



IDENTITY, FANS AND FOOTBALL CLUBS: A CASE OF UNITED KURSEONG FOOTBALL CLUB

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ABSTRACT

Football has a long history and it is the most popular sport on the planet. However, football has not just remained a sporting activity. It has been long used a political instrument to repress and suppress and also as a tool of resistance. The arena of football is also used as an avenue to assert one's identity. This paper looks at how a local football team was seen as a medium to assert one's identity by Gorkha population residing in the plains of North Bengal and Bhutan. This paper is based on the reflexive account of a player's experience. It is based on two case studies to draw correlation between identity and football.

Keywords: *Identity, Football, Fans, North Bengal, Bhutan, United Kurseong Football Club.*

Introduction

Historically Darjeeling was an important place for the British as it was strategically a significant place. Darjeeling as an urban center came into existence with the entry of the British in this hill station due to their need for a sanatorium and a summer capital (Lama & Chakraborty, 2007). The British developed Darjeeling for reasons of its strategic importance and its potential to become a major trading center (Palit, 2007). However, only with the introduction of tea and cinchona plantation did Darjeeling grow as an urban center (Pinn, 1990). With the plantation of tea and cinchona the

population of Darjeeling gradually started to grow from 100 in 1835 to 10,000 in 1859 and a staggering 1,73,342 in the early twentieth century (O'Malley, 1907). With the growth of Darjeeling as a summer resort, it soon started to attract the people of the plains with its ample business opportunities. Darjeeling has today developed into a major town and has been exposed to the outer world.

Football in India was brought by the British when they colonized this country. With their conquest of the different parts of the country they also popularized football. In particular, it was after the 'first war of

Indian independence' in 1857 that football began to assume wider social significance in the subcontinent (Burdsey, 2007). Similarly when the British first came to Darjeeling they introduced football to the inhabitants of the place. Football gained in recognition when St. Paul's School was transferred to Darjeeling from Calcutta in 1864. Darjeeling has dominated the football sphere in the hills of Darjeeling since time immemorial.

Teams from Darjeeling was dominant in the field of football vis-a-vis teams from other sub divisions as they were introduced to football much before the other sub divisions were. Due to this factor they were excluding players from the other sub divisions till very recently. The district team was composed largely of players from Darjeeling and if any were included they would find it difficult to find a place in the playing eleven. This trend of domination by the teams and players of Darjeeling continued till recently owing to the fact that many of the tournaments from which the players to represent Darjeeling district were selected were conducted in Darjeeling itself and also the district football association was located at Darjeeling. This supremacy of Darjeeling was broken during the 1990s by the rise of United Kurseong Football Club (UKFC).

UKFC was established in 1989 by a bunch of players who were frustrated with the subjugation of the club officials to the hegemony of the Darjeeling teams and officials. Without any financial support this club came into existence under dire situation and with sheer determination against all odds became successful in dismantling the

domination of Darjeeling in the sphere of football.

This paper tries to analyse the support UKFC received from the Nepali population in the plains of North Bengal and also in Bhutan and the identity issue they attached in supporting UKFC. This paper is not a product of the employment of scientific investigation but rather is a product of an individual's participation as a player and being witness to the entire process. It would not be very off the mark if it is said that participant observation has been the mode of investigation but it needs to be borne in mind that both participation and observation was done almost three decades ago and the analysis is done in retrospect.

UKFC and Their Fans in North Bengal

Football in today's world has become an important sphere for assertion of one's identity as well as for exchange of cultural values among diverse cultures. The support garnered by UKFC in the surrounding areas of North Bengal has to be viewed and judged in the context of the Gorkhaland Agitation which had concluded with the signing of the tripartite agreement between the Gorkha National Liberation Front, the Central Government and the State Government of West Bengal in 1988.

The demand for the separation from Bengal by the people of Darjeeling hills was first raised in 1907 by the Hill's men Association. The "Leaders of the Hill People" put a more refined, systematic and articulate version of the 1907 demand forward in 1917. This demand, proposed for

administrative separation of Darjeeling from the rest of Bengal. In 1920, the demand for the exclusion of Darjeeling district along with the areas annexed by the British from Bhutan in 1865, which formed the part of Jalpaiguri district, from Bengal, was supported by The European Association as well. But the Kalimpong Samiti and People's Association of Darjeeling opposed the exclusion of Darjeeling from the Province of Bengal and thus from the scope of reform (Chakrabarti, 1988). Since then the demand has been raised by the people under different leaders and political parties. The demand revolved around three important issues of autonomy, identity and the inclusion of the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule of the Constitution.

The entire decade of the 80s is very salient for the people of Darjeeling. It was during this decade that under the leadership of Subash Ghising that the entire population supported the demand for Gorkhaland and rallied against the Government of Bengal. There was widespread disturbance and the pitch for the demand reached each and every Gorkha living in India. The agitation did not see any untoward incidences occurring to the people of other communities residing in the hills of Darjeeling. However, there were skirmishes only between the Nepali population who supported the Communist Party and those who favoured Gorkhaland. Under such a situation the people of the plains did not want the state of West Bengal to bifurcate and therefore opposed the demand for Gorkhaland. There opposition was not violent in any manner but it amounted to ridiculing the Nepali population in the plains by calling them

'foreigners' and raising questions related to their ethnicity, nationality and identity. They were questioned on their nationality and now and then had to defend them being Indians. They were excluded and treated as 'outsiders' in the social milieu. This exclusion was much more subtle, complex and less visible. The term Nepali, in the academic circles was used as an indicator of ethno-cultural identity only, and the issues of nationality and ethnic identity it represented was overlooked.

As Finn (1991) says, that there is a strong connection between power relations, a pertinent aspect of human existence, and the social identities of human beings. In essence, the distribution of power within a given figuration necessitates that the perceptions and actions of the majority social grouping considerably influence the establishment of identity for the minority groups within a given society. As Elias (1992) argues, existence of power relationship between groups and the social positions of these groups authorizes one group to label inferior and the other superior. The ability of one social group to attach a lasting label of human inferiority onto another group is a consequence of the specific figuration formed by the two groups with one another. The positions and superiority of the dominant group is challenged by the minority group but at the same time the prerogative for the inclusion of the minority group within the society is the privilege enjoyed by the majority group. When the majority group reflects cultural relativism, the minority group is in a situation where they can enjoy and protect their identities. Assimilation starts to occur

as the majority group further approves the contribution made by the minority towards the cultural diversity to the community. Conversely, the inclusion of the minority group is contested when the majority group demonstrates xenophobia and show discrimination towards the former.

Under such situation it was understandable that the Nepalis of the North Bengal would connect themselves with UKFC, a football team composed of players belonging to their own ethnic stock and playing well to beat teams who had dominated the tournaments in those localities. Their way of showing support to UKFC or rather their showing of their ethnicity was based on singing songs which had ramifications on the pride of being Nepali. They would also raise slogans like 'Jai Gorkha' on the field, whenever a goal was scored or victory ensured by UKFC, thus celebrating the achievements of their 'proxy warriors' on the pitch and thereby challenging and dismantling the hegemony of the majority community (at least on the field).

Football matches for them was not just any match, it was for them a way of asserting their ethnicity and identity. People would come to the hotel rooms where the players were staying and say that it was for them a pride that a team from the hills was playing and winning was important for challenging the dominance of the majority community and also to prove their superiority. Supporting UKFC was also a form of showing their solidarity with the demand for Gorkhaland and the people of the hills, which they otherwise could not do

to show their political solidarity. The most important thing for them was to come out in the open without fear and celebrate the achievement of UKFC in the field of football and thereby claim the lost ground. Football and UKFC became a means for manifesting their political sympathies to the demand of Gorkhaland and their way of showing dissent towards the hegemonic majority community.

Nepalis in Bhutan and UKFC

Nepalis in Bhutan are known as Lhotsampas and are residing there for many decades. The plight for the majority of the Nepalis in Bhutan has been, to say the least, pathetic. They primarily work in the agricultural sector and many immigrate to Bhutan as labourers. However, there are many who have done well. The socio-economic conditions of the Nepalis changed for the worse with the passing of the Citizenship Act in 1985 and the census of 1988. It was decided that the Nepali population who lived in Bhutan before 31st December 1958 were conferred citizenship on the basis The Citizenship Act of 1958 (Lama, 2008). The Act of 1985 bestowed upon the citizens three ways of getting Bhutanese citizenship by birth, by registration and by naturalization. However, the procedures for getting the citizenship were stringent and moreover since during the Citizenship Act of 1958 people were not given any document to certify about their citizenship many failed to get the citizenship during 1985. The census of 1988 declared "almost one-sixth of the population of Bhutan as 'illegal-immigrants'. They were mostly Nepali-speaking people" (Lama,

2008). These two development in the political scenario of Bhutan are responsible for the expulsion of the Nepalis from Bhutan. The other important reason for the expulsion can be that the Bhutan government might have feared the situation would be like that of the Sikkim joining the Indian Union. Sikkim joined the Indian Union as the 22nd state in 1975 and the Nepalis residing there when the referendum took place played a pertinent role in making sure that the referendum was in favour of Sikkim becoming part of Indian Union.

However, in Bhutan there was cultural colonization by the Bhutanese government on the Nepalis. They were asked to wear the tradition dress of Bhutan and during the Citizenship Act 1985 it was made mandatory that the people who were seeking citizenship had to know Dzongkha and the history of Bhutan. The Nepali people thought that these were discriminatory. Those who were not expelled from Bhutan they had to face a lot of discrimination.

For the Nepalis who were granted the Citizenship and were residing in Bhutan UKFC was a symbol to be used and through which they could confront the hegemony and domination of the dominant majority group and thereby claim equal share in the economic, political and cultural capital. When UKFC took to the field to play the matches, to support them for the Lhotsampas was a symbolic assertion of their identity and on the other hand an opportunity for them to resist the forced identity on them. The young people were drawn between two cultures as their lives

were not only grounded in the cultures and traditions of their parents but also in the social practices of Bhutan. However, their ethnicity triumphed over nationality. Supporting UKFC by the Lhotsampas generates substantial symbolic linkages with their ethnic brethren. The Lhotsampas recognized that their only way to challenge the oppression faced by them was through the manifestation of their support for UKFC and celebrating their success in the field.

Therefore for them football support operates as part of a culture which functions to provide public and recreational space for them and construct a distinctively Nepali sense of community. Bhutan had failed to encourage multiculturalism and this had facilitated unabated ethnic segregation. This lack of integration had contributed to the social exclusion experienced by the Lhotsampas in Bhutan which in turn had reserved the Lhotsampas to cherish the Bhutanese identity. The support they showed to UKFC was just an attempt to show their dissent against the policies of the Bhutanese government and their solidarity towards the expelled Lhotsampas who were fighting against all odds to return to Bhutan. For the Lhotsampas football grounds played the role of processes of identity formation and cultural resistance.

Conclusion

This paper has illustrated the ways in which UKFC was seen and visualised by the Nepalis, who comprised the minority group in the region of North Bengal and Bhutan to express and assert their identity and also to challenge the dominance by the majority group and also to manifest their dissent

towards the dominant social groups. It is also apparent that support for UKFC, by the Nepali population evolved because of the shared history, culture and politics which helped these supporters to manifest their ethnic identities.

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