

Introduction to Multivocal Spaces: An Exploration of Everyday Life in Darjeeling Himalayas

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In a recent podcast episode of “Getting Curious” with Jonathan Van Ness in conversation with Mona Chettri, she offers a fresh insight on the Darjeeling-Sikkim Himalaya, importantly stating the need to understand the developments surrounding these places within their specific socio-cultural, historical, and political contexts.¹ Thinking about the Himalaya is in itself a complex process, begging us as an audience to curiously probe into the question of what or who constitutes the Himalaya in the first place. The collection of articles and art works in this special issue works with this purpose of ‘curiosity’ in exploring an alternative imagination of Darjeeling Himalaya, beyond current discourses on the place and its people, reduced to the tropes of ‘mountains, mysticism, tea’ and the sub-national political movement of Gorkhaland.

Historically, Darjeeling Himalaya/Hills was created with the purpose of establishing the region as a sanatorium for the British colonial rulers (O’Malley 1999). Through constant colonial experimentations - such as the introduction of the toy train,

the various plantations, and most importantly, the setting up of the Gorkha regiment - the region was eventually turned into an extractive frontier, a practice carried forward into the ‘post-colonial’ era. In recent years, however, Darjeeling has perhaps become most readily associated with the Gorkhaland agitation, a movement for sub-national autonomy that would form a new Indian state from the northern hilly regions of the state of West Bengal. Leaders and supporters of the agitation maintain that a new state of Gorkhaland would bring political agency, development, and recognition to the region’s Nepali-speaking demographic majority.

Treated as a periphery with ‘security concerns,’ the Indian state and the state of West Bengal’s militarized approach in addressing questions of ‘anxiety over belonging’ (Middleton 2013) amongst the Indian Nepali/Gorkha community has resulted in the region witnessing prolonged periods of political instability, conflict, and disturbances. Inclusion being an integral part of the ‘post-colonial’ nation-state building

project of the Indian state, ideas of belonging and inclusion continue to remain contested notions in these borderlands, forcing us to crucially engage with these ‘post-colonial’ developments in India’s peripheries (Barbora 2016). Such engagements therefore demand an urgent interrogation with the everyday, mundane spaces where articulations of insecurities, challenges, experiences are eminently tied to these larger questions of belonging, alienation, and exclusion—integral to the Gorkha identity and their quest for a homeland.

Attention to the overt political maneuverings of Gorkha separatist politics, while important for our understanding of the region, have drawn attention to certain indexes of being Gorkha. Questions of ethnic identity, masculinist political rhetoric, and articulations of a singular Gorkha ‘identity crisis’ dominate popular discourse, but this collection seeks to bring attention to life lived outside these normalized - *and normalizing* - framings of Gorkha identity. Articulations and materializations of Gorkha identity have been constrained

by hyper-masculinist, gendered, casteist postures to people, to politics, and to place. In turn, these postures foreclose what it means to belong in the Darjeeling Hills. This collection reads against the grain of the dominant political discourse to foreground questions of gender, class, sexuality, and caste, which are often obscured in scholarly and popular discussions of Gorkha identity.

The collection of works in this special issue is an effort to move beyond the strictly defined notions of the place, space, and its history, exploring new ways of rethinking the Darjeeling Himalaya. It brings together scholars/practitioners from the region with interdisciplinary backgrounds and interests articulating new approaches in redefining the place, through different prisms of analysis. The collection envisages and offers an epistemological framework that locates the Darjeeling Himalaya as an entity in itself - with all its myriad complicated histories, socio-cultural, and political realities and tensions embedded into the everyday spaces and existence of the people. This collection urges us to engage with the multi-faceted realities that govern the lives of the people, through an exploration of the mundane, everyday spaces that goes on to produce collective imageries of the people and the place.

The political instability in the Darjeeling Himalaya is now over a decade old and has changed in its nature and form which can no longer be ignored or marginalized from larger discourses shaping up an understanding of the place. Any forms of knowledge production on this place must therefore take into account these realities - experienced by the people in their

mundane, everyday spaces, constantly altered through new configurations of power hierarchies, re-instating gender, caste, ethnic, and other regimes with direct bearing upon what it means to be a Gorkha/Indian Nepali. This collection is an effort to bring to the fore these realities; it is an effort to engage with the place through these altered realities that demand an urgent engagement beyond strictly defined contours of politics, society, and history. Efforts in this direction are already visible in the works of early career scholars from the place experimenting with new frameworks/political activism and nudging us to shift focus from homogenized discourses to these intertwined shifting identities and practices.

This collection seeks to contribute to the ongoing dialogue in this direction Reconsidered (Shneiderman and Middleton 2018) is an important intervention in this direction. Online resources such as *talesintwolanguage*², *adhaakaashblogspot.com*³, the *Confluence Collective*⁴ are welcome efforts of young scholars creating new spaces in writing their own histories and stories, contributing to nuanced, diverse and informed knowledge production on the place. This collection is an effort to bring together works of younger early career scholars from the place, working within their respective disciplinary training and using interdisciplinary approaches to produce new articulations of place.

Mandika Sinha and Dronika Subba's article brings to the fore the centrality of caste to the Indian Nepali/Gorkha community in the Darjeeling Hills through the narrative of the *khukuri* as symbol of valor

and pride of the Indian Nepali/Gorkhas. They raise important questions around the invisibility of the makers of the *khukuri* (prominently the lower caste groups) despite the centrality of the weapon to the Gorkha identity. Caste is a predominant marker of the Indian Nepali/Gorkha community, evident in the cultural practices of intolerance of inter-caste marriages, subtle and direct forms of untouchability being practiced in private and public spaces as the norm. Largely believed to be a 'liberal, free' society, silence around caste-based discrimination has often rendered lower caste groups being subject to various forms of emotional, mental, and physical violence. Caste-based practices look different in the Hills compared to mainstream Indian society, allowing for liberal elites to take a comfortable position around caste, to the extent of denying caste-based discrimination in the first place. Sinha and Subba's work is crucial for it raises discomfort around this notion of silence, based on their reading of place and lived experiences.

Kaustav Chakraborty in his work offers a fresh reading of folklores as crucial sites of interrogation, engaging with the overtly hyper-masculine Gorkha identity, "uncovering an endogenous ecofeminism (Alternate) masculinity that may act as a gender queer model based on which the Gorkha men may learn to replicate the 'ethic of daring' with the 'ethic of caring.'" Positioning himself as an ally, Chakraborty's interrogation of the hyper-masculine Gorkha identity not only introduces gender and sexuality as important prisms of analysis but contributes to the larger volume's purpose of exploring alternative methodologies in

knowledge production on the place and reframing of the Gorkha identity. This piece allows us to explore existing, alternative practices creating possibilities for re-imagining the Gorkha identity outside of the dominant framings of the hyper-masculine discourse and practices.

Nirvan Pradhan engages with the steady practice of ‘out’ migration, aptly described as a search for ‘*new Muglan*.’ Nirvan uses this trajectory of migration, embedded into the historical/spatial realities of the Indian Nepalis, locating it in the ‘post-colonial’ period with new challenges, realities and bearings on the realities of this community. In exploring this ‘culture of migration’ that has become an eminent feature of the Darjeeling Hills in the wake of growing unemployment, poverty, and underdevelopment, this work importantly locates the factors behind such need to migrate - seeking a better living condition - in the form of an imagined space of *Muglan*, drawing the readers to look beyond the romanticized tropes of the Hills, to acknowledge the growing everyday hardships, insecurities and impoverished conditions of the people in tea and other plantations.

Sangay Tamang in his paper introduces the centrality of land as an integral framework to approach the question of the Gorkha identity and the quest for a homeland in the form of *Gorkhaland*. Where does land fit into this imagination? How has it been articulated or addressed by the multiple political stakeholders? Reduced to mere political rhetoric during times of election, access to land remains a pressing issue for the Indian Nepali/Gorkha community

with a huge section having no access to land. In the wake of significant changes such as the Citizenship Amendment Act, where citizenship has over time come to be significantly associated with land, lack of such documentation renders the Indian Nepali more vulnerable than ever. Sangay Tamang in his article traces this centrality of land to the question of identity through these notions of accessibility and control (or rather lack of control) over land, bringing to the fore both the emotional and the materialistic dimension of identities and belonging, demanding a critical re-interrogation of this connection to the imagined idea of the homeland.

Pema Gyalchen Tamang, through a decolonized reading of Indra Bahadur Rai’s prominent works *Aaja Ramita Cha* (There is A Spectacle Today) and *Pahad ra Khola* (Mountains and Rivers) seeks to address the discursive formation of the place, largely embedded in colonized notions of romanticism and mysticism. Tamang raises important questions on the knowledge production of the place and its people, historically denied access to these spaces. His work is an attempt to “decolonize existing knowledge and re-imagine Darjeeling from an insider’s perspective”.

Anisa Bhutia’s work draws our attention to the idea of the meaning-making of place through the story of two cheeses. Through the comparative analysis of these cheeses - one being the locally produced *Churpi*, more easily and affordably accessible, vis-a vis the Kalimpong cheese with an appeal to a certain section of people both outside and inside of Kalimpong - this article traces the connection between the colonial history of

the place carried forward into the post-colonial period through the sociality of food and landscape. This paper introduces readers to the place - often overshadowed in the discourse on the Darjeeling Himalayas - with its own complicated and rich history. Kalimpong a place emerges as an entity of its own, marked by these multiple socio-cultural dimensions, brought to the fore through these connection of the Swiss cheese, *Churpi*, *Haat Bazar* as specific markers of the place embedded in its history of colonialism and connection with the larger Himalayan belt.

Unlike the picturesque, romanticized images of the Darjeeling Hills presented in popular culture and tourist websites, long queues of people lined to fill up water with buckets and jerry-cans is a common sight in Darjeeling, demystifying the romanticized idea of the region. Rinan Shah engages with the notion of water scarcity not merely as an environmental issue but as a direct outcome of regional disparity between the plains and hills of West Bengal. Interconnecting water governance, politics, and identity, Rinan Shah’s work brilliantly traces the interconnection between questions of marginalization, identity, and development, not as separate from but as integral to the discourses on Gorkha identity and *Gorkhaland*. The author pushes readers to navigate through these mundane realities deeply intertwined to the physical and spatial realities of the place.

This collection is an outcome of long deliberations and conversations among the contributing authors and editors for months. It is an effort to contribute to knowledge production on the

Darjeeling Himalaya and its people addressing questions that have been pushed to the background despite being central to the everyday existence of the people of this place. As new challenges and realities contribute to worsening the already fragile and politically unstable conditions, we see a gradual increase in shrinking of democratic spaces, growing sense of insecurity, rise in unemployment and crimes. Our histories continue to be distorted and our present more fragile in changing situations of governing policies around who belongs; amidst such challenges and difficulties, this volume is compiled with a growing sense to address these concerns and realities through nuanced, deliberative and collective engagements from within. The contributing authors through their respective work explore new methodologies in the form of oral histories, fiction, lived experiences, and artwork offering alternative frameworks to engage with the place. The photo essay and the artwork add to the richness of the volume seeking to build alternative epistemological framework on readings of the place and the people.

We as guest editors of this special issue of HIMALAYA are humbled to be taking an effort in this direction and are thankful to the authors for trusting us with their work and especially to Sarah Besky, whose expertise, encouragements, insight and support has been a valuable contribution in the materialization of this volume. We are grateful to the peer reviewers for their valuable time and feedback on the papers.

Endnotes

1. [How Ranging Is The Eastern Himalaya? With Dr. Mona Chettri - Getting Curious with Jonathan Van Ness, podcast, aired, March 23, 2022.](#)
2. <https://talesintwolanguage.wordpress.com/>
3. <https://aadhaakaash.blogspot.com/2022/03/aadha-aakash.html>
4. <https://www.theconfluence-collective.com/>

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