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Guest Editorial Commentary

Stories of Everyday Life in the Darjeeling Hills

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It is a pleasure to comment on these seven articles, which offer new and distinct perspectives on the Darjeeling Himalaya. As many of the articles highlight, the colonial history of the region overdetermines how it has been represented in popular media over time, from film to travelogue. For colonial officials and agents, Darjeeling was a place apart—a reprieve and retreat from the heat of the plains. Its climate and landscape, as scholars of other hill stations have described, was thought to be conducive to European - particularly British - constitutions (e.g. Pradhan 2017). Skating rinks, parks, and stately schools served as infrastructures for the reproduction of British sociality high up in the Himalaya. Colonial accounts, from the bureaucratic to the ethnological, concretized images of both redemptive nature and exoticized, racialized native inhabitants—a nature and people brought into the rationality of colonial governance. Wasteland Rules, special administrative setups, and territorial conquest brought more and more mountainous land under that governance, but always on exceptional terms. All the while, landscapes of tea, timber, and cinchona extraction expanded in step with hill station development.

Such images persist today. Most notably in current CM of West Bengal Mamata Banerjee's repetitive likening of the Darjeeling Hills to 'Switzerland,' a mountainous retreat to the 'London' of Kolkata. Banerjee's declarations came on the back of the 2007 reemergence of calls to form a separate state of Gorkhaland out of the Nepali-speaking regions of North Bengal. The Gorkhaland movement has a long history, but it is most often associated with agitations in the mid-1980s. Since this time, colonial imaginaries have converged with images of (often similarly timeless) ethnic strife. Such narratives also dehistoricize the region and occlude the intertwined political, economic, and social histories that not only brought this place into being but also all shaped the Gorkhaland agitation as a subnational movement and a response to historically rooted material conditions.

Architectures of colonial conquest, Gorkhaland posters, tea plantations, and unpeopled, undulating landscapes against the backdrop of Kanchenjunga. These are the dominant images. They have become the mechanism for understanding people and place here. They are made and remade with rote precision. But these forms of representation do not attend to the lived realities of people in the region on their own terms.

This collection seeks to reverse this way of seeing, thinking, and knowing the Darjeeling Hills.

Just before I started to write this essay, I was sitting in my office on a far-too-cold morning at the end of Ithaca's seemingly endless winter. I haven't been able to be back to Darjeeling or Kalimpong since the pre-pandemic summer of 2019. I picked up a stack of old issues of *Flat File*, a literary magazine published out of Kalimpong in the 1990s. I opened the issue on top and started reading. I was drawn in to D.T. Lepcha's translation of *Euta Din ko Samanyata*, "The Ordinariness of a Day."[1]

Rai narrates that ordinariness through the familiar: through attention to everyday objects and processes. Corn husks and

radish seeds, the warmth of the sun, cabbages and chicken for the evening curry. Families and friends come together through the quotidian materiality of making a home and making a life in the Darjeeling Hills, and poignant revelations emerge from this materiality as well. Rai's writing is ethnographically pointed and astute. His prose is grounded in the details of the everyday, the mundane even. The reader becomes enmeshed in work in the fields and words shared over meals.

The articles in this special collection share not only an attention to the everyday of Darjeeling, but also to oral narrative, story, and mundane objects. The authors attend to the lives lived, things made, and stories told that often don't figure into popular and dominant representations of the region.

One object, or maybe more accurately an icon, that pervades representations of the Darjeeling Hills (and a greater Nepal region) is the *khukuri*. In symbolic significance, it is perhaps only second to the mountains themselves. Mandika Sinha and Dronika Subba's article in this collection uses the materiality and symbolism of the *khukuri*, dripping with associations of war, bravery, loyalty, valor, and masculinity to tell a story of Nepali Dalits. While the *khukuri* circulates predominantly as a consolidating symbol of a Nepali or Gorkha identity, it is an object that is, after all, made by people, namely members of Nepali Dalit communities. This article reminds us of the importance of considering the labor dimensions of all things - even, or perhaps especially, highly valorized things. They are also commodities brought into being through the labor of some people and not others. Commodity production naturalizes that labor, or in the case of the *khukuri*, appears to erase it all together. Labor taxonomies and caste-based difference emerge within the production process. We must consider the labor histories of caste-based marginalization (or other forms of difference) that bring the icons of the eastern Himalayas into being. Like the *khukuri* itself, Darjeeling is a space of consolidation - a place where different caste-based groups and tribes from Nepal settled with Marwari and Tibetan traders, as well as Indigenous groups. Colonial settlement, frontier extraction, and migration made Darjeeling into a cosmopolitan place, where caste-based difference matters in different ways (or some would argue, matters less) than it does in Nepal or elsewhere in India. People are united through migration and the use of Nepali language, but the stories behind everyday objects undermine these neat narratives.

Take another everyday object: cheese. Cheese here, like anywhere else, is, of course, a broad category. Anisa Bhutia's article on the two cheeses of Kalimpong offers a material-semiotic juxtaposition as a means for understanding everyday food provisioning. The first cheese is *chhurpi*, a soft cottage-like cheese made from cow's milk, readily available from many vendors at the twice-weekly market at a price that many people in Kalimpong can afford. The second cheese is 'Kalimpong cheese.' It is made in large wheels, and shoppers (mostly *Lonely Planet* toting tourists, according to Bhutia) can buy a wedge at a relatively steep price. While one is obviously more consumed in Kalimpong and across the Himalayan region (and is likely well known to readers of this journal), both cheeses - taken together - tell a story about Kalimpong, its present as well as how agrarian production and cottage industries were central to colonial governance in the past. Kalimpong cheese was popularized by Christian missionaries, most notably the Swiss Mission. Bhutia's paper also notes that the Scottish mission promoted dairy as well as a host of other cottage industries (e.g., lacemaking, baking, carpentry). The Swiss dairy was abandoned in the 1970s, and the machines were sold off to another dairy hours from town, where cheese is still produced. The Scottish mission dairy is similarly abandoned.

More recently, the Hills have witnessed a new kind of agrarian abandonment, that of tea plantations. Nirvan Pradhan's article on migration out of Darjeeling describes how neither the town-based nor the agrarian economy of the Darjeeling Hills can support the people who call it home. There are no jobs. The plantation, which once brought Nepali settlers to the region in droves with the help of *sardars* (labor recruiters), is now a place to migrate out from. The condition of life in the Hills is characterized by '*dukkha*.' State support structures don't help, and industrial support is dwindling. *Dukkha* indexes the unlivablity of place. People migrate out of Darjeeling to find places and forms of work that can support them and their families, leading to what Pradhan calls a "culture of migration" in the Hills. This, of course, links Darjeeling with Nepal and other sites across the world, as racialized and marginalized migrant workers are, as Pradhan puts it,

"subjected to excessive recruitment fees, misrepresentation of the nature and terms of the work, non-payment of promised wages, cancellation of departures and longer working hours than their contracts originally indicated." Pradhan draws on research from six abandoned plantations in the region. He also did research in Siliguri with a recruitment firm. What is significant is the juxtaposition he's playing with in the article. *Sardars* of the past, who enticed people to settle in Darjeeling so that they could feed and support themselves and their families, (Nepal had, in the 1800s, become 'unlivable' for low-caste and tribal farmers), have become labor recruitment agencies of the present.

Migration, of course, is how the Darjeeling Hills became the dynamic multi-cultural, multi-ethnic space it is today. Pema Gyalchen Tamang's article, which analyzes two pieces by Indra Bahadur Rai, one of Darjeeling's most notable Nepali writers, centers Rai's work as a means of "decolonizing Darjeeling." Rai's writing, as I noted above, offers a window into lived experience in the Hills. And, as I also noted above, Darjeeling is made and remade through retellings of well-trodden colonial narratives of its "making." This article takes *Aaja Ramita Chha* (Rai 2017) and *Pahad ra Khola* (Rai 2018) as narrative illustrations of the tensions and textures of being Nepali in India. It highlights the objective of the collection: to showcase work in Nepali and by scholars from the region and, often working in academic institutions that serve students in the Darjeeling Hills. Tamang - through an analysis of Rai's work–shifts our attention to fine-grained sociality as a means of understanding being and belonging in the region. Rai writes in *Aaja Ramita Chha*: "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. Whoever this soil gives to, that place is theirs; the rest can only live here in hope" (Rai 2017: 170, partially quoted in P. Tamang).

Sangay Tamang's article on questions of land and idioms of rights and ownership explores senses of belonging and sovereignty, conveyed through longstanding occupation, settlement, and toil. The emphasis here on land in discussions of belonging and identity is an important and a welcome contribution to the literature. Land claims - and promises of land rights - punctuate Gorkhaland politics. But, actualizing ownership on paper, and through *patta*, is much more difficult than any politician can actually muster. The multiple meanings of belonging are mediated in material ways through engagement with land–working it, occupying it, making a home on it - as both I.B. Rai and this paper describe. Land rights, tenure, and rent have long been important concerns for in my own research. What Gorkhaland meant - how it was described - on the tea plantations of Darjeeling and in the farms of Kalimpong was shaped by land tenure and the relationship between land, rent, and the state. Land is at play in discussions of the past, present, and future. Tamang's article asks: where is that future, and what are its material relations? *Where* is the most fruitful land to work and make a home? *Where* is life livable? Is it in Darjeeling, or in the vastness of Siliguri?

Just as attending to vernacular literature and everyday speech reveals idioms of land ownership and belonging that go beyond stale tropes, diffuse notions of sexuality and gender emerge as well. Kaustav Chakraborty's article queers oral traditions, highlighting how Lepcha folktales reveal nonnormative, "ecomasculinist" ways of being in the world. As Sinha and Subba's article in this collection describes, the *khukuri* is symbolic of the region. Paired with Chakraborty's discussion, we can see the *khukuri* as both metonym and icon for hyper-masculine heteronormative Gorkhaness, too. The bravery, loyalty, and valor of Gurkha male soldiers certainly seem to emanate from the thing itself, but so too does a mythical, almost superhuman, strength and aggression. This vision of masculinity is inseparable from colonial occupation and a colonial taxonomy of labor that rendered certain groups into loyal subjects and 'martial races.' And, it is certainly not the only way of being in the world. In the spirit of the collection, Lepcha folktales offer an alternate reading of masculine being in the Darjeeling Hills. These folktales decenter patriarchal and stratified social norms, so often replicated in political discourse. The everydayness of folktales offers a reversal from dominant ways of seeing. In Chakraborty's words, these tales "replace their colonial internalized 'ethic of daring' with the 'ethic of caring' in their everyday future." His article seeks to "allow the Darjeeling men to recall 'the not yet-real', but plausible, genderqueer male identities of yore." Folktales tell of an intertwined world of humans and nonhumans and offer posthuman intimacy. Again, there is a call from the

whole collection in this vein. How might we center nondominant modes of representation, or genres, beyond political speeches, newspapers, English language political analysis to highlight ways of knowing and being that run counter to dominant modes of apprehension?

An axiom that circulates in the region about as frequently as statements about the innate bravery of Gurkha soldiers is: “there is no water in Darjeeling.” Rinan Shah’s article begins with the conundrum of Darjeeling’s high rainfall, but poor water distribution system. While scholars have highlighted the effects of water scarcity, Shah describes how formal and informal water supply and circulation networks converge, and have converged over time, to bring water - as sparse as it is - to Darjeeling public taps. Water is an excellent lens for understanding municipal and state institutions, political action, and physical infrastructure. The lack of water - and the everyday negotiations between state and non-state, formal and informal actors - highlights the chronic underdevelopment of the Hills. Shah argues that such inequalities engender the “identity crisis” that shapes life in the region. The material manifestations of underdevelopment (e.g. in “the water problem”) emerge historically from diffuse political and political economic forces. Though the causes are diffuse, the effects must be worked on - in the everyday - by people in Darjeeling. We can thus read in seemingly mundane acts, like standing in line with reused plastic bottles at the neighborhood tap or waiting for the water tanker to weave its way up from Senchal, as everyday acts of trying to make Darjeeling livable amidst increasing uncertainty, inequality, and deprivation. Certainly, too, community groups and political parties make connections that state institutions don’t. Attending to work on water, both in formal and informal means or by individuals, families, and *samajs*, pushes against a normalization of water scarcity as a normalized condition.

In conclusion, I’ll return to the work of I.B. Rai. Whether it is carrying a bag of cashews home for a child, or debating about the way to make *kheer*, or the sigh of returning home from one’s own fields after a day of planting, there is a joy in slowness. There is beauty and importance in the languid details of the everyday. There is so much life lived beyond dominant frames of thinking and apprehending the Darjeeling Hills. Let this collection be a call to listen better, to slow down our analysis, and pay attention to the stories of the everyday; to privilege emic concepts, vernacular literature, and theories emergent from the Hills.

Endnotes

1. See March 1998 issue of *Flat File*. This short story also appears in Adhikari’s translation (Rai 2018)

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