

**Dinesh Chandra Ray and Srikanta Roy Chowdhury, ed. 2022.**  
***Darjeeling: In Search of People's History of the Hills.* New Delhi:**  
**Manohar Publishers.**

Darjeeling, the attractive academic destination, has been prolific in encouraging intellectual engagements, some very recently (see Dasgupta 2023). Hence when a book, splashed with colors of a rainy day spells “Darjeeling” on its cover, it is difficult to ignore it, more so when it claims to be “in search of people’s history of the hills.” This voluminous book of twenty articles, divided into six subsections, besides the Introduction, is a spread of insights that sparsely adds to the already brimming knowledge pool on Darjeeling. The Introduction begins with the categorization, not problematization, of “people” and “non-people,” attempting to put down “an inclusive people’s history of Darjeeling hills” (p. 13), where “people” includes those who are absent in the colonizers’ interpretation of the place, or in the native writers’ or nationalist framing of “mainstream” history. Thus setting limits to the enterprise, the editors rightfully delve into the necessity of engaging with Darjeeling’s pre-colonial past. However, while cataloguing the articles of the book, “past” constricts itself only to “the colonial history of Darjeeling” (p. 15). The Introduction underscores the six subsections which deal with theoretical concerns, impact of colonial interventions on land, topography and people, people’s endeavor towards developing communitarian identities, understanding of how notions of in-betweenness, hybridity and plural syncreticism operate in Darjeeling, reflection on the people’s problems in literature and arts, and “subaltern history of the people of the hills” (p. 15) who have been marginalized with respect to gender, caste and class differences, although subaltern with respect to whom remains unanswered.

Promising a platter of perspectives, Part-I begins with T.B. Subba’s discussion of the problems of writing people’s history, mainly, the sheer difficulty in defining “people,” the relationship between people and non-people, people and individuals. The article argues that “people” is a diversity of individuals and experiences. Thus, “a people’s history of Darjeeling may vary from community to community and may not have a meeting point ...” (p. 31) since lived experiences vary. Considering people’s history as an “alternative form of history writing” (p. 37) that has gained much “from the extensive use of vernacular sources” (p. 36), Ichchimuddin Sarkar selectively

catalogues books on Darjeeling. While the article holds reservation towards colonial sources, works by “scholars [who] were not practising historians” (p. 39), it promotes certain “path finding research” (p. 39), mostly in Bengali, which are eye witness documents or personal surveys written during the colonial period, and some recent works in English while establishing Darjeeling as a veritable field of research.

Part-II features Dahlia Bhattacharya’s article that dwells on the colonial system of crime and retribution, prison structure and administration in India and then zooms into Darjeeling; Tahiti Sarkar’s article critically evaluates how the colonial intervention in Darjeeling transformed land and landscape arrangements by straining “the material linkage of life of the indigenous people with Nature” (p. 74); Awashes Subba’s article dwells on the history and development of colonial sports in the various schools, colleges, gymkhana of Darjeeling which allowed the authorities “to control and discipline the linguistically diverse bodies in the hills as well as in the other parts of the country” (p. 95); Suman Mukherjee’s article offers a touristic view of the history of development of Darjeeling as a recreational spot for the Europeans and the Indian elites.

In Part-III, Rahul Ganguly dwells upon the Lepcha myth of Mayal Lyang to argue how the imagination of Gorkhaland or ideas related to political modernity are not the only representation of particular spaces. Deepjoy Katuwal traces how the words—Nepal, Nepali and Gurkha—assumed their contemporary meanings due to repetitive use in colonial documents while being far from people’s imagination. Somoshree De explains the rise of Nepali nationalism in Darjeeling by zooming into Nepali’s standardization as common language to cater to the workers’ search for an everyday language of use, and the colonizers’ interest for a language of command, which consequently led to the delegitimization of several other non-standard languages. Bishal Chettri locates the aptness of the demand for a separate geospace of Gorkhaland by drawing upon the colonial policy of separateness of the hills from the plains, the marginalization of the language and the people by the mainstream and so on.

In Part-IV, Kishan Harijan presents Darjeeling as a place where “people of multiple diversities live together with perfect communal harmony” (p. 215), a character that Harijan attributes to the colonial rulers who encouraged migration and trade and commerce in the region. Dewakar Thatal examines the consequence of the conversion of Lepchas into Christian by highlighting

the advantages associated with such conversion while also reflecting upon the indigenization of Christianity. Nirmal Chandra Roy points at the similarities between Gorkhaland and Kamtapuri movements by considering these as premised on the consolidation of ethnic identity. Vivek Thapa interestingly explores the ideological construction of Darjeeling by the colonizers as a place of leisure by foregrounding the idea of difference and the “pecuniary culture” (p. 251).

Part-V contains exploration by Sushma Rai into the evolution of Khaskura into Nepali language; Nima Doma Lama and Rathika Subba’s probing into tea garden literature as narratives of “third space” (p. 304); Illora Sharma’s informative account of the creation of Gorkha Janapustakalaya in Kurseong which was aimed at the social and cultural development of the local people of Kurseong (p. 317); Sudash Lama and Anand Sherpa’s cataloguing of the songs and dances practiced by the different ethnic communities in Darjeeling.

In Part-VI, Saurav Chettri revisits the predicament of the tea garden workers, and Lekhraj Balmiki highlights the plight of the Balmiki community in the hills owing to caste prejudices historically attached to the community.

Instigating queries galore, it is difficult to overlook the gaps in arguments, facts, referencing, and literature review that the book carries. One wonders, if people’s history of Darjeeling does not find a meeting point, will Darjeeling as a place only serve as a passive canvas for such subjective utterances? Also how will these varied utterances negotiate with the idea of collective conscience—*hāmī bhanne bhāvanā*—that has been instrumental in channelizing the urge for a Nepali nation in Darjeeling (see Sarkar 2017)? One wonders why “vernacular sources” (p. 36) does not include Kumar Pradhan’s works when Pradhan also falls under the category of “practising historians” (p. 39)? Why is it necessary to romanticize the mythical idea of Mayel Lyang instead of problematizing it to understand how the contemporary political scenario interacts with a mythical idea (see Faulkner and Rama Mohan 2021), when people seem aware of the pragmatism and materiality involved in the simultaneous presence of identities? Why does a discussion on two ethnic movements resort to presenting the history of two political fronts that eventually go separate ways?

In fact, “people’s history” has evaded most discussions (Chapters 3, 5, 6, 12, 14), or has been transformed into uncritical study of well-known individuals or associations in the hills or simple cataloguing of songs, dances, musical instruments (Chapters 11, 17, 18), or have come up with interesting

phrases like “third space in Tea Garden Literature” without clarifying who are at the two extremes of the binary in-between which this “third space” exists. How would the formation of a separate state provide the tea garden laborers with identity when they are yet to come in touch with modernity? Can the migration of a community that has been moving from one place to another in search of work even today be considered as “forced migration” (p. 349)? Most importantly, what role does Darjeeling as a place play in the subjugation of a community that has an exploitative internal structure? In most articles, Darjeeling continues to be a field of exploration (Chapters 3, 5, 11, 12, 19), objectified as always. Had this trend been critically dealt with, people’s history could have yielded a subjective connotation of the place in itself which, however, is silent here. The book plainly informs us that Darjeeling as a hill town does not have a precolonial history. The prospect of people’s history could have benefited much by problematizing this argument. Besides errors in dates in pages 68 and 77, repetition of paragraphs in verbatim with different citations in pages 80 and 87 makes one wonder about editorial supervision. While some reference lists (p. 370) reflect the absence of recent works on, say tea gardens (Besky 2014; Sen 2018), another (p. 154) shows entries that are missing from the body of article (like Onta 1996). O’Malley has been used without citation in pages 348 and 349, an anomaly that becomes vivid when in page 257 one finds O’Malley cited for the same ideas.

While searching for “people” in people’s history, when the index pops up three entries (in contrast, Pathak’s [2021] people’s history, for example, maintains a six-page index on people alone), one is bound to wonder if an edited volume is only about chapters being literally stitched together to form a book which actually do not speak to each other. Had conversations been initiated between perspectives, delving into a “search of people’s history of the hills” would have been a less tedious one.

## References

- Besky, Sara. 2014. *The Darjeeling Distinction: Labour and Justice on Fair-Trade Tea Plantations in India*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Dasgupta, Dipanwita. 2023. *The Ravaged Paradise: Environmental History of Colonial Darjeeling Himalaya (1835–1947)*. Oxon: Routledge.
- Faulkner, Sarah and K.R. Rama Mohan. 2021. Mayel Lyang Embodied: ‘Tradition’ and Contemporary Lepcha Textiles. *HIMALAYA* 40(2): 97–107.

- Onta, Pratyoush. 1996. Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India: The Rhetoric of *Jāti* Improvement, Rediscovery of Bhanubhakta and the Writing of *Bir* History. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 1(1): 37–76.
- Pathak, Shekhar. 2021. *The Chipko Movement: A People's History*. Ranikhet: Permanent Black.
- Sarkar, Swatahsiddha. 2015. Nepali Nation and Nationalism in Darjeeling: Kumar Pradhan in Perspective. *Studies in Nepali History and Society* 20(1): 31–68.
- Sen, Debarati. 2018. *Everyday Sustainability: Gender Justice and Fair Trade Tea in Darjeeling*. New Delhi: Women's Unlimited.

**Priyanka Chatterjee**  
University of North Bengal