the world the idea of Sherpa people is synonymous with the experience of trekking in Nepal. After Tenzing Sherpa's monumental climb of Everest with Edmund Hilary, the Sherpas became widely known as a group of people who not only assisted on major climbs but were also uniquely skilled mountain guides.¹ However, this is merely an aspect of their existence as the term Sherpa has wider connotations. Its meaning ranges from a specific job description on organized trekking tours to a generic term for all Tibetan origin peoples of eastern Nepal. The name Sherpa is derived from the Tibetan word Shar-pa, which means 'easterner'.² Oral history suggests that their original homeland was the Kham province in eastern Tibet, approximately 2,090 km away from their present home, from where they migrated to Khumbu around 1530s.³ Three regions contain the main concentration of the Sherpas, i.e. Solu, Pharak, and Khumbu and the entire area is collectively known as Solu-Khumbu.⁴ The landscape adorns mountains, glaciers, and rivers, embodying a dramatic elevation range from 2,800 to 8,850 meters. Among the peaks are three of the ten highest in the world, including Mount Everest.⁵

Adaptability: The Sherpa's key to Survival

Sherpas live at altitudes where many people would feel accomplished on reaching after a long trek. Thus survival didn't come easy but the sturdy Sherpas adjusted to the nature's ferocity. Traditionally Sherpas led a utilitarian existence, surviving through trade and subsistence farming.⁶ Sherpa agro-pastoralism was specialized to high altitude varieties of crops and livestock and the harvest of forest resources.⁷ Wheat and potatoes are the leading crops, and some raise yaks which are the main beasts of burden adapt to high altitude as well as cow and cow/yak hybrids. Sherpas keep moving between multiple small stone huts in the highlands and lowlands as per the season, practicing

transhumance. They trade these goods for other necessities in weekly markets, or in Kathmandu. Recently trekking and tourism has become the most lucrative economic trend for the Sherpas, specifically those in the elevated Khumbu valley have profited the most from it.⁸

The increased status of the term Sherpa associated with the economic success of the Sherpas of Solu-Khumbu is partly attributable to their geographic location in a desirable trekking zone, but it also reflects their enterprise and ability to adapt quickly to changing economic opportunities. Multiple strategies for resource use and experience in responding to changing markets in trading have well prepared Nepal's Tibetan-origin peoples to adapt quickly to many aspects of modernization and development.⁹

Trekking and Tourism Industry

Initially Sherpas got associated with foreign mountaineering expeditions coming through Darjeeling in early 20th century. After first successful ascent of Mt. Everest in 1953, significant trekking and sightseeing activities began in Khumbu. The nature and culture based-tourism industry offered hiking tourists multi-day camping trips in the mountains.¹⁰ Eventually, the respect and pay earned in mountaineering made it attractive to the Sherpas, who, being so well adapted to the high altitudes, were capable of carrying large loads of cargo over long distances. The influx of foreign climbers and trekkers has dramatically changed Sherpa life, as their livelihood increasingly has come to depend on these climbing expeditions.¹¹ Households enroute to Everest Base Camp have got engaged in business through ownership of teahouses, lodges, shops, trekking agencies, while specialization as mountaineering guides and high altitude porters is more prevalent in families from off-route areas.

Physiological Adaptation

Sherpa's load carrying capacity at high altitude and the remarkable tolerance to hypoxia has been a focus of attention for the scientific community. Physiological studies have suggested numerous distinct, adaptive phenotypes in the Sherpa including advantageous levels of hemoglobin, oxygen saturation and birth weight, and the elevated reproductive success of Sherpa women. Genomic studies have identified robust signals of positive selection across genes including *EPAS1*, *EGLN1*, and *PPARA*. All three of these signals of genetic selection have been shown to correlate with advantageous levels of hemoglobin. This illustrates the outstanding physiological performance of the Sherpa at altitude is, in part, a result of hypoxia driven genetic selection spanning the ~35,000 years of seasonal migration on the Himalayan plateau.¹²

Religious Beliefs

Khumbu Sherpa follow the Nyingma Tibetan Buddhist tradition, a syncretic combination of folk, Bon, and Buddhist tenets.¹³ They believe in the theory of karma and cycle of birth. Accumulation of good deeds leads to chances of better birth or ultimately cessation of rebirth i.e. Nirvana. The Sherpa also believe in various deities called Yüllhathat protect them from natural calamities. An important local deity is Khumbu

Yül-Lha, or Khumbila which lives on the mountain directly above the Khunde and Khumjung settlements. Goddess Jomo Miyo Lang Sangma, resides on Jomolangma or Mount Everest, providing norbu(wealth), which includes tourism and mountaineering success. The protector deities also have their khor or associates in the form of wildlife, livestock, and other mythical creatures. Khor are to be respected and not harmed. Worship is carried out in the gompa (monastery), homes, or in the outdoors. It encompasses burning aromatic incense, placing white flags over the house, and the annual ceremony of Dumji, in which an entire dance is dedicated to the deity.¹⁴ Prior to embarking on the Everest climb, Sherpas perform an elaborate worship ceremony, making a stone post, hoisted with prayer flags, accompanied by chants and offerings. The colourful flags represent the five Buddha families. Inscribed with mantras and spiritual symbols, they are meant to spread blessings of compassion, love and peace across the wind. The flags also remind Sherpas of the Buddhist teachings and open their mind toward continued enlightenment.¹⁵

Environmental Preservation Embedded in Traditional Lifestyle

Sherpa belief that felling trees adds bad karma to their account, attracts divine wrath and bad fortune is an example of environment conscious living in the religious garb. Only the harvest of non-timber products is permitted in certain forests, exhibiting the concept of Sacred Groves. These sacred groves include forests growing in an area where a spirit is believed to reside, and protected groves called lama and gompa. Lama protected forests originated when a certain powerful lama sanctified or cursed a forest patch. Trees therefore must not be used or felled by cutting implements. Gompa forests were typically groves in the vicinity of a village gompa. It appeared that these trees gained their holiness through the gompa and were not considered sacred before construction. The oldest gompa forest exists near the Pangbuche Gompa.¹⁶

Cross-Cultural Impact

Intermingling with westerners, availability of money, and access to information through modern digital devices has transformed the traditional way of life. To the younger generation the Himalayas present an avenue of earning. It is now viewed more as a commercial entity than a spiritual overseer. Most of the Sherpas pick up skills required to make them employable in the trekking/tourism industry such as spoken English. Education is linked with this employability. Knowledge of Sherpa language in younger generation is dwindling affluent families send children to boarding school in Kathmandu and more emphasis is on learning Nepali and English, in sync with the present economic orientation.

There is also an increased assertiveness in the Sherpa behavior. They are no longer the subservient hired hands by the foreign sahibs but have emerged as skilled service providers with a marked awareness about their role in the Himalayan expeditions. A brawl high up on Lhotse face on Everest in April 2013 between three celebrity foreign climbers and a few Sherpas exhibited this phenomena. The foreigners' use of abusive language for the Sherpas ended into them being attacked and having to run for their lives. Chip Brown notes, "the encounter at Camp 2 looks like the opening of a new era,

hopefully not one that encourages violence but addresses what may have lain underneath it: years of inequality, disrespect, and lack of recognition.”¹⁷

Though overall Sherpas still come across as very warm, friendly and caring, the assertiveness is more prominent now. They also resent and protest against merry making on the mountain by the westerners as mountains are sacred for them. Thus along with assimilation of western ways of life the conflict of cultural values is also coming to fore, and the Sherpas expect people venturing out into their land to respect their cultural sentiments.

Evolution Vs. Continuity

The development of Solu-Khumbu region as the centre of Himalayan trekking and mountaineering has brought new opportunities and affluence for many Sherpas. However, the unequal distribution of these benefits has given rise to economic differentiation, cultural conflicts and erosion in traditional values. Yet, there has also been considerable cultural continuity. Sherpas are deliberately maintaining many fundamental values, beliefs, subsistence practices, and aspects of their lifestyle.¹⁸ The belief in protecting deities has been reinforced and recast and the knowledge has percolated to tourists through the Sherpas. For example in case of goddess Jomo Miyo Lang Samba, tourism remade spiritual values. She earlier provided norbu (wealth) and food but now brings tourists and trekkers to Everest. Some even commented that she ‘raised herself up’ to be the highest mountain as a way to support the local people. Khumbila whose worship has become more popular, is also said to shield the Sherpa from declines in the number of tourists and other inauspicious events.¹⁹

Aspirations

The rugged terrain of Solu-Khumbu region meant deprivation of the Sherpa society from adequate socio-economic infrastructure in terms of health, education and variety in job opportunities. Most Sherpas spoke only their own language and had little contact with the world beyond the mountains. The transformation began after the first ascent of Mt. Everest in 1953. Much of the credit for improvement of life in Khumbu is owed to Edmund Hillary, esteemed until his death in 2008 as "the Sherpa King".²⁰ Hillary's Himalayan Fund charity built 30 schools in the Solu-Khumbu region and also funded an airstrip and hospitals in the remote area that have brought modern medicine and dentistry to the villagers. The Kunde Hospital, for example, offers free health care for Sherpas and is staffed by both permanent and volunteer doctors.²¹

Due to tourism, some modern facilities such as internet, music stores, electricity have penetrated in the Solu-Khumbu area. Namche Bazar the village enroute Everest Base Camp stores almost everything required by trekkers, however more needs to be done on education and health front. Majority of Sherpas still take up mountaineering business because of lack of alternatives, arising out of inadequate access to education in hilly areas. This has also led to outmigration to mainly Kathmandu. Apa Sherpa who has the record of 21 Everest summits, wishes that he could have a better education and become a medical doctor, rather than make a life out of climbing. He only climbs to afford a brighter future for his children and donates some income from his trekking

business to a Sherpa educational fund. Apa shares the sentiment of many other Sherpas who also want to provide more for their children.²²

Being vocal about the immensely risky environment in which they work, the Sherpas have now started raising demand such as better payments, insurance, compensation to the families that have lost relatives, and for disabled, and setting up a relief fund out of a portion from the permit fees.

Conclusion

Sherpas have an image of being strong, resilient, cheerful, welcoming and pious people. Even Sir Edmund Hillary who closely worked for their betterment for years resonated the same, “The Sherpas of the mighty Himalayas are a remarkable group of people. Mostly small in stature they are amazingly strong with an outstanding ability to perform effectively in the thin air at high altitude. When I first met them fifty years ago, their life was harsh and uncomfortable one, which they dealt with in remarkably philosophical fashion. They had an outstanding sense of humour even in the most unpleasant conditions and a strong community spirit, which gave them a remarkable combined strength. They were devout Buddhists with strong cultural beliefs and these qualities carried them through all the challenges that their tough environment presented to them.”²³

Through their hard work, they have created a niche for themselves and for Nepal. It is time that they be perceived not merely as a commercial entity in the form of service providers on Everest but as human beings whose overall development is the obligation of the state. Mountaineering shall be one out of many options for them in contrast to the present situation. Infrastructural development in consonance with cultural sensitivity driven by the grass root participation is the key to meet their aspirations. The heroes of Everest deserve this.

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