

Research Article

# Decolonizing Darjeeling: History and Identity in the Writings of Indra Bahadur Rai

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## Abstract

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Darjeeling has been largely represented as a place where fine tea grows and where the mighty Kanchenjunga graces its presence as an attraction for tourists. Much has been written about its colonial formation and its tea, but discursive formation of the area has been rather unfair for the inhabitants who are lost in this narrative of 'leisure'. This injustice is all the more magnified when one perceives the identity crisis and the politics of belonging that the people of Darjeeling have been subjected to since the days of empire, continuing up to present times under the nation state. Against this misrepresentation Darjeeling, as lived by its inhabitants, needs to be reimagined. The politics of belonging is a recurrent theme across South Asia and the anxieties over belonging that the people face in Darjeeling has to do a lot with the kind of knowledge that has so far been produced about the region. This article will attempt to decolonize that knowledge and reimagine Darjeeling from an insider's perspective. This will be done through the iconic literary figure of Indra Bahadur Rai and his writing. In the present study I will be primarily looking at his only novel *Aaja Ramita Cha* (There is A Spectacle Today) (1964), and his essay *Pahad ra Khola* (Mountains and Rivers).

## Keywords

Darjeeling; decolonize; vernacular; Himalayan Borderlands; Indian Nepali

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*...like its trees and rivers and springs, we have, in the cradle of history, been part of one peoples after another...If today someone should ask these alder and juniper trees, these swift rivers and trickling springs, 'Where are you from?' the answer will be, 'I'm from the soil that I'm of...'*

- Janak in *There is a Carnival Today* (Rai 2017: 170-171)

## Introduction

Darjeeling, the hill station and its hills, is located in the lesser Himalayas in the state of West Bengal, India. Known for its majestic view of the Kanchenjunga, the weather, and its luscious tea gardens, decades after colonial rule for most 'outsiders,' this Darjeeling still remains just 'A Summer Place', a romantic commodity and a tourist destination for consumption. However, Darjeeling Himalaya<sup>1</sup> is a space that within itself hosts many problems and exceptions that postcolonial studies have tried to understand through research in other South Asian regions and thus exploring these through Darjeeling would propose fresh perspectives and guide new insights. Before understanding Darjeeling, one has to first look into its history or rather its history, and the imaginations that have been constructed so far about the region.

## History

The region that we now know as Darjeeling has been 'ruled' by many regimes. In the eighteenth century, it was under the Raja of Sikkim, followed by the rule of the Gurkha Kingdom of Nepal. In 1817, under the Treaty of Titalya, the territory was returned to Sikkim by the British with the clause that Sikkim is "bound to refer to the arbitration of the British government" regarding any disputes with Nepal or any other neighboring state (O'Malley 2001: 19-20; Dozey 1922: 2). In the nineteenth century, Hill stations were being constructed all over British India as "seasonal variable settlement[s]" in cooler highlands where the British sought rest (Kennedy 1996: 9). Captain George A. Lloyd and Mr. J. W. Grant found their way into Chungtong (West of Darjeeling) in 1892 and instantly found it as an ideal location for a "sanatorium" for the colonial officials to visit (Dozey 1992: 2-3), away

from the heat of Calcutta, a major economic and political center for the Company back then. This newly 'discovered' location was known to the local Lepcha peoples as 'Dorje-ling' meaning "Place of the Thunderbolt" (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 5). After acquiring the Deed of Grant (1835)<sup>2</sup> from Sikkim, work began to transform the "worthless inhabited mountain" into a hill station, for which Dr. A. Campbell was put in charge in 1838. By 1865, they had also incorporated Kalimpong and the lands east of Teesta River and between the Meechi and Teesta, from Sikkim and Bhutan, creating the area we now know as the Darjeeling Hills.<sup>3</sup>

Darjeeling's land and climate seemed to favor tea cultivation and other medicinal plantations like Cinchona, and Darjeeling was soon to become, not just a center for colonial officers to rest but also a profitable venture. Building Darjeeling required labor and the local population was not enough. People in the neighboring kingdoms of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan were living under the oppressive regimes of their respective monarchs and thus the Company lured them with wages and shelter to work in Darjeeling (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 6-8). With the labor influx, Darjeeling grew rapidly to become the hill station, and more, that Llyod, Grant, and Campbell had imagined. Hill stations in the British Raj saw building projects such as clock towers and railway lines and in fact by 1881 the narrow-gauge lines were completed in Darjeeling establishing the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and making travel to Darjeeling easier and economical (Kennedy 1996: 14). Darjeeling had established itself as a place of major capital investment and production, with at least running 170 tea gardens by 1901 (ibid), and also a majestic hill station.

According to O'Malley and Dozey, when Darjeeling was 'discovered' in the early nineteenth century by Grant and Llyod, it was "practically uninhabited" (O'Malley 2001: 37) with a population of one hundred who were mainly Lepchas and Limbus (Dozey 1922: 38). Almost a century later, Darjeeling Hills' population had increased to 2,49,117 according to the 1901 census. This, as we have seen, was a result of the tea industry, so much so that two-thirds of the total population were tea garden coolies and their children (O'Malley 2001: 44). The population was also very heterogeneous consisting of Nepalese, Lepchas, Bhotias, Tibetans, even Marwaris, Bengalis and Punjabis, and Raj Bansis in the Terai region, the largest of all these being

Nepalese (1,30,000) which in them included diverse ‘tribes’ and ‘castes’ who migrated from Nepal such as Khambus, Murmis, Limbus and so on. As these Nepalese immigrants were getting old the population was being dominated by their children who were born in Darjeeling. We also see that ‘Khas Kura’ or ‘Nepali’ soon became the lingua franca (Dozey 1922: 40). This ethnic plurality made Darjeeling a region of exception.

However, due to the British’s refusal to claim the settlers as British subjects and the fear of being sent back to the country they ran away from, Nepal (Middleton 2018: 36), the need to secure belonging to India began to increase in the twentieth century. Nepali language was recognized by Calcutta University in 1918, and soon the development of the people of the Hills was linked with the development of Nepali Language (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 10). Associations and organisations started using the term ‘Gorkha’ to represent the Hill communities (Chhetri 2018: 161).

1947 brought freedom from the British, but the colonial regime was replaced by neo-colonial rule of the plains as racism and politics of othering from the plains was also clear. These quests for belonging resulted in the Bhasha Movement and a movement for statehood. The Bhasha Movement, run by literary stalwarts and politicians from Sikkim and Darjeeling, worked throughout the decades after Independence which resulted in Nepali being recognized as one of the official languages of India in the constitution of India, in 1992. The three-year movement for statehood, the Gorkhaland Movement, in the second half of 1980s led by Subhash Ghising, on the other hand, resulted in 297 deaths with 1164 homes destroyed, and the setting up of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC), an administrative setup with limited autonomy under West Bengal (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 13). The movement, however, still continues, reigniting, violently, throughout the last two decades.

### Imaginations

Colonial records have been sources to build the earlier section as these works provide basic data about the formation of Darjeeling. However, the legend of Darjeeling continues in them and blurs our understanding of the region’s key issues. In her seminal book, *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples* (1999), Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes: “[H]istory is the story of the powerful [where the colonized] have been

excluded, marginalized and ‘Othered’” (Smith 2008: 34). Anxieties, exploitation, and issues of the people of Darjeeling have remained missing in these colonial records, which claim to archive Darjeeling’s history. James Clifford, in the introductory essay of his seminal co-edited volume, *Writing Culture* (1986), argues that ethnography presents only partial truths as it is never objective. Cultures consist of many voices of expression but ethnography tends to give one voice an authorial function (Clifford 1986: 6-19) This authorial voice is of the colonizers as far as these records are concerned. These imagine Darjeeling as a place where Kanchenjunga can be seen in its might and the weather is perfect for the sick to recover, where the locals are extremely loyal and hardworking and where there exists cheap labor for great capital production. For example, in *Among the Himalayas* (1900) Lawrence Austine Waddell writes about his travels to the Himalayan region in an attempt to “[supply] intimate knowledge...of the wild and primitive people” and dedicates the first chapter to Darjeeling (Waddell 1900: v-vi). Keeping in mind Clifford’s “Who speaks? Who writes? And to whom?” (Clifford 1986, 13), these books by Europeans are the works where People of the Place - Do Not Speak - and the Colonizers Write - For The West.

Neo-colonization from the plains of Bengal and mainland India replaced the European colonization in Darjeeling Hills after independence. Knowledge produced from the plains of Darjeeling seem to follow the same pattern of imaginations that the Europeans practiced. In the 2001 republication of the O’Malley’s *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Indian Administrative Service (IAS) and editor Kumud Ranjan Biswas pens an essay called ‘A Summer Place.’ The title of the essay itself evokes the myth and legend of Darjeeling as a place of rest and leisure from the summer heat of the plains. He describes Darjeeling as: “mysterious and romantic...the dreamland of clouds” (Biswas 2001: vi). His words echo the orientalist gaze of romantic poets like Coleridge and Poe, and in fact he refers to Keats and Wordsworth in the essay. The essay feels like a poetic ode to Darjeeling. He writes:

“How about taking a break and getting away from this insane world at least for a while and going to a place where the world is wide, the skies are high, the air is fresh and bracing.” (Biswas 2001: xv)

The essay was written a few years after the violent agitation of Gorkhaland of the 1980s and yet Biswas's description of Darjeeling turns a blind eye towards the people who actually built Darjeeling and the crisis they face in contemporary times. The work continues the colonial romanticism of Darjeeling in the new millennium.

Darjeeling and Indian Nepali people have also been imagined in pop culture and literature. However, these imaginations have been rather unkind. Farah Khan's 2003 directorial debut, the Hindi language movie, *Main Hoon Na*, is set in Darjeeling. Khan's movie showcases the colonial buildings of St. Paul's School against the backdrop of the Himalayas. Darjeeling in the movie is a commodity used for aesthetic value, like most movies set in Darjeeling. There are no characters who look or talk or represent the people of Darjeeling in the movie. Anurag Basu claims that his 2012 movie *Barfi* captures "the true spirit" of Darjeeling, however this 'spirit' of Darjeeling and his movie is set in the romantic 1970s before the violent agitation of the 1980s, which burst the romantic bubble of Darjeeling (Bennike 2018: 55). The song '*Kasto Mazza*' from the movie *Parineeta* (2005) is set aboard the famous Darjeeling toy train, in the 1960s. The song's Hindi lyrics are fused in the chorus with Nepali lines that translate to: 'Oh what fun it is to ride the train, these joyful ups and downs.' Every time the Nepali refrain is sung, the camera pans to a group of Hill children singing the lines, in, what looks like, a mixture of traditional dresses of the ethnical groups of Darjeeling. Darjeeling here is imagined as an exotic place where people would be wearing their ethnic dresses. We also see Saif Ali Khan's character dreaming about Vidya Balan's character as a tea plucker in a tea garden in the song sequence, which is another romantic stereotype associated with Darjeeling. These are some among many instances. Ridiculing of Indian Nepalis in Indian movies and advertisements is common to; often shown as *chowkidars* (watch men) with a funny accent or as untrustworthy outsiders.

Kiran Desai's Man Booker Prize winning *The Inheritance of Loss* (2006) becomes a chief text to look into the imagination of Darjeeling by mainlanders. Desai's novel is set in Kalimpong of the 1980s with the Gorkhaland uprising happening in the background. Desai's imagination of the people of Darjeeling is rather negative: "These people aren't good people. Gorkha's are mercenaries...Pay them and they

are loyal to whatever...and what is this with the Gorkha? It was also Gurkha..." (Desai 2007: 246-47). We will see later that Indra Bahadur Rai showcases otherings against the Marwari traders in Darjeeling in his novel. However, Rai seems to be capturing the realities of Darjeeling based on his observations as an insider. Desai's characters do not reflect the non-Nepalis of Kalimpong. Her portrayal of Nepalis as a whole is problematic because she makes a choice of not investing herself in the perspective of the people she is writing about. Her gaze is that of an outsider's. Furthermore, Desai paints the people as vengeful and xenophobic and reduces the demand for statehood to an ethnic conflict (Poddar and Mealor 2017: 331). The publishing house of her book later defended Desai, claiming that the work is of pure fiction (Ranjan 2015: 150). It is clear that her work truly imagines a fictional idea of the people she writes about. It follows the same stereotyping that Indian Nepalis are subjected to in the mainland. Her novel moves around the themes of post-colonial identity, but this she explores only through non-Nepali characters like Sai, Biju, Jemubhai, and so on, and misses on the post-colonial crisis of the Gorkhaland agitation that she sets as the backdrop of her story. Her Booker win has given the novel a certain amount of credibility and thus her fiction, with its misrepresentation, is cited in tourism articles (Poddar and Mealor 2017: 331), creating imaginary knowledge about the Darjeeling Himalaya.

### **Decolonizing Darjeeling: An Inside-Out Approach**

Postcolonialism, as we know it, assumes the fact that colonialism is over. However indigenous resistance to that idea tells us that decolonization is not a process of just transferring powers of governance (Smith 2008: 24). Linda Tuhiwai Smith writes that decolonization is a long-term process involving the cultural removal of colonial power (ibid: 98). This involves removal of colonial knowledge and imaginations of the colonized world and reclamation of history.<sup>4</sup>

Smith writes that the process of decolonizing indigenous people involves many projects, of which writing, and representation are vital. Boundaries between fiction and nonfiction are blurred as indigenous voices use language and literature to capture indigenous lives (ibid: 150). Indigenous literature thus becomes a primary method of decolonization. In Darjeeling's context, Nepali literature works as an intervention to existing knowledge on Darjeeling and a tool to

re-imagine the region and its people. Vernacular literature of any region provides insights that are unique only to the literature of its place and become a source of alternate knowledge, and even preferred knowledge in comparison to the ones created by 'outsiders.' Nepali literature not only gives a literary perspective, but becomes a medium of expression of an insider, someone who speaks the language and has experienced what it means to live in and belong to Darjeeling.

As the twentieth century began, Nepali language became a symbol of identity in a land that considered the people of Darjeeling as foreigners. Literature also helped form the idea of the "Indian Nepali Nation" (Rai 1994: 149). Newspapers and journals were being published from Benaras and Darjeeling. Darjeeling Himalaya soon became the epicenter of Indian Nepalis and grew economically, politically, and socially. Indra Bahadur Rai is one of the most significant literary figures of Modern Nepali Literature. Born on 3 February 1927, Rai experienced Darjeeling before and after independence, and thus most of his writings (which range from short stories, essays, novels, and plays) capture the place, its people, and their experiences and also their histories. His first collection *Bipana Katipaya* (So Many Waking Moments) (1960) involves a realistic mode of writing while his second collection *Kathastha* is divided into two sections, '*katha*', meaning 'story' and '*aastha*', meaning 'faith'. While the *katha* section contains experimental short stories, in the *aastha* section, he writes about his theory of 'wholeness' or 'totality' and refers to many modernist and postmodernist writers and theorists from the west. *Aaja Ramita Cha*<sup>5</sup> (1964) is his only novel that not only captures Darjeeling but also the 'post-colonial' crisis of identity, belonging and culture hybridization. The novel and his essay<sup>6</sup> *Pahad ra Khola* are going to be the focus of my article. Academic discussions about Darjeeling Himalaya, thus, need to be decolonized by enabling voices from Darjeeling Himalaya, such as Rai's to address its issues and problems, which this paper will attempt to bring forward. This will be done by analyzing Rai's literary works and building upon existing academic contributions on the region.

## Re-imagining and Negotiating Identity

### Internal Conflict

The identity crisis of most of the people of Darjeeling has been a lurking question that has taken violent forms in the last five decades. In his

novel, *Aaja Ramita Cha*, Rai deals with identity through the character of Janak Yonzon, a person born in Darjeeling before India's independence, like the writer himself. The first few pages of the book take place during the freedom struggle. Events leading to independence are seen happening in the background. We are introduced to Janak as a Gandhian nationalist. Janak is seen telling his mother about Gandhi: "Non violence... You must lovingly conduct a satyagraha...we must observe the vow of civil disobedience." (Rai 2017: 4-5). In one of the conversations, we see Janak and his mother addressing India as 'home' and 'ours'. Janak tells his mother: "Our country is our home...what would you do if a thief were to enter our home?" (ibid: 4). Again, on the eve of independence Janak's mother is seen asking: "Janak, is our country really free, then?" (ibid: 5).

We see in both these characters a strong sense of belonging to India. This belongingness to India is further solidified by Rai in a section when Janak's family visit Nepal for his and Sita's marriage: "Janak and his relatives, who were Indian, were thrilled to be stepping on Nepali soil for the first time" (ibid: 10). Later, we also come to know that Janak has never ventured past the bifurcation to Pashupati (ibid: 21).<sup>7</sup> Rai makes a clear distinction and dissociation with Nepal in these sections.

However, we see a different sense of 'home' for Janak in the section where he and his family are crossing the border, returning to India, after his wedding. Janak is seen chasing a peacock back to the jungle. He says: "We are compelled to leave our homeland, but that peacock also wanted to go to the land of the Mughals, just like us." (ibid: 15). Here he refers to Nepal as 'homeland'. This is further complicated when he asks about Sailung during his visit to Nepal: "Janak had seen pictures of Sailung's pastures... he believed that he'd go there someday...and see the ancestral homeland of the Yonzons...It was, maybe, the unfilled desire to go there that gave Janak's life such a delicious dissatisfaction." (ibid: 10-11). Here we see Janak refer to Sailung as his 'homeland' and even though this area is in Nepal, the specificity of the region reminds us of Janak's ethno-linguistic ancestry. Also, 'homeland' is associated with personal and/or ancestral memory which Janak here feels towards Sailung and not Nepal (Lahiri 2019: 46).

Janak, thus, at the beginning of the novel, is seen as an Indian Nepali born in Darjeeling trying to negotiate his identity. Janak's internal conflict with the idea of 'home' and 'belonging' perhaps

is the reason for his dissatisfaction. We see Janak come to terms with his identity only towards the end of the novel which we will discuss later.

In the earlier scene at the border, we see that the peacock is unruffled by travelers:

“Janak picked up a fallen branch...and made as if to strike it. It didn’t run away. That peacock was unafraid of travellers; it was perhaps accustomed to the affections of exhausted journeymen. They all crossed over the Indian soil.” (Rai 2017: 15)

Rai in this scene establishes the open borders between India and Nepal and makes the readers aware about the regular migration taking place from Nepal. Sita and Birman represent the Nepalese<sup>8</sup> population of Darjeeling who have crossed these borders either due to marriage or due to work. Sita used to temporarily visit Darjeeling because of her relatives before permanently moving after marrying Janak. Birman works at the Yonzon household, and we are shown his migration journey. Later, he goes back to Nepal only to return to India again. This is enabled by the 1950 India-Nepal Treaty of Peace and Friendship that grants the nationals of both the countries privileges in the matter of residence, ownership of property, participation in trade and commerce, and movement. This migration has led to what Middleton calls “anxious belongings.” (Middleton 2013: 608-621). This is the anxiety of being deemed as foreigners in India in spite of being born in India. Middleton writes that the people he spoke to during his research were anxious to mention the migrations that led the formation of Darjeeling. The anxieties cause complete dissociation with Nepal. The same identity crisis and anxieties have led to the violent sub nationalist movement i.e., Gorkhaland.

Rai also informs his readers of the oppressive structures of Nepal while writing about Dharmaprasad Shrestha, Sita’s father and his past:

After looking around to see who owned large, productive plots of land, people would start cases against those Rajbanshi, Sattar or Dhimal families and take over the plots of themselves. The history of Morang’s indigenous people carried an ancient curse of the court cases and offices of Gorkha’s rule. Although the saying went, “Go to Gorkha if you want justice”, the indigenous peoples’ experience taught

them, “Yet live on in the Gorkha kingdom if you don’t”. They would flee overnight, abandoning their homes and fields, their wives and sons and daughters. The day after they fled, their land would become the property of some brave Gorkhali victor. In those days, when day and night were equally murky in Morang, the Gorkhals committed daylight robbery, looting wealth and life and dignity. (Rai 2017: 12-13)

Rai in this brief section informs his readers about Nepal’s history which becomes an important factor in the formation of Nepali identity in Darjeeling. In the 1700s Prithivi Narayan Shah, the king of a principality called Gorkha, wanted to unify the region we now know as Nepal. His process of unifying Nepal involved annexing different kingdoms within the region. Some members of the Newar (the original inhabitants of the Kathmandu valley) became closely allied and served as bureaucrats in the palace (Tamang 2016: 24). Dharmaprasad’s wealth and lands in the novel were a result of this very patronage. The Limbuwan kingdoms were granted limited political and economic autonomy which through the years were lessened. Other communities like the ‘Tamangs’ were highly marginalized: their customs and practices banned, and their documented history destroyed. In 1854, the Muluki Ain, Nepal’s civil code was commissioned by Jung Bahadur Rana which put the Hindu and non-Hindu indigenous peoples of Nepal in a hierarchy civic code that placed the Hindu upper caste Khas people at the summit and most non-Hindu indigenous peoples at the bottom. This enabled further oppression which Rai shows in the above section. The ancestors of most groups constituting the population of the post-independent Darjeeling were these indigenous communities running away from the Gorkha regime to the tea gardens of Darjeeling.<sup>9</sup> These were mostly different tribes and castes and thus Darjeeling’s population is rather a heterogeneous one.

Rai addresses these anxieties and acknowledges the diversity within Darjeeling’s peoples:

A flock of birds came hurtling down from the blue of the sky. The birds were small, and more than forty in number...they flew in one flock. None had an identity of its own outside the flock... [the birds had] mutual awareness of each other. High up...there was only limitlessness and

liberation.... a unified mind, a single soul, inspired and drove them all. (Rai 2017: 69)

Through the flock of birds, Rai, perhaps, is presenting the different tribes and castes in Darjeeling. Through this passage, Rai seems to bring forth the idea of a unified identity of the people of Darjeeling. Together this community could fight for recognition in the political entity that is India. This identity for Rai is that which acknowledges mutually the cultures of the different communities within it. We can see Rai situating this identity within the context of India in his 1994 essay, 'Indian Nepali Nationalism and Nepali Poetry.' Rai argues in this essay that like all the other nations within India, Indian-Nepali nationalism is compatible with pan-Indian patriotism (Hutt 2009: 38-39):

India is a home for many nations - Assamese, Bengali, Gujrati...Nepali and many others - and they are not sub-nations. By 'Indian Nepali nation' we mean the ethnically and linguistically distinctive community of people who are of Nepali origin and are Indian citizens...Patriotic feeling fastens itself...one can...emerge as a pan-Indian nationalist by inductively working one's way up from premises of patriotically loving your own national people and serving one's own national community. (Rai 1994: 149-150).

When Janak falls ill and is confined to his house, Janak finds the time to reflect on his thoughts or rather conflicts of his life. An impassioned Janak is seen telling Sita about his newly understood ideals of belongingness:

[After] The Treaty of Sugauli, Nepal gave away only its unusable cliffs and gorges. We, the Nepalis of Darjeeling...Darjeeling is ours and we are Darjeeling's. All the house and shops in the four square miles of the town, the tea plantations beyond that, and all these lands and trees, they may have once belonged to Bardhaman or Cooch Behar, and now they belong to the government, or maybe the Bengali's and Marwaris will buy them and make it theirs; and yet Darjeeling is ours. Since primeval times, Darjeeling has belonged to those who can plough its grey and red soil and produce food. It can't be anyone else's... (Rai 2017: 170)

Janak's own internal struggles with identity in his younger life seems to finally come to a conclusion as he grows older and wiser. His sense of belonging is not a political one but one that has to do with the place he grew up in and, in that, Rai seems to reflect the voices of the people of Darjeeling. Janak talks about the colonial and neo-colonial regimes that have ruled the region for capitalistic gains but asserts that Darjeeling belongs to its people who have ploughed its soil and lived on its fruits. Furthermore, Janak compares the people of Darjeeling with its rivers and mountains. Janak's identity is rooted, not to his ancestral home in Sailung or the distant Nepal for that matter, but to the 'soil' he was born in. In this Rai re-imagines the identity of Darjeeling as something unique and distinct to the place. Janak mentions that Darjeeling belongs not to the people who used money to own Darjeeling but to the people of Darjeeling who built it. In this he asserts that Darjeeling's history is the history of its people and vice versa:

...like its trees and rivers and springs, we have, in the cradle of history, been part of one peoples after another...If today someone should ask these alder and juniper trees, these swift rivers and trickling springs, 'Where are you from?' the answer will be, 'I'm from the soil that I'm of...The names of those who donated money may be written on Darjeeling's grand town halls, banks, clubs and houses, but countless Nepalis carried loads on their foreheads, broke their backs, fell ill and died during the construction of those buildings. It is they who made Darjeeling... (ibid: 170)

### Fragmented Identity

Rai also addresses the ethno-politics and fragmented nature of the Indian Nepali identity, in his work *Pahad ra Kholā*.<sup>10</sup> He seems to capture the history of the people of Darjeeling in the process. He starts with describing a house which is a representative of the Indian-Nepali community. He goes on to talk about how through the years the house went through various patch works and yet, it is recognized as the house of the people who had survived the hardships and struggles together. In this Rai wants to present a sense of community amongst the people of Darjeeling; having commonality in survival, of surviving in a distance place together:

A hill ridge that is always looked upon from above by the Himalayas. There was a village of Nepalis who had come in large numbers. There was a house (known also as *mul ghar* and *jati ghar*)<sup>11</sup> there since a time unknown...It stood pretty and strong... on that hill. This house built by the forefathers...was known as the house of the people who had survived struggling... (Rai 2004a: 186)

He goes on to talk about the anxieties and struggles that the people of this house experienced. These anxieties are caused on surface level because of the fear of natural calamity like landslides that would sweep away the house. However, this fear is also the fear of being uprooted from the land they belong to, Darjeeling, causing anxieties mentioned in the earlier section of this chapter, such as of being sent back to Nepal. They are unsure if their foundations are strong enough:

Sometimes during festivals joy would suddenly arrive. Otherwise, they all lived in the fear of the house being pulled down by a landslide or a storm. They began to worry about how strong were the foundations and ground on which the house stood or the bonds between the storeys. (ibid: 186).

Rai then talks about the history of migration of the people of Darjeeling and establishes again a sense of commonality. This commonality is rooted now in the aspirations of the people which rather turned out to cause more anxiety and problems. Questions are posed on the future of these people, whether the land of such beauty forget its people and succumb to the struggles of the place:

They all had a dream: Together, one day, they would work hard and earn peace, everyone would prosper, enough for everyone. The reality was: Always gloomy, the sun would shine sometimes...will the land forget the people? Carrying centuries of ignorance and poverty will these people fall on the mountain slopes. (ibid: 186).

The next section becomes an important part of the work. We see a brother thinking about breaking away from this house. He realizes the ethno-linguistic diversity in the house and questions the commonality within them. Rai in this, shows the heterogeneity of the community

and address the division within the groups of Darjeeling:

This house will fall, today or tomorrow. None will rise if we sleep in a shared grave (we have been living in a shared grave). I will choose a separate death for myself. My life will follow a separate path...How long can we wait for a future for everyone? We have to live in the present, I will tear away my present and my future, separately. He looked at his brothers: I am fairer than that one, I am different. I am darker than that one, I am different. My nose is flatter than that one but higher than the other one. I am not poor like them, I am different. I am not stupid like them, I am different. I am educated and wealthy. I am smart...are we all of the same *jaati*?<sup>12</sup> (ibid: 187)

'Nepali' was the term used to describe the people of Darjeeling in the tea gardens (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 8) and as Darjeeling entered the twentieth century, 'Nepali' or 'Gorkha' identity was being used to represent discrete ethnic identities like Gurung, Magars and so on (Chhetri 2018: 158-160). Nilamber Chhetri, in his paper, *The Quest to Belong and Become: Ethnic Associations and Changing Trajectories of Ethnopolitics in Darjeeling*, finds that the collective category, 'Gorkha',<sup>13</sup> used to place the collective demands of the hillmen of Darjeeling, was becoming an exclusive category representing only Nepali speaking ethno-groups. This escalated the rift between Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis. Within the 'Gorkha' collective there emerged a heightened ethnic consciousness. Many ethnic associations were established by the ethnic groups like Tamang, Thami, Kirat, Magar, and even Khas groups (ibid: 161-167).<sup>14</sup>

On the day of his departure...He hurled away the khukuri in its sheath which he was carrying. He disrobed the daura-suruwal and the topi and threw them in the corner. He threw...Bhanubhakta's Ramayana. 'I don't want it'. He was shouting - 'I don't want Dashain! I don't want Tihar also! I don't want selroti!'<sup>15</sup> (Rai 2004a: 189)

In *Pahar ra Khola*, the character when leaving his '*mul ghar*' is shown stripping away all the symbols of Khas culture that has grown to become the culture of the other ethno-groups in Darjeeling. He is seen throwing his *khukuri* (a machete originating in the cultures of the



Khas speaking Gorkha kingdom) and *daurasural* (traditional dress of the Khas people). He completely rejects Bhanubhakta's Ramayana and the festivals, *Dashain* and *Tihar*.<sup>16</sup>

In the 1990s these ethno-groups started associations and organizations, however this time not to only preserve their culture but to enjoy reservations provided by Scheduled Tribes (ST) and Other Backward Classes (OBC) status. This led to Mangars being recognised as OBC in 1994 and Limbus and Tamang's as ST in 2003. We see slowly the people of the house leave for reservation and their own ethnic recognition:

'I have ancient pride, I have strength,' another one calculated. 'I have talent, I have skill,' weighed another... 'We are the one who need reservation!' The stack of arguments grew. After demanding for reservation and after being granted the same many left in the night while some marched away in broad daylight. (ibid: 189)

Rai seems to argue in this essay that dividing and getting reservation into groups might bring benefits to the people of these particular groups but would create troubles for others. His arguments seem to focus on the benefits and recognition that collective movement and statehood could bring for all the ethno-groups. He ends the story with hope as the house still stands in the end. The remaining people who are left worry that the house are weak, but Rai writes that the people who have left the house, haven't really left. It is history and the aspiration of the Indian-Nepali nation that still binds them together: "History has not left and the goals of the jaati remain." (ibid: 190). Rai's extended metaphor seems to assert an identity that is rooted in Darjeeling: a common history of migration to Darjeeling.

### **Cosmopolitanism and the Communal Question**

While we have spoken about the Indian-Nepali community of Darjeeling, we are yet to address the other communities of that place that do not have any ancestry in Nepal nor are indigenous to the region. These are Marwaris, Bengalis, Biharis and so on who have migrated from different parts of the plains of India to Darjeeling Himalaya. The dynamics these communities share with the rest of the groups in Darjeeling is an interesting one and one that Indra Bahadur Rai captures in his novel.

In the early sections of the novel, we see that Janak has started a business, 'Janak Clothes Store.' He is seen struggling and competing with the Marwari traders. We can clearly see a sense of communal othering when Yashraj says: "We must make Nepalis buy at Nepali shops." (Rai 2017: 23). This sense of othering stems in Darjeeling for two reasons. Firstly, while most of the communities have a certain sense of belonging because of their shared history of migration to and building of Darjeeling, Marwari traders entered Darjeeling primarily to do business. Secondly, the Marwari community have been owners of many tea plantations after the end of colonial rule. These reasons have perpetuated a reason of suspicion and othering of the Marwari communities in Darjeeling. Later on in the novel, when the Jayabilas file a lawsuit against Janak for the failure of repayment of his loan, Sita storms at the Jayabilas store enraged:

You filed a lawsuit, didn't you? You're worried that my husband's going to die... he's not going to die... And if he actually dies, I'm here to pay you back. It's not money that we cheated from others, lolling around on a white settee all our lives, like you: we earned our wealth with our own hands, you year! ...a sly Marwari like you, you hear? (ibid: 181)

In these lines, Sita is channeling the general consciousness of the Indian Nepalis that associates the Marwari community with slyness and cunningness, and as cheaters who are only looking out to make profit. Hearing Sita insult him, the Jayabali warns Sita by threatening to call the police and to file a trespassing case against her. Sita's reply further signals the othering:

You come to somebody else's place and suck our blood, and yet the trespassing case is against me, not you?... You're a selfish caste!... It was my father who brought your grandfather a sack full of silver rupees and saved him from bankruptcy. Ask your father about it, that man who went back to the mainland old and grey-haired.<sup>17</sup> (Rai 2018: 135)

Sita frames Marwaris as blood sucking traders who profit out of Darjeeling and return back to the mainland and claims that Darjeeling is not theirs, that the traders do not belong to Darjeeling. When another Marwari trader tries

to pacify Sita's rage, she replies: "Don't teach me, you're all the same." (ibid: 135).

In another scene we see Kisanram, a Bihari from Arail village of Bihar, who has set up his *paan* shop in Darjeeling. The schoolgirls call him *madhise* when he tries to flirt with them. The term *Madhise* (Mah-dhee-say) is not to be confused with *Madheshi* (Mah-dhey-she). While *Madheshis* are Nepalese nationals who have Indian ancestry or live in the Terai region of Nepal (Singh 2011: 1049), *Madhise* is used to describe people from the plains, often in a derogatory manner. This section captures the chauvinism and othering that Indian Nepali communities practice in Darjeeling, which is similar, if not same in magnitude, to the chauvinism and othering that Indian Nepali people face in the mainland and plains of Bengal and India.

M. K. and Ajoy Das Gupta are also seen in the novel talking about Biharis: Biharis are absolutely bad people: "There is no one as dirty as the Biharis. Their food will spread cholera in the plains and tuberculosis in the hills." (Rai 2018: 30). While Ajoy is a Bengali, born and raised in Darjeeling, M. K. is perhaps<sup>18</sup> a Nepali, born and raised in the plains of West Bengal. However, it is interesting to see Ajoy refer to M. K. as *pahari* (hillman) while he himself was born and raised in hills, whereas M. K. is seen referring to Ajoy as just a Bengali.

We see, in Janak's impassioned monologue about Darjeeling and its people, Rai's proposed distinct identity which is rooted in Darjeeling. However, it seems to exclude the ethnic groups like Bengali, Marwari and other groups whose origins are in the plains of India. On the one hand these groups do not have to assert their 'Indian-ness.' Also, the mainland hegemony creates a sense of hostility causing Janak to exclude these groups. However, on the other hand, their sense of home and belonging could also be Darjeeling. Ajoy is married to a Nepali woman and thus his children perhaps would be raised in a space that holds both the ethnicities and cultures. The children of people of these communities living in Darjeeling would identify themselves with the lingua franca of that place, and the roads and hills of Darjeeling as their home. This communal othering which Rai showcases brilliantly is a social reality of Darjeeling's contemporary history and calls for further research to negotiate Rai's proposed Darjeeling identity.

## Conclusion

When Rai shows how the Janak household celebrates *Dashain*<sup>19</sup> it tells us that Darjeeling is a place of cultural hybridity. Homi K. Bhabha in his book *Location of Culture* (1994) talks about a hybrid space where traces of both the original cultures can be found (Lahiri 2019: 55). In 2008, Gorkha Janmukti Morcha, the leading party of Gorkhaland movement of that decade, asked the people of the Darjeeling Hills to wear their traditional dresses for a month as part of a cultural movement for Gorkhaland. Bimal Gurung, the president of the party and also the face of the movement, then, made a statement saying that members of the Sherpa, Lepcha, Yolmo and Tamang communities should also wear the *daura sural* (mostly Khas attire for men) and that people should be united and not fragmented (Chettri 2008). I remember my mother, a Tamang, telling me about the 2008 incident and how she too like thousands, made '*chowandi cholo*' (mostly Khas attire for women). She doesn't know how to speak Tamang nor did my grandparents. It is interesting to see how Tamang is still widely spoken in Nepal while in India, because of the region's heterogeneity, the language has almost completely disappeared. This calls to question the nature of 'Gorkha' or 'Indian-Nepali identity'; is it a singular Nation where the ethnic groups are sub nations or is it a commonwealth of many nations? While, as we have seen earlier, Rai seems to re-imagine an identity rooted in Darjeeling, politicians have argued for an identity which is rather homogeneous. This failure of the homogeneous Gorkha project was capitalized on by politicians in the last decade by setting up of development boards in North Bengal. In the last few years, the ethnic communities have been trying to revive their culture. This assimilated identity needs to be negotiated as the homogeneous project is bound to derail the movement for statehood. Also, while Nepali writing in Nepal has its origins among the elite Brahmans, the beginning of Indian-Nepali literature can be traced back to the *Sawais* and *Laharis*, poems in folk meter, composed by Gorkha soldiers stationed in the region known as Northeast India, and laborers working in the tea gardens of Darjeeling, during the nineteenth century (Rai 2004b: 309). However, the intellectual development of Darjeeling due to the influence of sanskritized Nepali language (used by educated Nepali writers) led to local poetic forms like *Sawais* and *Laharis* (written in the colloquial Darjeeling Nepali) to be referred to as

backward (Dhakal 2015: 96). This also calls for an in depth analysis of the nature of the Nepali language in India and Darjeeling.

Rai's work captures the contemporary history of his time and in many ways addresses key issues still troubling Darjeeling today. Not only that, his novel also subverts the romantic imagination of the tea gardens and showcases the conflicts and exploitation festering there. Furthermore, Rai's characters do not fit into the stereotypes that have been created in popular consciousness; Janak is an educated businessman. He reads Nehru and Balakrishna Sama is his favorite playwright (Rai 2017: 26). Rai's position as a person born in the Tea Gardens of Darjeeling and also as an educated writer makes his works even more layered. Works by other writers such as *Fatsung* (2019) by Chuden Kabimo, and its translation *Song of the Soil* (2021), which is about the Gorkhaland Movement of the 1980s, re-imagine the violence and crisis of the region contradicting misrepresentations like those in Desai. Thus, scholarly investment in exploring the Nepali and Anglophone literature written by writers of the region, like Rai, will bring more to the project of decolonizing Darjeeling Himalaya.

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## Endnotes

1. I will be using the terms Darjeeling, Darjeeling Himalaya and The Darjeeling Hills to denote the region that includes districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong.
2. According to Dozey and O'Malley, the lease was granted by the Raja of Sikkim as a mark of friendship for the then general Lord William Bentinck and in return the Raja received an allowance of Rs 3000 per annum, later raised to Rs 6000.
3. Shneiderman and Middleton note that the neighboring Himalayan kingdoms were not pleased with the migration of labor from their kingdoms, and this escalated into the kidnapping of Campbell and botanist Joseph Hooker. They were released later but this gave the British leverage to annex the region between the Meechi and Teesta rivers. The Anglo-Bhutenese war between 1864 and 1865 and their victory led them to incorporate the rest of the region including Kalimpong in 1865 (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018: 5-6).
4. In Darjeeling's case, both the British Raj and neo-colonial India.
5. It is difficult to translate the word *Ramita* into English and for the purpose of the article, the title has been taken from Manjushree Thapa's translation. I have cited the translated novel wherever I have used sections from Thapa's translation and cited the original wherever I have translated myself.
6. It is an essay but reads like a story.
7. The India-Nepal border.
8. In the context of Darjeeling, Nepalese is a political identity referring to the nationals of Nepal, while Nepali is a linguistic identity referring to Nepali-speaking peoples.
9. As mentioned earlier the Lepcha community is indigenous to the region and the borderlands of Darjeeling and Sikkim.
10. *pahar ra khola*: 'mountains and rivers'.
11. *mul ghar* or *jati ghar* could be roughly translated into 'original home' or 'ancestral home'.
12. *Jaati* is a complex term and for the purpose of this article could be understood as race or community.
13. Not to be confused with 'Gurkha' which was

the term used in colonial writings to construct the 'martial race'. 'Gorkha' is the term used by the people of Darjeeling to represent a collective identity.

14. *Sarva Kirat Chumlung*, was a council formed in the 1970s with efforts to unite the Khambus, Limbus and Yakkhas under the Kirati identity. However, later due to disagreements the three groups formed separate ethno associations

15. *Selroti*: Traditional ring-shaped rice-bread and eaten during 'Nepali' festivals.

16. Ramayana is an Indian epic important to the Hindus and Bhanubhakta was the first Nepali poet to translate the epic into Nepali. The festivals are originally of the Hindu Khas people and have taken center stage in the culture of Darjeeling hills and Gorkha identity.

17. I have made changes to Thapa's translation and added my own translation in this passage.

18. I say 'perhaps' because in the novel his name is never revealed. It is indicated that his father's surname was either 'Munshree' or is a Munshree, a person who is part of the administration in the Tea gardens.

19. Hindu religious festival of Nepal, similar to *Navaratri*, *Dussehra* in India.

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