

## Review Essay

### DARJEELING/KALIMPONG: RETHINKING PASTS AND FUTURES

**Prem Poddar**

Townsend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman, eds. 2018. *Darjeeling Reconsidered: Histories, Politics, Environments*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press.

How can we begin anything new with all of yesterday inside us? While that may nudge us towards linking our troubled presents to potentially liberatory futures, the volume under review attempts to diagnose some of these past presents. By “past presents” I refer to the claim that the book “aims to challenge—and ultimately rethink—Darjeeling’s legendary status in the postcolonial imagination” (pp. 1–2). The related question of present futures, a central one, is well beyond the purview of this review essay.

Reviews of edited volumes are by definition piecemeal as proper and even justice cannot be done to all the collected essays. Mine is no exception. Any scholarly work on the Darjeeling hills has but to be lauded and applauded. This particular one is well-engendered and attains a high degree of deliberation and discussion. But its unevenness disallows it to come close to Middleton’s own sterling contribution in his monograph *The Demands of Recognition: State Anthropology and Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling* (2015) or Sarah Besky’s *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labor and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India* (2013). Despite this, both their essay contributions in the volume are a pleasure to read. Shneiderman’s own ethnographic work on the Thangmi community in central-eastern Nepal, and to a certain extent Sikkim and Darjeeling, is contained in remarkable essays and her fantastic in-depth ethnography, *Rituals of Ethnicity: Thangmi Identities Between*

*Nepal and India* (2015). Given such a provenance, the volume under review raises great expectations.

This essay will isolate only three issues that stand out when considering the overall reach of the volume. The first is its focus on “Darjeeling,” the second its putative postcolonial provocation. And the third, its sometime over-simplified assertions, in quite a few of the essays. Tied to this, for a volume whose goal is no less than to “reconsider” the area, is the neglect and omission of narratives produced in the body of Darjeeling Nepali literature where histories, politics and, importantly, subjectivity—*anxious, drippy, hide-bound, transgressive, or ambivalent, or mixed doses of any of these elements*—are richly mapped out.

### **The Question of Kalimpong**

When considering the space of Darjeeling, the place has historically and geographically included the district, especially the hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling, Kalimpong and Kurseong. Economically, politically, and sociologically, the sub-division of Siliguri in the plains has been a bit of an odd man out of this schema. Things got even messier map-wise with the declaration of Kalimpong (with an area of 1,053.60 sq.km) as Bengal’s 21st district in 2016, and its formal rebirth emerging from its elder sibling in February 2017. With its own distinct albeit entangled history, Sikkim ruled over Kalimpong until 1706 when Bhutan invaded Sikkim. Thereafter the territory was ceded to the British in 1866. The British did not restore Kalimpong but made it a sub-division of the Darjeeling District administered by Bengal.

In a footnote to the “Introduction,” Shneiderman and Middleton, refer to the recent edited volume *Transcultural Encounters: Kalimpong as a Contact Zone* (Viehbeck 2017) as providing “an impetus” to their own enterprise (p. 3). Perched at a critical node of South Asia, “[g]eopolitically, the Darjeeling region—which for the purposes of this book,” the authors claim, “include[s] both Kalimpong and Darjeeling districts” (p. 2) while also “expanding the frame to engage with ‘South Asia’ and ‘West Bengal’ as sites of connection” (p. 3).

Rethinking the external as well as internal boundaries of this field can only be salutary, but the claim is disingenuous at best. The word “Kalimpong” appears on a mere sixteen pages in a volume of 316, and there is not a single essay on it. Neglect aside, factual errors creep in: “Harka Bahadur

Chhetri, who had been elected MLA from Kurseong in 2011 on the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) ticket, defected from the party.<sup>1</sup> He announced the new Jana Andolan (People's Movement) Party, trumpeting a promise from the TMC to create a Kalimpong administrative district from Darjeeling” (p. 109).<sup>2</sup> Apart from coming as news to the people of Kalimpong that a member of the Legislative Assembly (MLA) from Kurseong is taking inordinate interest in Kalimpong's future, the argument in Bethany Lacina's essay on the Gorkhaland Movement lumps the space of Kalimpong with the development boards as “institutional counterweights” to the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA).<sup>3</sup>

If that is really the case, then a more elaborate delineation of Kalimpong's potential merger with Sikkim could have been made, pointing out how that would offer multiple advantages to all stakeholders. Apart from the Indian government's security concerns raised by the increasingly violent Gorkhaland demand, the specter of Greater Nepal, Sikkim's lifeline, NH10,<sup>4</sup> continuously plagued by strikes and blockades, Kalimpong's vast floricultural and agrarian resources, both natural and human, would be at Sikkim's disposal. Add to this Kalimpong's vast reserve forests and not a few tea gardens along the southern tarai and Dooars.<sup>5</sup> Not to mention direct access to the infrastructure of the plains without having to traverse the strike-torn Gorkha badlands

<sup>1</sup> GJM is a registered political party which campaigns for carving out a separate state, Gorkhaland within India, out of hilly districts (along with parts of the Dooars area in the plains) in the north of West Bengal. The party was launched on October 7, 2007 in an attempt to replace the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Since the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) formed in 1988 failed to fulfill its goal of forming the new state of Gorkhaland, it led to the downfall of its maverick leader Subhash Ghising and the rise of GJM headed by his erstwhile lieutenant Bimal Gurung.

<sup>2</sup> Just to clarify that Harka Bahadur Chhetri was elected from the Kalimpong seat. TMC is the All India Trinamool Congress Party, now in power in West Bengal.

<sup>3</sup> GTA is an Autonomous District Council for the Darjeeling and Kalimpong areas. It was formed in 2012 to replace the DGHC.

<sup>4</sup> NH10 refers to the National Highway (number 10) and is the lifeline to Sikkim and Kalimpong from Siliguri.

<sup>5</sup> Forests first begin to lose out under the supervision of the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation, which clear-felled the reserved forests of Kalimpong in 1978–1979; this was followed by rampant plundering and encroachments during the Gorkhaland Movement.

of Darjeeling/Kalimpong districts. Might this have crossed the minds of Pawan Chamling (or his successor P.S. Golay) in Mintokgang, Mamata Banerjee in Kolkata's Writers Building (or Nabanna, the converted textile hub in Howrah that now serves as the seat of government), and the Delhi mandarins in the South Block?

This, despite the fact that the Sikkimese leaders have gone to the extent of describing themselves as Sikkimese Nepalis, and not as Gorkhas, somewhat to the surprise of Darjeeling dwellers, many of whom work in Sikkim and identify themselves with the Sikkimese Nepalis.<sup>6</sup>

In his elaborate essay, "The Quest to Belong and Become: Ethnic Associations and Changing Trajectories of Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling," Nilambar Chhetri details the history of ethnic revitalization in terms of different groups' assertions for rights and belonging, and points out that "the Darjeeling Planters Association and the European Association echoed the demand for the creation of a separate administrative unit for Darjeeling on the eve of Montague–Chelmsford Reforms of 1919. These associations supported this demand, as they wanted to secure their interest in the tea plantations and insulate the hills from the growing influence of the nationalist movement. Such demands were, however, resented by other organizations like the Kalimpong Samiti, which feared that Darjeeling's exclusion from the reforms of 1919 would perpetuate the backwardness of the region" (pp. 160–161). In this story of conflation of *jāti* with *jāt* identities, what is missing that needs further detailing are the fault-lines here. S.W. Ladenla who launched the Hill People's Social Union and its journal *NeBuLā* asking for rights as well as improvement is seen as a pioneer, but there is also a narrative of collaboration with planters and colonials in Darjeeling. Parasmani Pradhan and others, closely associated, in some ways complicit, with the Presbyterian diocese, were also charting a separate Gorkha presence outside of Bengal. This is where the Kalimpong narrative contributes to the fissure and needs excavation from journals like *Gorkhe Khabar Kāgat*.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>6</sup> Some scholars make the distinction in spelling; thus, the suffix "ese" in Nepalese refers to the people or language of Nepal, and Nepali (in both English and Nepali languages) to the Nepali-speaking people across the globe, irrespective of their adopted nationalities.

<sup>7</sup> The paper *Gorkhe Khabar Kāgat* was the first monthly newspaper in Nepali and came out in 1901. It was edited by Padre Gangaprasad Pradhan and published

In his “Afterword” to the volume Tanka Subba views the book as perhaps “the last tribute to Darjeeling” (p. 263) when the academic focus in the region seems to be shifting to Sikkim. He also alludes to “Kalimpong’s unique history” which would “internally differentiate the conversation” (p. 263), not least on account of the dissimilarity between Darjeeling’s tea gardens and Kalimpong’s agricultural areas in terms of the continuity between the colonial and postcolonial. He takes a potshot when he wonders whether *Darjeeling Considered* has been “fair to the colonial rulers.” What, he asks not without some nostalgia whilst cocking a snook at the local misuse of development funds, have “we added to Darjeeling after we became independent in 1947 except congestion of roads, scarcity of water, filth, unplanned urban growth and the like? Have we done one thing good for Darjeeling after Independence?” (p. 263).

Put another way, the volume in its Nepal-centricity becomes but a partial story in Himalayan Studies, even as severing the context completely from Nepal, no matter how much one tries, is arguably not completely achievable. The historical inertia and sociological temptation to always inextricably relate Darjeeling to Nepal is arguably powerful. But it also paradoxically fuels the demands for a politics of identity articulating an exclusive Indian Nepaliness as Gorkhanness. By gesturing to the entangled histories of “Darjeeling” to Tibet, China, Bhutan, and Sikkim in the volume—thus zooming out of a Nepal centricity—would make the connect to Himalayan Studies if a larger idea (which would necessarily include Kalimpong) were made available, and thereby visible.

### **The Question of Vernacular Writing**

The volume introduction refers to the work done in Nepali literary studies and implies that—as opposed to the humanities, and social sciences—creative literature cannot be central in considering the region’s history and geographical imaginary. When we ask ourselves, “What does it mean to be of this place?” we are necessarily asking, “What are our responsibilities as member-citizens of this place?” These old questions need new answers, and literature is most likely concerned with these, no matter how obliquely. When one reflects on the politics and practices, and indeed the very character,

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from Darjeeling. It should be noted that it preceded the better known *Gorkhāpatra* from Nepal by a few months.

of Darjeeling, it is obligatory to pursue the routes of its manifestations elsewhere, be they battle fronts during wars or the settlement of young Nepali professionals and workers in cities like Bangalore today. In not giving in to the temptation of fetishizing the local, it is the relational scope of the geographical imaginary that swims into view.

Vernacular writing, whatever its limits, always makes a case for articulating the angst of a people, especially if they see themselves as displaced.<sup>8</sup> This can be sometimes dismissed as nothing but a form of cultural nationalism; just as the book's cover illustration *Meci Pāri* (Across the Mechi River) by Mahendra Thami can be read as migrating to *Muḡlān* (India) without any ironic presencing. A creative writer does not merely or always present what his/her people want; s/he hears what they say in all its ambivalent glory.

The reception of Nepali literature (from the Darjeeling hills) as it continues to develop its life amongst newer generations is not one of closure but becoming: not what a work is, but what it might be. As I have argued before (Poddar 2009) to cite here just the example of the iconic Indra

<sup>8</sup> This may appear as inviting the charge of “over-concluding,” ignoring numerous other strands of emotion found in Nepali vernacular writing. Admittedly, the canon has undergone several phases, and one can identify contrarian elements in diasporic literature; cultural reformist impulses, claims of citizenship rights and distancing from Nepal in these narratives are nevertheless attempts to tweak anxieties of belonging and non-belonging. Several poems and novels portray exile, travel and emigration in the vocabulary of loss, nostalgia and the travails of adaptation. Lain Singh Bangdel's novel *Muluk Bāhira* (Outside One's Home, 1947) is an earlier example. In recent years Pancham Adhikary's *Pathik Pravāsan* (Pathik's Exile, 2010) has enjoyed some success as it recounts the experiences, post-Maoist war, of Nepali students who go abroad to study. Ananta Gopal Risal's poem “Echoes of Foreign Land” is similarly evocative:

Why do I hear a different sound in foreign land  
 there is no China nor India bordering my land  
 I see only large buildings like cliffs  
 Instead of the Karnali and Gandaki  
 I hear Niagara Falls and Hudson. (Risal 2012: 3)

After the 1950s, some hold, Nepal has no longer served as the cultural fount for India Nepalis, who start looking within rather than looking towards the *pahād*.

Bahadur Rai—Rai’s reflections on the Nepali language, the Gorkha/Nepali community, and his own writing practice can be read at least in two ways. The first is in terms of *telos*: that writing will strengthen the nation or *ethnie*. The other is the more troubled interrogative reading that raises the same questions of cultural identity, through textual elisions and ambivalences, among other things, about writing and the Gorkha/Nepali community. The critic can raise the possibility, and vacillate between, both kinds of reading, but the very act of vacillating would veer us towards the latter. The trope of “building” that runs through Rai’s novel *Āja Ramitā Cha* (1964), then must be seen not simply as materialistically aspirational, as a derivative symbol of arrival for the protagonist, but as a measure of dwelling that is at home in history.<sup>9</sup> Such a liberating history, a futuricity, a place where the received and assertive vocabulary of cultural community is recast, is something worth waiting for.

Middleton and Shneiderman write with scholarly erudition about migration to the hills. But the one lacuna in the volume is clearly the leitmotif (or more) of migrancy in the region’s creative literature. Migrancy, predictably, has been a predominant concern in Nepali fiction (originating in Nepal as well as India) from Lain Singh Bangdel’s novel *Muluk Bāhira* (1947) to Asit Rai’s *Nayā Kṣitijko Khoj* (Search for a New Horizon, 1981), from Lil Bahadur Chhetri’s *Basāi* (Migration, 1960) and *Brahmaputrako Cheuchāu* (Brahmaputra’s Nearabouts, 1986) to Bikrambir Chhetri’s *Tistadekhi Sutlejsamma* (From Teesta to Sutlej, 1986) and beyond. As if to drive the point home, the much-travelled Bangdel (1919–2002) was to later write his memoirs echoing the title of his novel *Muluk Bāhira Ma* (Outside My Home, 2010). Interestingly, for the purposes of this review, a cross-border novel like Badrinarayan Pradhan’s *Maulī* (1993) has the Nepali critic Rishi Raj Baral, who also travels, firmly holding that, despite its beginning and end in Indian Darjeeling, it is not a story outside of Nepal, but belonging from within the country:

<sup>9</sup> This novel has recently been translated into English by Manjushree Thapa as *There’s a Carnival Today* (Rai 2017).

To an extent, this [tale] reaches beyond the realm. Its beginning and ending take place outside the homeland but this is a story inside the homeland, inside Nepal.<sup>10</sup> (Baral 2014: 39)

Baral goes on to raise the question of citizenship, and sees the novelist warning his cross-border constituencies that whatever the differences wrought by geography, history, events, and despite the sharing of culture, language and lifestyle, those Nepalis living in India are Indian citizens and those residing in Nepal are residents of a free and independent country. This seems like a neat solution, sidestepping the issue whether the novel is Nepali, Indian, migrant, or one that just transgresses boundaries. Or, perhaps, just as borders do, literature too crosses us.

### **The Question of the Postcolonial**

Related to this invocation of vernacular writing and its enmeshment (or otherwise) in the trans/national is the proven intervention of postcolonial narratives as well as the movement's theorizing. To talk of the postcolonial today is also to invoke its double, the "decolonial." While the latter attends to issues of the material and the socio-economic, the former has been chastised for its propensity towards the social and cultural. The modernity/coloniality focus foregrounded in the "decolonial" is mainly sociological and perhaps a little in the direction of the philosophical in the work of Walter Dignolo (2000). In this regard, the work by Sarah Besky on the "extractive" nature of the Darjeeling tea gardens in her earlier book, comes close to world-systems theory as well as to scholarly work in development and underdevelopment theory.

The volume under review misses a great opportunity in not raising crucial questions about subject formation and subjectivities, which must needs be crucial, in relation to the representation of contemporary inequalities consequent to historical conditions. In correlating these facets, the demand then for any vision of the future is, to quote a postcolonial theorist, that "we must not merely change the narratives of our histories, but transform our sense of what it means to live" (Bhabha 1994: 256). Postcolonial theory never really was simply about the establishment of separationist trajectories

<sup>10</sup> My translation. The original reads: "मुलुकबाहिरलाई यसले केही छोएको छ । प्रारम्भिक प्रवेश र कथा विस्तारमा मुलुक बाहिर छ, तर यो मुलुक भित्र अर्थात् नेपाल भित्रको कथा हो ।"



or matching interpretations, but setting up new dialogues about that past so that new presents and new futures can be brought into view.

While the introduction deploys the term as a framing device, quite a few of the essays including the “Afterword” use the term “postcolonial” as a descriptor and an event-marker in the sense that it refers to what came after the colonial. It is of course best understood as making us cognize what is “in addition to” the colonial. The issue in postcoloniality is clearly about re-inscribing “other” cultural traditions into narratives of modernity and thus transforming those narratives—both in historical terms and theoretical ones—rather than simply renaming or re-evaluating the content of these other “inheritances.” In struggling to make sense of the worlds we find ourselves immersed in, the mission then becomes how we engage in “reversing, displacing and ceasing the apparatus of value-coding” itself (Spivak 1990: 228).

The true significance of postcolonializing would be to unsettle and reconstitute—something that one could have hoped for in the volume—standard ways and means of knowledge-production; postcolonialism and decoloniality are crucially still in circulation on account of the magnitude of the despoliations of colonialism. A new geopolitics of knowledge is what the reader looks for in future editions of a volume like this. A description of communal associations like the Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan (GDNS) is begun by Nilambar Chhetri but this surely requires a charting of this treasure trove in opening up a space that allows the deployment of the term *duḥkha* (or suffering) to delineate narratives informing migrant subjectivity. What would be immensely productive in this context of knowledge production (without detracting from the otherwise rich Chhetri essay) is a subtle reading of this trope. Models of the precariat (à la Judith Butler) or the “politics of pity” (Hannah Arendt) or the complex ways in which suffering and humanitarianism (Lilie Chouliaraki) can be brought to bear here and thought through, hold much promise in enhancing and furthering any such analyses.

### **The Question of Darjeeling**

Apart from co-editing, and co-authoring a first-rate introduction to the themes in the book, Townsend Middleton in his excellent chapter “Unwritten Histories: Difference, Capital, and the Darjeeling Exception,” in deliberating the movement of labor and the investment of capital to

Darjeeling, traces its “exceptionality” in the colonial administration’s allocation of it with a special status. He sketches the largely unregulated relationship between governance, private capital, and labor in Darjeeling and contrasts with the more regulated relationship that obtained in neighboring Assam. But the comparison, although rich and textured, is incomplete and leaves one with the feeling that there must surely be more. His forthcoming work on the introduction of cinchona plantations will undoubtedly provide a nuanced narrative of the politics and economics operating there. Middleton here, in my view, could have painted a bigger geo-political picture of the nineteenth century eastern Himalayan region; Darjeeling’s history was not after all untouched by the vectors that converged in the unification of Nepal and the economic-strategic stakes of the East India Company.

The account of Darjeeling’s history of exceptionalism in terms of the tourist gaze and the postcoloniality of Darjeeling in Rune Bennike’s essay leaves his question about habitation and belonging largely suspended in an over-reliance on John Urry’s general writings on the notion of tourist destinations. Urry’s *The Tourist Gaze* (1990) has no doubt been hugely influential, but his turn to the emergent paradigm of mobilities and its theories and methods, provides a discernible opportunity to any young Darjeeling scholar, especially in terms of mapping the newer migrations of hill youth to the plains, and how newer technologies have facilitated the explosion of connections at a distance. Jayeeta Sharma’s chapter, “Himalayan Darjeeling and Mountain Histories of Labour and Mobility,” in welcome contrast, commendably strives to mark the “agency that...labouring subjects achieved through and beyond their encounters with imperial institutions” (p. 100); this, in order to recover Himalayan subjects’ “voices, names, and visages [that] appear only fleetingly, if at all” (p. 100) in the colonial archives. In delineating the negotiations of indigenous groups that were constitutive of Darjeeling as a trans-Himalayan space, she centers, for instance, on the Lepchas who were favored, in contradistinction to “Hindoostanee” in terms of their reliability, as Captain J.D. Herbert records appreciatively in 1830, by colonial officials. Her reading reveals how the close and exhaustive local knowledge of the Lepchas, “their versatile command over Nature’s bounty” (p. 76) was made use of by botanists such as J.D. Hooker; Kew Gardens would not be what it is today without this form of green imperialism.

Under the second section on “Politics and Social Movements,” Bethany Lacina supplies a chronology of the various stages of the Gorkhaland

Movement; both Miriam Wenner (*Virtuous Movements and Dirty Politics*) and Mona Chettri (*Rowdies*) attempt to analyze of the murkier aspects of Gorkhaland politics without biting in to historical connections that are clearly there. For instance, any talk of “rowdies” in the hills cannot be described without the recurrent episodes of the use of this muscle in Sikkim politics. Swatahsiddha Sarkar and Babika Khawas pay homage to Kumar Pradhan by looking at his work for the “promise” of a class analysis in the development of the Nepali identity in Darjeeling. The essay ends rather tamely with the conclusion “that most of Pradhan’s writings call for a tolerance of differing truths on nation and nationalism” (p. 194). What a reader asks for is a considered elaboration of what these differential truths, the tug and kiss of nation and *ethnie* might be.

In the final section on environments and labor, Sarah Besky’s essay “Subnational Occupations: A Year in the Life of the Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre” shows how the center’s goal was “an attempt to reconcile the tension within the [Gorkhaland] movement between an aspiration of economic development and an aspiration of ethnic recognition” (p. 200). She finds through ethnographic evidence that this attempted care for a Gorkha landscape failed. Georgina Drew and Roshan Rai’s discussion of the role of *samājs* or local neighborhood societies in the access to water is informative but it is their cautionary note that is most interesting in a situation where water mafias already operate: “[S]hould the viability of environmentally sensitive springs diminish, or should the cohesion of the *samāj* deteriorate, then future investigations may uphold arguments leaning more strongly towards the abject relations created through geographies of exclusion” (p. 239). Debarati Sen’s representation of the agency of women engaged in fair trade tea production impressively excavates the emerging modalities of women’s shared self-governance.

Apart from these three essays in the section, the term “environments” occurs in the subtitle raising expectations of accounts and analyses of this crucial vector in the region. I assume that the sense of the term here is to imply the aggregate of surrounding things, conditions, or influences in Darjeeling. In other words, it implies a cartography of the social and cultural forces that shape the life of the habitants in the area. What it seems not to be referring to is the ecology or the sum total of interactions between the air, water, landscapes, and all other external factors surrounding and affecting human and non-humans alike. The volume might well have included a piece

on the massive transformations being wrought in the region by pressures exerted simultaneously by the lack of economic opportunity, the increasing uninhabitability of the “mainland” plains during hot weather (when temperatures routinely touch the high forties centigrade), the proximity of the Himalayas as the nearest haven for tourists, nay, climate refugees, and the rise of an Indian middle class that can afford these holidays.

The issue of environmental despoliation accompanied by demographic non-dividends impinging profoundly on the present and the real risk of a looming Anthropocene extinction—not least impacted by the melting Himalayan glaciers attached to the Third Pole of the Tibetan Plateau—in the future is something another “rethinking” volume along these lines cannot not explore.

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