

## Seminar Paper

Calcutta Research Group  
7<sup>th</sup> Critical Studies Conference on Migrant Asia: Refugees, Statelessness &  
Migrant Labour Regimes, November, 17-19, 2022, Kolkata

Panel: Metamorphosis of the Migrant: State, Migration and Identity Politics

### The Migrant at Home: A Case of the Gorkha Conundrum

\*Bidhan Golay

Around the same time the English of South Asian and Caribbean descent faced the ‘Tebbit Test’ in England, the people of Darjeeling too underwent through a similar test. Except that there was no equivalent of the British Conservative Party, or a certain Mr. Tebbit to make such pronouncements here. But it was a test nonetheless. But let us take a quick detour before we come back to that specific moment. Darjeeling had through the late 1960s, 70s and early 80s established itself as one of the favourite ‘Hill Stations’ for tourists and casual visitors. It was, and still is, a must visit place in the travel itinerary of Western tourists and domestic travellers alike. The town is perched along the ridge that overlooks a vast valley with the magnificent Kanchanjunga on the north. No wonder the hill station was a much sought-after location for the Bollywood directors those days.<sup>1</sup>

Darjeeling was many things to many people. Most of all Darjeeling also served as the ‘Hill Station’ for the British. Among the vestiges of the British rule is the ‘Governor’s House’, a sprawling bungalow, showcasing colonial architecture, located on the northern end of the Mall Road. In keeping with the imperial splendour, the Gurkha personnel serving in the British Army instituted a football tournament called, ‘The All-India Brigade of Gurkha Gold Cup’ or simply “Gold Cup” in 1975. The annual tourney attracted some of the top

---

\* Bidhan Golay teaches Political Science at the Department of Political Science, School of Social Sciences, Sikkim University, Gangtok, Sikkim

<sup>1</sup> A leading English daily published from Darjeeling puts a catchy title: “Bollywood Back in Darjeeling”, *The Telegraph*, Siliguri, 11.06.2011. (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/north-east/bollywood-back-in-darjeeling/cid/383294>) Also see, “Bollywood Laps Up Darjeeling Again: Queen of Hills Goes Gaga as Stars Hit the Streets”, *The Telegraph*, Siliguri, 16.06.2011 (<https://www.telegraphindia.com/west-bengal/bollywood-laps-up-darjeeling-again-queen-of-hills-goes-gaga-as-stars-hit-the-street/cid/387683>)

football clubs like the Calcutta based Mohun Bagan, East Bengal, including foreign teams from neighbouring Nepal and Bhutan. The year was 1984. The pre-tournament favourite East Bengal met with a relatively unheralded Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation (RNAC) team in the finals. The RNAC team was led by the young talismanic striker Ganesh Thapa whose genius and skill on the football field had endeared himself to the football enthusiasts in Darjeeling in the lead up to the finals. No sooner that the ball was kicked into play than the local supporters shed all inhibitions to support the Royal Nepal Airlines Corporation team. The East Bengal players were bemused to say the very least. They now had to suddenly deal with a partisan crowd whom they thought would anyway support the home club against a foreign team. This particular event can be read as the ‘Tebbit’ moment for the people of Darjeeling. Needless to say that the RNAC team lifted the trophy handing defeat to the Calcutta club that year. In the same year East Bengal signed up Ganesh Thapa.

The history of Darjeeling is quite unlike the history of other ‘Hill Stations’ in India in the sense that unlike other hill stations, Darjeeling was located right at the edge of the British frontier. As a result, Darjeeling has always remained the bearer of ‘doubleness’. It is the bearer of overlapping boundaries of histories, cultures and identities. This fact came into sharp relief when this researcher visited the Nepalese Embassy situated at the Barakhamba Road, New Delhi, during the initial years of research. Upon entering the researcher was told to meet the Second Secretary for the necessary permission to access the library. The gentleman was very warm and offered tea. One never felt that the embassy was that of a foreign country. It was indeed easy to break into conversation quite effortlessly – effortlessly because it was in our mother tongue - and in the course of the conversation it turned out that the Second Secretary’s native place was no more than thirty kilometres away from this writer’s home in the border town of Pashupati in Nepal. It was so close and yet very far. Such personal experiences have generated a deep interest in the history of Darjeeling in this researcher’s mind.

The spatial region comprising the mid hills or *pahad* starting from far west of present-day Nepal all the way to the borders of present-day Bhutan represents a space that had always been a fluid zone for a population that was continuously moving from one end to the other. Novels like *Naya Chhitijko Khoj* (In Search of New Horizon) have richly documented this

nomadic life of the people across the borders and frontiers.<sup>2</sup> If one visits the ‘Observatory Hill’ or *Mahakal Dara* just above Chowrashta, the famous promenade in the town, then we get to see a temple with a Buddhist monk seated on the right and a Hindu priest seated opposite him propitiating the *Mahakal Baba*. It is said that the King of Nepal and the King of Sikkim contested each other’s claim of suzerainty over the place and hence the presence of the monk and priest. The nomadic nature of life of the people living in the *pahad* had produced an imaginative geography that was at once sacred and holy. Tribal forms of worship consisted of propitiating nature gods, rivers, a tree or a hillock.<sup>3</sup> But all this changed with the coming of the British in Darjeeling.

One of the interesting facts about Darjeeling and its people is that ‘history of Darjeeling’ inevitably begins from the year 1835, the year British East India Company took over from the Maharaja of Sikkim. What has been erased or made invisible is the rich history of the region before the coming of the British. Unfortunately, there aren’t many standard history books that deal with the history of the region prior to 1835 save some stray remarks and references. Even if they have done it, these works have not dealt with the fundamental changes that British rule represented in terms of a cognitive apparatus that was fundamentally different from the exiting forms. This paper in way seeks to make a modest attempt to fill this void by looking at the history of Darjeeling as the history of colonial governmentality. The study of ‘colonial governmentality’ as actualized in Darjeeling and the use of modern technologies of rule in Darjeeling reveal crucial facets about Darjeeling and the people. The deployment of the modern cognitive technology by the British led to mapping and cartography, census and objectification of “tribes” as also the production of space in terms of its administrative and official categorization. This led to fundamental changes in the self-conceptualization of the people and the space they inhabited. As a result, one significant change came in the way the people who up until now had led nomadic lives. Mapping was effectively a cartographic incision that produced borders in the hitherto seamless zone. Thus, nomadic life now gave way to a more sedentary life as the free movement of people came to be regulated and policed. The need for ‘Hill Coolies’ for building the summer retreat meant that more labour force comprising specific tribes needed to be stationed permanently in Darjeeling. This resulted in creating settlement for coolies and their families. This segment of

---

<sup>2</sup> Asit Rai, *Naya Chhitijko Khoj* (In Nepali), Shyam Prakashan, Darjeeling, 1984

<sup>3</sup> Even to this day people in Darjeeling offer animal sacrifice at the meeting point of rivers Teesta and Rangit in the month of *Maagh*.

population brought with them a new technology of cultivation called ‘terraced cultivation’.<sup>4</sup> Terraced cultivation is a sedentary agricultural practice that was quite different from *jhum* or shifting cultivation traditionally practiced by the Lepchas.

Furthermore, the production of frontiers and boundaries led to a reconfiguration of the space that now threatened to overwrite the sacred geographies. As a result, the people who now started to live a sedentary life in Darjeeling became the Nepali diaspora. The Nepali diaspora who made Darjeeling their home began to be referred to as *Munglane* or those living in the land of Mughals. This production of Nepali diaspora resulting out of modern cartography and mapping is at the heart of the ‘identity crisis’ of the Nepalis<sup>5</sup> in Darjeeling. The Nepali subjectivity that has come to be constituted is constantly struggling to make a home in Darjeeling but not without fleeting memories of the *pahad* that they left behind. What is interesting is that while the political discourse on Nepali identity and Gorkhaland movement increasingly swept the past that ties the people to the vast geography under the carpet, the literary discourses as also the occasional spontaneous moments like that of a football match made room for expression of diasporic yearning for home. We shall be looking at these two registers as separate discursive spaces occasionally merging together. The political discourse and the history of Gorkhaland movement is well documented and hence does not require much elaboration. What has perhaps remained inaccessible to non-Nepali speaking/reading public is the vast field of literary utterances that is constantly flitting between Darjeeling and the region that has now come to be known as Nepal. Michael Hutt has traced this diasporic yearning in Nepali writings in an essay that is interestingly titled, *Where is the Home for an Indian Nepali Writer?*<sup>6</sup> He says that while the political leaders of the Nepali community have been demanding a homeland for Nepalis within India, the Indian Nepali writers on the other hand have been somewhat sceptical towards the notion of a ‘homeland’.<sup>7</sup>

At the heart of the problem lies the issue of “migration. The British establishment of a modern regime of power in Darjeeling profoundly altered the earlier pattern of people

---

<sup>4</sup> T. B. Subba, Socio-Cultural Aspects of Sikkim: Chie Nakane Re-Examined, *Man in India*, Vol. 65. No. 1, March, 1985, pp. 103-104

<sup>5</sup> The word ‘Gorkha’ and ‘Nepali’ is used interchangeably here even though there is a running debate between the votaries of either term.

<sup>6</sup> Michael Hutt, *Where is the Home for an Indian Nepali Writer?* in Tanka Bahadur Subba, et. al. (eds.) *Indian Nepalis: Issues and Perspectives*, Concept Publishing House, New Delhi, 2009, pp. 28-48

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* p. 28

moving back and forth across the mid hills of present-day Nepal and Sikkim. It slowly gave way to a different pattern of movement where people started moving east of Mechi river to Darjeeling on a permanent basis. The key factors behind this human movement are involved in the setting up of the infrastructure for the establishment of a ‘hill station’ for the Company officers from Calcutta, establishment of tea gardens that was dependent on massive labour which the non-Hindu natives were to provide, and finally, the establishment of ‘Gurkha’ regiments for the defence of the British Empire.

It is interesting for us to note that most academic studies on the Nepalis in Darjeeling are incomplete without any reference to Nepal. Nepal has truly become the template for understanding the history, society and culture of Nepalis in India. More recently, there is also this academic movement to label all Nepalis living outside Nepal as the “Nepali diaspora”. In fact, the publication of a well-known work with the title, *Nepali Diaspora in the Globalised Era*, evoked much resentment and anger among a section of academia and political circles.<sup>8</sup> The ensuing debate suggested that the word ‘diaspora’ has become a dreaded word in the changing political dynamics of Darjeeling. It appeared as if the use of such words only buttresses the claim of those opposed to Gorkhaland since the implication is that Nepalis are indeed from Nepal and that they have migrated to India. The everyday experiences of the Indians of Nepali origin suggest an element of truth in such claim but those experiences remain distant and apart from the discussions that take place in high academics. To be fair to all we can say that such claims are made both out of ignorance as well as deep-seated political motivations. For someone embedded in the complex belongings pervasive in Darjeeling to find their people invisible in such academic discourse and by extension in the eyes of the nation is disappointing to say the very least. But equally disappointing is the understanding of the political leaders about the spatial histories of the region. They fall victim to this narrative that the history of the nation is something that has been always and already existing from antiquity not subject to change and contestation.<sup>9</sup>

Leaving aside the apparent compulsions of the political discourse in Darjeeling, migration remains an objective phenomenon the Mongoloid tribes experienced centuries ago. The archive documenting this objective phenomenon is rather scarce but what is rich is the

---

<sup>8</sup> Tanka B. Subba and A. C. Sinha (eds.) *Nepali Diaspora in a Globalised Era*, Routledge, London, 2016

<sup>9</sup> For a fuller discussion on the narrative of the nation, see, Etienne Balibar, “The Nation Form: History and Ideology”, in Etienne Balibar and in Immanuel Wallerstein (eds.) *Race, Nation, Class: Ambiguous Identities*, Verso, London, 1991, p. 86

literary production subsequently that subjectively reproduced the experience penury and privation back home. The role of *gallawalas* (recruiting agents) in turning over young able-bodied Nepalis at the service of the Empire or that of *daffadars* in drafting the ‘hardworking’ ‘hill people’ in the newly laid tea gardens perhaps needs to be rewritten not as an footnote but as a central theme to recapture the lasting significance of that in the form of cultural memory and subjectivity. In order to do that it is necessary to understand the background of migration in some detail.

Nepal in the nineteenth century was predominantly a rural economy whose agriculture was subsistence.<sup>10</sup> The state as the all-powerful entity was the biggest landowner. This traditional state landlordism was known as *raiker*. The word *raiker* is supposed to have been derived from two Sanskrit words *Rajya* (State) and *kara* (tax) denoting land on which state levies tax.<sup>11</sup> Within this broad system of *raiker*, the state allowed the co-existence of other forms of land tenure, like *birta*, *guthi*, and *jagir*. There was also, in addition to the above three forms, the communal ownership practiced among the indigenous tribes known as *Kipat*. The system of *birta*, *jagir*, and *guthi* simply understood was the grant of the state land to either an individual or to a religious institution.<sup>12</sup> Baburam Acharya informs us that the word *birta* was probably derived from the Sanskrit word *Britti*, meaning livelihood.<sup>13</sup> *Birta* was given to individuals in appreciation to their services, as ritual gifts, or as a token of patronage. It was usually priests, religious teachers, soldiers, members of the nobility and royal family land often endowed by the King for temples or monasteries as well as other charitable purposes was called *guthi*.<sup>14</sup> *Jagir* was another form of a land tenure in which the members of the nobility as well as civil or military employees got land as emolument for the services they rendered to the state.<sup>15</sup> There is little doubt in that the policy of land grant was followed in favour of particular social classes while excluding certain communities. They tended to be concentrated, for the most part, among the Brahmins, Chhetris, and Thakuris mostly from

---

<sup>10</sup> Mahesh Chandra Regmi, A Study in Nepali Economic History, 1768-1846, Manjushree Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, p.38

<sup>11</sup> Baburam Acharya, Land Tenure and Land Registration in Nepal, Integrating Generations, FIG Working Week, Stockholm, 2008, p. 4

<sup>12</sup> Mahesh Chandra Regmi, A Study in Nepali Economic History, 1768-1846, Manjushree Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, p.38

<sup>13</sup> Baburam Acharya, Land Tenure and Land Registration in Nepal, Integrating Generations, FIG Working Week, Stockholm, 2008, p. 4

<sup>14</sup> Mahesh Chandra Regmi, Thatched Huts and Stucco Palaces: Peasants and Landlords in 19<sup>th</sup> Century Nepal, Adroit Publishers, Delhi, p. 39

<sup>15</sup> Mahesh Chandra Regmi, A Study in Nepali Economic History, 1768-1846, Manjushree Publishing House, New Delhi, 1971, p.39

western Nepal, who sustained the political authority of the new rulers. The Gurungs, Magars, Tamangs, Limbus, Khambus and Newars generally did not receive such favours. On the contrary, they suffered encroachment leading to a gradual depletion of the lands they had obtained during the previous regimes as a result of *birta* grants and *jagir* assignments.<sup>16</sup>

While the general policy of the Gorkhali State was to maintain the existing economic system, its policies did affect the *kipat* system practiced by the indigenous tribes in central and eastern Nepal. The *kipat* system was a system of communal ownership of land by a particular ethnic group. The ownership rights were generally customary, acquired on account of settlement over a long period of time. This *kipat* system was a major hurdle for the state whose primary objective was maximization of *raiker* land. Prithivinarayan Shah initially followed a conciliatory policy towards these groups. But these assurances did not appear to comfort the tribes who preferred to move further east to the adjoining areas of India and Sikkim in the last decades of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. It was only after the Limbus, in particular, joined the Chinese in the war against Nepal in 1788-93 that the Nepali State restored their traditional rights over their land.<sup>17</sup>

The society was clearly divided into two groups. The upper castes that drew their sustenance from the state formed a group at the top, and the Mongoloid tribes who were mostly peasants formed the group below. It was this section of the people who left their homes and hearths and migrated towards *Munglan* (India). The more familiar name Darjeeling, which is the anglicized version of *Dorjeling*, was popularized only with the coming of the British. Even to this day Darjeeling is still referred to as *Munglan* in many parts of Nepal.

This process of eastward movement started spiralling after the Anglo-Gurkha war, and it only increased further with the consolidation of the British power in Darjeeling. It is to be noted that Darjeeling prior to the coming of the British did not provide any economic opportunities. But people did come to this part mainly for two reasons. Firstly, since most of the people came from the mid hills known as *pahad*, their choice of Darjeeling was natural given its geographical similarity. Secondly, they could not move southwards to the *Terai*

---

<sup>16</sup> Lionel Caplan, Some Political Consequences of State Land Policy in East Nepal, *Man*, Vol. 2. No. 1, March, 1976, p. 109. Also see, Thomas Cox, Land Rights and Ethnic Conflict in Nepal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 25., No. 24/25, June, 1990

<sup>17</sup> Lionel Caplan, Some Political Consequences of State Land Policy in East Nepal, *Man*, Vol. 2. No. 1, March, 1976, pp.49-51

regions of Nepal because they feared *awoole joro* or malaria (literally meaning fever of the low lands).<sup>18</sup> However, with the settlement of the British, Darjeeling provided new economic opportunities in the shape of casual labourers in building roads, clearing forests, recruitment in the British Indian Army, and a certain type of skilled labourers in tea gardens and cinchona plantations. From the above it can be deduced that the experience of ‘migration’ from the *pahad* to Darjeeling is central to the subject formation of Nepalis in Darjeeling. The imperial ideas about race and labour have constituted the subjectivity of the people in more than one way.

Townshend Middleton says that despite the Nepali government’s disapproval and legal hurdles against migration of Nepalis to Darjeeling, the British were convinced that no development was possible in Darjeeling without the Nepali coolies and that ‘they are the best tea coolies known’.<sup>19</sup> Hence the British depended heavily on informal labour recruiters known as *sardars*. The native recruiters tapped the ethnic connections, with their knowledge of their traditional habitats to promise a better future to entice labourers. *Sardars* typically brought together large groups of coolies usually belonging to a particular tribe to particular tea gardens where labour was needed. The *sardars* thus performed an important function of acting as a bridge between the planters and leaders of the coolies attending to both material and cultural needs.<sup>20</sup> In a similar vein the anthropologist Tanka Bahadur Subba talks about the importance of ethnic ties in the import of labour. Migration, he says, always happened on the basis of ‘family’ and not ‘individual’. As a result, the mobility of labour from one place to another rarely happened resulting in the scope to employ even the children at less than half of the wage of an adult.<sup>21</sup>

Back home the Nepalis weaved their own stories about Darjeeling. As they prepared to leave their home and hearth, they began imagining about Darjeeling and tea gardens as a

---

<sup>18</sup> There is an interesting passage in Indra Bahadur Rai’s novel, *Aaja Ramita Chha*, where a comparison between *pahad* and Morang (Now a district) in the terai region is made. Dharmaprasad Shrestha, the protagonist in the novel, has married second wife and now settled in Morang leaving behind his first wife in *pahad*. The novel is replete with descriptions like, “[...] *awoolle khayeko kaalo suska sareer*”, meaning a body burnt and worn out by the heat in the plains”. Again, “[...] *chaarai tira garmi ra awoole feri machinnda*”, meaning once the onset of heatwave and malaria. Indra Bahadur Rai, *Aaja Ramita Chha*, (In Nepali) Navyuwak Nepali Pustak Mandir, Gorubathan, 1964

<sup>19</sup> Townshend Middleton, “Unwritten Histories: Difference, Capital, and the Darjeeling Exception”, in Townshend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman (eds.), *Darjeeling Reconsidered: Histories, Politics, Environment*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2018, p.36

<sup>20</sup> Ibid, p. 37

<sup>21</sup> Tanka Bahadur Subba, *Dynamics of a Hill Society: The Nepalis of Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas*, Mittal Publications, Delhi, 1989, p.4



place of freedom and better life. Most people were told: *chiyaa ko bot maa paisaa falchha*, (which can be loosely translated to mean that money will grow on tea bushes).<sup>22</sup> Another saying that became common at that time was, ‘*soonako lingo, chaandi ko ping, ek jieu khaana laauna lai thikai chha Darjeeling*’, (roughly translated and summed it means Darjeeling will end my sorrow).<sup>23</sup> Paradoxically, at the same time, migration was never a simply happy moment for the people who got lured by *sardars*. They were never sure of what the new life was going to offer to them. As they prepared themselves for a new regimen, they often consoled themselves saying: *ek jhoomro launchu, ek maanaa khanchu*, meaning I will wear soiled clothes just enough to cover my body and eat just enough to survive.<sup>24</sup>

It is our contention here that Nepali literary public sphere in Darjeeling that emerged around the second decades of the last century served as the discursive field for the articulation of the pain and agony of loss. The literary sphere has off late been ridden with a certain kind of political correctness informed by the political discourse of Indian Nepali identity but even then it serves to rewrite cartographic violence of modern state. Take for instance the proverb: *Lhasa ma soon chha kaan mero buchhe* (Literally meaning, there is gold in Lhasa (Tibet) but my ears are without them), bringing Tibet into the sacred territory of the kingdom. The incantations by the *purohit* (chief priest) at the sanctum sanctorum at *Mahakal Dara* (A temple/Monastery at the Observatory Hill) and at *Sinchel Dhaam* (A Durga temple at Tiger Hill) similarly invoke together the names of rivers in present day Nepal and Sikkim.

To drive the point of migration and memory home, with suitable illustrations, let us take up an interesting exchange that took place between the poet Laxuman Lohani from Nepal and poet Agam Singh Giri from Darjeeling in the backdrop of *Gaon Farka Rashtriya Abhiyan* (Back to Village National Campaign) in Nepal. This particular campaign was initiated by Nepal’s Panchayat regime between the years 1967 – 1975 urging young Nepalese to return to their villages and live among village communities to usher in a new development. It was around the year 1975 that some of the famous theatre personalities and artists from Nepal like Nati Kaji, Tara Devi, and Pushpa Nepali travelled to Darjeeling. The singer

---

<sup>22</sup> Bidhan Golay, Rethinking Gorkha Identity: Outside the Imperium of Discourse, Hegemony, and History, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 1 &2, 2006, p. 37

<sup>23</sup> Ibid. p.40

<sup>24</sup> Bidhan Golay, Rethinking Gorkha Identity: Outside the Imperium of Discourse, Hegemony, and History, *Peace and Democracy in South Asia*, Vol. 2, No. 1 &2, 2006. p. 41

Pushpa Nepali had then sung the song *Farka hai farka Nepali, timilai dakchha Nepal* (return, all Nepalis please return, Nepal beckons you) composed by Laxuman Lohani, in the GDNS Hall.<sup>25</sup> To which the poet Agam Singh Giri gave a moving response. It was a response made all the more moving by its ambivalence and unsureness that slips out of the interstices of the text. In his widely popular song *Suna hai suna Nepali* he writes:

*Suna hai suna Nepali, hamila dakchha himali*  
*Aanshuko binti pokhera ragatko maaya sanghali*  
*Mutu yo haamro chirinchha, pira ra markaa bijjaunchha*  
*Paschim Pahar byunjhera hamilai jaba thitaunchha*  
*Thitaina deu hamila nirball banna shikai*  
*Farkana pare farkaunla pranako baaji lagai...*<sup>26</sup>

Listen, listen all Nepalis, Nepal beckons us  
 Nepal is pleading with tears and invoking our blood ties  
 Our hearts are torn apart, reminds us our pain and sufferings  
 The western hills are awake and pleading us to return  
 Please don't call us, help us to be strong here  
 If we ever have to then we shall wager our lives and come back...

[Translation mine]

In much of what Agam Singh Giri has written one can see the traces of what Frederic Jameson had called the 'national allegory'.<sup>27</sup> Indeed, the literary production in the Nepali public sphere has successfully canonised the idea of *jati ko unnati* (progress of the

<sup>25</sup> Satish Rasaily, "Girika Kewal Kehi Geetharoo" (In Nepali) in, K.M.S. Subba, L. B. Rai et. at. (eds.) *Samjhauni: Sangeet Madhuri* (A commemorative volume on Nepali songs) (In Nepali) published by GDNS, Darjeeling, 2001, pp. 64-65

<sup>26</sup> Chandra Sharma and Sujata Rani Rai (eds.) *Agam Singh Giri Rachnavali*, Vol 1, (In Nepali) Nirman Prakashan, Namchi, Sikkim, 1998, pp. 642-643

<sup>27</sup> For Jameson the nature of relation between the 'subjective, public and political' quite unlike the 'First World is wholly different in 'Third World Literature'. He says that even those texts that are private and having the property of libidinal even then makes room for projecting a political dimension in the form of national allegory. Frederic James, Third World Literature in the Era of Multinational Capitalism, *Social Text*, Autumn, 1986, No. 15 (Autumn, 1986), p. 6

community) as the central motif.<sup>28</sup> In Kumar Pradhan's assessment Agam Singh Giri's writings represent the desire of the Nepalis in Darjeeling to develop a new language of kinship and brotherhood. The writer works on two separate registers; one traces and recounts the history of strife, struggle and diasporic yearning, and at another level, it tries to map the desire of the community to create a national feeling bound together with common history and memory.<sup>29</sup> And this not a specific characteristic of Giri's writings alone. Indeed, most Nepali writers writing around 1950s wrestled with the subject that was trying to navigate through the complex terrain of collective oppression, migration and memory.

This material history has not only been a part of the folklore but has also been subjectively reconstructed in in some of the major works in Nepali literature. Novels like Lilabahadur Chhetri's, *Basaai* (Settlement), and *Brahmaputra Ko Chheeu Chhaau* (On the Banks of Brahmaputra), Laina Sing Bangdel's, *Muluk Bahira* (Outside the Homeland), and Rudraraj Pande's *Prayaschit* (Penance), were all predicated on the leitmotif of migration and memory.<sup>30</sup> It may be worth unpacking the plots in some of the novels to illustrate the point of memory. Let us take Laina Singh Bangdel's *Muluk Bahira* that narrates the story of Rane and Myauchi. Like most people living in *pahad*<sup>31</sup>, Rane too lived a marginal life steeped in poverty and hardship. Young and able-bodied men like Rane would often travel eastward to *Munglan*<sup>32</sup> the older name for the area called Darjeeling to work as wood cutters along the banks of river Teesta during the winter months.

The reasons are similar for the huge popularity of Manbahadur Mukhia's drama, *Ani Deorali Roonchha* (And the Valley Cries) not only in Darjeeling but also in Nepal. Songs like *Nau Laakhe Tara Udayo*, a lyrical poetry written by Agam Singh Giri and sung before the visiting King Mahendra by Gagan Gurung in 1959, struck an emotional chord with the Nepalis in Darjeeling.<sup>33</sup> The following lines from the song are worth quoting in this context:

---

<sup>28</sup> For a detailed discussion, see, Pratyoush Onta, Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India: The Rhetoric of *Jati* Improvement, Rediscovery of Bhanubhakta and the Writings of Bir History, in *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, Vol. I, No.1, June, 1996, pp. 37-76

<sup>29</sup> Kumar Pradhan, "Agam Singh Girika Kabitama Jatiyata ko Bhawana" (In Nepali), in Kumar Pradhan, *Adhiti Kehi* (In Nepali), Purnima Prakashan, Siliguri, p. 121

<sup>30</sup> Michael Hutt, "Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on a South Asian Diaspora", in David N. Gellner et. al. (ed.), *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Netherlands, 1997, p.102. p.140

<sup>31</sup> *Pahad* means hill in Nepali. But more specifically *pahad* refers to the mid hills of present-day Nepal.

<sup>32</sup> Darjeeling was known as *Munglan* in the *pahad* region back in Nepal.

<sup>33</sup> Sanjay Biswas, *Samjhanako Kurobhitra Kanchanjunga Atitko* (In Nepali), Published by Chumki Biswas, Darjeeling, 2009, p. 21

*Na samjha aaja Nepali sanchole yahan bancheko;*  
*Kada kai majha pahadi phul chhaina ra kahan hanseko;*  
*Suna ko sapana aanshu ma kina po bandhi lyayau nee;*  
*Mana ko aago nevhauna kina po yahan aayau nee.*

Don't think the Nepalis are living here [in Darjeeling] peacefully;  
 Living amidst thorns, the flowers of the hills are without their smiles;  
 Tying your dreams of gold with tears why did you bring it here;  
 To douse the flames of your heart why did you come here?

[Translation mine]

The new sense of belonging of the migrants to Darjeeling was thus ridden with tension, and bearing wounds of the remembered *muluk*. At the same time, it no longer quite belonged to the *muluk*, the emotions were beginning to lean more towards making a home in the *pravash*, without entirely losing the links with their *muluk*.

The contradiction in the life of the Nepalis perhaps comes from the impossibility of negotiating the yearning for the lost home and the need for making a new home in the *pravash*. The political discourse since the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling has been vociferously talking about the need to sever ties with Nepal and carve out a home in Darjeeling but what interests us is the slippages in the discourse of identity. These slippages could never be convincingly addressed as the cultural beingness of the Nepalis remain deeply tied to the memory of home left behind. If this wasn't enough as a challenge for the Nepali nationalist discourse in Darjeeling, a new kind of crisis is being felt at a particular moment of political and economic shifts that are taking place the world over. This has resulted in deeper structural shifts in the new configuration of class and culture within the community formation. There is a change in the form of growth of a large middle class with steady income and rising living standards; a highly visible segment of population has become available that is fired by new aspirations aggressively seeking to acquire newer forms of educational and cultural capital. Alongside these developments, the community has also witnessed the growth of a sizeable diasporic community that finds itself in the heart of

global economic processes made possible by neoliberal economic regimes creating - all of which are new tensions in the available conception of the Nepali self in Darjeeling.<sup>34</sup>

Let us now turn to those specific changes and transformations that is presenting itself as a new set of challenges for the identity movement that is seeking to create a separate identity for 'Indian Nepalis'. The Nepalis from Darjeeling and Nepal who form the international labour force in West Asia including places as dangerous as Tel Aviv have led to creation of new solidarities among people from both sides of the border. Small time Nepali stand up comedians and cultural groups are making a killing during Dushera and Diwali travelling to these places in helping them create a home.

The other interesting development that actually began much earlier than one discussed above was the creation of a shall we say a domestic diaspora in cities like Delhi, Mumbai, Bangalore, and such other cities. However, this process got exacerbated with the steady growth of the middle class that is increasingly inserted into the neoliberal economic regimes produced in the first world and the travel of those images as well as ideologies of consumption to the familiar parts. This phenomenon is most evident in the manner how brand 'Darjeeling' has come to be promoted and marketed in metropolises like Kolkata, Delhi and Bangalore of late. 'Darjeeling Momo' is a hugely popular item in the menu of fancy restaurants as well as street joints in these cities. So is the '*Nepali Thali*', that is fast catching up with a niche clientele who visit these new age restaurants serving 'ethnic cuisine'. There is a steady supply chain established between Darjeeling based entrepreneurs who produce raw materials – mostly fermented items – and those young entrepreneurs whose restaurants are located in the heart of a mega city.<sup>35</sup> A similarly intriguing phenomenon is the popularity of Bipul Chhetri, a composer and singer, particularly among the Nepali diaspora, living in metropolises and those who have become part of the global work force in West Asia. Much of Chhetri's popularity can be understood as yearning, nostalgia, loss and the need to reinvent Nepali identity all at the same time. Bipul Chhetri's songs take its listeners

---

<sup>34</sup> There is a clear indication in the sense in which the question of diaspora – a forbidden word in Darjeeling until sometime - is now being freely used and aggressively debated in academic circles. See, T. B. Subba and A. C. Sinha (eds.) *Nepali Diaspora in a Globalised Era*, Routledge, New York, 2017

<sup>35</sup> Leaving aside the small eateries in Delhi streets selling 'Darjeeling Momo', the more fancier ones like Yankiez, Darjeeling Steamers, Darjeeling Momos, and Momo King have more than one outlet in Delhi.

back to the now-lost earthy world of a simple village life set in a bucolic setting that once afforded everyone the peace of salubrious climes.<sup>36</sup>

In all these the Gorkha/Nepali identity is staring at crisis that does appear insurmountable. One such crisis is the upshot of the neoliberal governmental gaze, that is leading to the creation of new ethnicities in Darjeeling. Tied to this development is the intensification of the touristic, exotic gaze on the community and the space the community inhabits. This touristic gaze has necessarily resulted in the reproduction of Darjeeling and the Nepali community in its most essentialist image, meant for the consumption of an ever-growing niche consumers. The production of Nepali/Gorkha body as a marketable commodity and as a labour force that is sufficiently 'exotic' necessarily leads to the invention of the 'authentic' Gorkha. And this invention of authentic Gorkha inevitably ties them to the home that the left centuries ago. This is so because the ones who left their homes to make new homes in the *pravash* had already defiled that 'authenticity'. The word '*Munglane*' was with a certain degree of disdain back in Nepal.

Similarly, the ethnicization of Nepali identity has become a necessary condition in order to qualify as the new targets of welfare policies of neoliberal governmentality. This has resulted in a peculiar condition for the Nepalis in India. On the one hand, the insecurities of the hill population drive them towards further integration with mainstream India. On the other hand, the exigencies of electoral democratic politics and neo-liberal market reforms demand the reproduction, curation and, indeed, commodification, of their old ethnic identity. Nepali nationalism is thus confronted with a perplexing situation, where the Gorkhas must make a capital out of their distinctive Nepali identity and hence their deep ties with Nepal. At the same time, their political stake very much depends on how far they manage to juggle the elements of their Gorkha identity and make assertions of being at once different from the people of Nepal. The future of Nepali identity will thus depend on how the community can creatively use their embattled tradition to negotiate with their troubled modernity.

\*\*\*\*\*

---

<sup>36</sup> Some of the popular numbers by Bipul Chhetri are, *Rail Garee*, and *Deorali Darah*, from the album *Sketches from Darjeeling*, *Bhaans Ghari* from the album, *Samaya*. For details, please visit the site: <https://www.bipulchhetri.com/music>

