

Darjeeling Histories, Politics, and Environments

Preconference at the Annual Madison South Asia Conference

October 22, 2015

Organizers: *Townsend Middleton* (University of North Carolina) and *Sara Shneiderman* (University of British Columbia)

This preconference focuses on an exciting body of new research conducted in the Darjeeling district of India's state of West Bengal. The aim is to workshop a set of pre-circulated papers, leading to the publication of an edited volume.

Popular discourses have long fashioned the region as either a romanticized holiday destination—the “Queen of the Hills”—a tea connoisseur's paradise, or as Gorkhaland, a site of violent ethnic separatism. But until recently there has been relatively little academic engagement with the complex dynamics behind these representations. This is in large part due to Darjeeling's anomalous position within the geography of South Asian Studies. The district is at once part of India's West Bengal, which dominates much scholarship in South Asian Studies, yet peripheral to the dominant concerns of that scholarly community; an important historical and contemporary node in Nepali-speaking networks, but again beyond the domain of many researchers focused on Nepal; and finally a site for engagement with the diaspora Tibetan community, but in a mode that has often dislocated subjects from their territorial location in India. Moreover, while there has been increasing scholarly interest in India's Northeast—to which Darjeeling district serves as the gateway—it is not officially classified as part of this region's eight member states. For all of these reasons, Darjeeling has often been seen as an emotively powerful, yet empirically marginal location within South Asian imaginaries.

Over the last decade such paradigms have begun to shift, with many emerging scholars refocusing on Darjeeling on its own terms: as a historically situated, politically charged, and environmentally challenged locale in which many contemporary themes of broad interest across the disciplines can be explored. These include the production of ethnicity, the politics of land and labor, resource management, democratic practice at state margins, cross-border migration, linguistic politics and policy, and social conflict.

This preconference seeks to resituate Darjeeling as a key site for South Asian research. We highlight emergent work from scholars based in North America, Europe and Asia to show how the specific historical, political and environmental trajectories that shape Darjeeling connect with broader transregional concerns. Understanding Darjeeling, we argue, helps us better understand the historical, political, and environmental concerns of South Asia writ large.

Schedule

SESSION 1, Territory at the Margins, 8:30-10:15

- 8:30 Introductory Remarks:
Sara Shneiderman (University of British Columbia) and *Townsend Middleton*
(University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- 8:40 “Locating Darjeeling: The Hills as Exceptional Space”
Townsend Middleton, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
- 8:55 “A Summer Place: Land, Landscape and the Relational Geography of Darjeeling”
Rune Bennike (University of Copenhagen)
- 9:10 “Tea, Territory, and Tacit Knowledge: Managing Darjeeling Tea”
Sarah Besky, (Brown University)
- 9:25 Discussant: *Bodhisattva Khar*, (University of Cape Town)
- 9:40 Discussion

10.15-10.30 Coffee break

SESSION 2, Class, Citizenship and Belonging 10:30-12:15

- 10:30 “The Facilities of Citizenship: Labor, Mobility, and Belonging between Nepal and India”
Sara Shneiderman, (University of British Columbia)
- 10:45 "The Gurkha as a Subject of Justice in Transnational Sustainability Initiatives"
Debarati Sen, (Kennesaw State University)
- 11:00 "The Class Question Among the Indian Nepalis: Darjeeling in Perspective”
Swatahsiddha Sarkar (University of North Bengal) & *Babika Khawas* (University of North Bengal)
- 11:15 Discussant: *Arjun Guneratne*, (Macalester College)
- 11:30 Discussion

12.30-1.30 Lunch

SESSION 3, Subnational Politics and the State, 1:30-3:15

- 1:30 “Engaging the State in Darjeeling: Political Science Perspectives”
Selma K. Sonntag, (Humboldt State University)

- 1:45 “Local Political Competition and Escalation of the Gorkhaland Demand”
Bethany Lacina, (University of Rochester)
- 2:00 “Between ‘*Jana Andolan*’ and Party-Politics: Questioning the Movement Character of the Gorkhaland Agitation”
Miriam Wenner, (University of Zurich)
- 2:15 “Moving forward to become ‘Backward’: The Formation of Ethnic Associations and Claims for Recognition as Schedule Tribes in Darjeeling.”
Nilamber Chettri, (Jawaharlal Nehru University)
- 2:30 Discussant: *Bengt G. Karlsson* (Stockholm University)
- 2:45 Discussion

3.30-3.45 Coffee break

SESSION 4: Advancing Darjeeling Studies (Roundtable), 3:45-5:15

- 3:45 “Darjeeling Refigured: New Histories and Ethnographies of the Hills”
Townsend Middleton (University of North Carolina) and *Sara Shneiderman* (University of British Columbia)
- 4:00 Proposals for Further Collaboration
- 4:15 Open Discussion

5.30-6.30 Reception

ABSTRACTS

“Locating Darjeeling: The Hills as Exceptional Space”

Townsend Middleton, (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

In policy and the popular imagination, Darjeeling has always been a place apart--a land intimately connected to, yet appreciably different from, the ‘real’ India of the plains below. The British annexed Darjeeling in the 1830s to become the consummate colonial hill-station-- a ‘sanatorium’ offering escape from the proverbial heat of empire. Yet, beginning with the *carte blanche* authority vested to its administrators to realize these colonial designs, the region has periodically been exempted from standard rules of governance. The people have suffered a similar fate, as they have been consistently excluded as geo-racially different and marginal to India. Today, Darjeeling’s legacy of exceptionalism bears heavily on the region’s ecology, economy, and politics, shaping everything from its famed tea and tourism industries to the Gorkha people’s ongoing agitations for subnational autonomy.

This paper asks how this legacy of exceptionalism has both *marked* and *made* Darjeeling a place apart. It positions the Darjeeling Hills in relation to (and contrast with) other ‘aboriginal’, ‘frontier’, and ‘backward’ regions in India’s Northeast and beyond. The paper draws on the archives to discuss the unique arrangements of migration, labor, and governance that enabled Darjeeling to become a bastion of imperial capital. It then calls upon ethnographic engagements to explore how these collusions of capital, governance, and migration impact the lives, land, and politics of Darjeeling today. Historically and ethnographically, this paper accordingly reads against the grain of popular conceptions of Darjeeling to reveal the untold processes through which Darjeeling has become such an exceptional figure--and figment--of the post/colonial imagination.

A Summer Place: Land, Landscape and the Relational Geography of Darjeeling

Rune Bennike (University of Copenhagen)

From the early British explorers to the contemporary tourist, Darjeeling is all about landscape: misty tea gardens, picturesque cottages, elusive mountain views. Home to the Gorkhaland movement’s multiple attempts at establishing a separate state within the Indian Union, Darjeeling is also an intensely contested space. Although it was the attraction, settlement, and exploitation of Nepali migrant labour that transformed the land of Darjeeling to conform to the hill station fantasies of the colonial elite, the resulting landscape was alienated from the Nepali inhabitants. Through the disciplining of an imperial gaze that saw Darjeeling almost exclusively from the perspective of Calcutta, the Darjeeling landscape became defined by its scenery rather than its inhabitants; a place you visit rather than a place of belonging. In this chapter I explore the dialectical relationship between land and gaze that has produced Darjeeling as a “hills station” - a specific kind of place with a specific set of meanings and consequences attached. Combining an outline of land-regulation with an analysis of colonial textual and visual representations of Darjeeling I trace the processes through which Darjeeling was established as “a summer place”. Doing so, I argue for that historically rooted landscape aesthetics play a significant role in relation to contemporary politics of belonging.

“Tea, Territory, and Tacit Knowledge: Managing Darjeeling Tea”

Sarah Besky, (Brown University)

Darjeeling’s famed tea plantations are staffed almost exclusively by an Indian Nepali, or Gorkha, labor force, whose ability to advance beyond field labor has been severely limited. In 2008, retired Gorkha plantation managers founded the Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre (DTMTC). Though it was modeled on similar training programs, DTMTC’s goal had a twist: to prepare *Gorkhas* as plantation managers. As the DTMTC President explained, “Darjeeling tea gardens are in a deplorable condition. They need love.” Such conditions were caused by mismanagement by “outsiders.”

In this paper, I explore attempts to link what Julia Elyachar (2012) calls “tacit knowledge” about tea management to the broader Gorkha movement to assert territorial sovereignty over the Darjeeling region. Across India, management knowledge is increasingly being turned into a fungible good. Cloistered management “knowhow” is seen as a mark of market developmentalism, but as I show in this paper, such marketing has a long history in India—a history that finds tacit knowledge entangled with environmental notions of territory.

According to DTMTC teachers, the contemporary Darjeeling tea industry remains in a precarious state, stemming from a lack of knowledge—of how to run plantations on the part of Gorkhas and of Darjeeling’s unique socioecological context on the part of non-Nepalis who gradually replaced European managers after independence. Management skills gained elsewhere in India were, according to the DTMTC, poorly suited to Darjeeling. The DTMTC, then, was a novel blend of vocational training and political action. The institute’s goals were interwoven with ideas of connection between people and plants and moral obligations to care for a Gorkha landscape—a landscape that might be improved with the right kinds of training. Installing Gorkha managers would regenerate the agro-environment and exert territorial sovereignty over an area controlled by capital interests that sat in Kolkata, not Darjeeling.

“The Facilities of Citizenship: Labor, Mobility, and Belonging between Nepal and India”

Sara Shneiderman, (University of British Columbia)

This presentation examines the historical and contemporary conditions of citizenship (or lack thereof) that have encouraged cross-border mobility between hill villages in Nepal, and Darjeeling. I ask: what are the social dimensions of citizenship and belonging in both countries that have made cross-border mobility an ongoing lifestyle choice for many people of Nepali heritage born in both Nepal and India over time? I first consider the ‘push’ and ‘pull’ factors that provoked mass migrations from Nepal to Darjeeling and its environs, notably the problem of caste-based land appropriation endemic to 19th century hill Nepal, and the emergence of new labor opportunities in British India at roughly the same historical moment. I then explore how the upward social mobility afforded by relatively flexible social structures in Darjeeling offered new forms of citizenship, while also encouraging the emergence of class—rather than caste—as a key form of social differentiation. Finally, I look at how access to education intersected with class formation to produce new generations of Indian citizens of Nepali heritage, many of whom now cross the border in the other direction to work in education and other white collar jobs in Nepal. Such employment requires the production of Nepali “paper citizenship” (Sadiq 2008). At the same time, new generations of migrants from Nepal continue to travel to Darjeeling, seeking what many informants with whom I worked called “the facilities of citizenship”. In conclusion, I consider the relationship between these different forms of citizenship, what they tell us about

state regulation of labor (both skilled and unskilled) across the region, and their ongoing implications for class formation, belonging, and debates over the meaning of citizenship on both sides of the contemporary border.

"The Gurkha as a Subject of Justice in Transnational Sustainability Initiatives"

Debarati Sen, (Kennesaw State University)

The popularity of Fair Trade products has engendered new possibilities for consumer citizens in the global North to demonstrate solidarity with producers in the global South. Fair Trade enthusiasts are not only buying labeled products as an act of solidarity with producers in Darjeeling's tea plantations; some of them extend their affective solidarity by voluntarily visiting certified production sites to witness the effects of Fair Trade on workers' livelihoods. These acts in turn produce new kinds of transnational praxis affecting the plantation public sphere. What potential do these acts of solidarity and related transnational praxis hold for increasing the bargaining power of producer citizens (plantation workers) vis-à-vis the state? This question becomes salient since in India the state mandates wages and other worker benefits. The everyday engagements of Fair Trade savvy voluntourists enable a particular kind of socio-historical fix that does not acknowledge the past and present labor struggles in the region. Such constructions of a people or community without history draw on a peculiar celebration of a colonial nostalgia that pervades the representation of Darjeeling in socially just tea marketing.

Thus I argue that representational and engagement strategies of voluntourism in Darjeeling's tea plantations undercut the power of transnational solidarities by inadvertently celebrating practices that it is out to undo. Fair Trade as transnational praxis has inadvertently pushed justice seeking and delivery to a non-state sphere that is not accountable to the workers in terms of citizenship rights. This privatization of justice indirectly undermines collective bargaining institutions and decreases the state's accountability to workers.

"The Class Question Among the Indian Nepalis: Darjeeling in Perspective"

Swatahsiddha Sarkar (University of North Bengal) & Babika Khawas (University of North Bengal)

The class question of Nepali identity in Darjeeling lacks adequate attention except in the writings of Kumar Pradhan, a local historian. Pradhan has emphasized class as the primary factor that reinforced national unity among the Indian Nepalis settled in Darjeeling. Drawing upon Pradhan, we seek to illuminate the interstices between class and culture and thereby to illustrate how community solidarity rather than class polarization unfurled among the Nepalis of Darjeeling. Marxian class analysis with a Weberian tint, followed by attempts of social class analysis, will be considered to situate the problem conceptually. We argue that the class issue of the Nepali identity involves in it a statement of methodology and a programme of research in terms of concepts and processes that the discourse itself raises. A nuanced understanding of Nepali nationality question outside Nepal may possibly be reached by exploring the overlap between class and cultural issues.

"Engaging the State in Darjeeling: Political Science Perspectives"

Selma K. Sonntag, (Humboldt State University)

James C. Scott, a political scientist with a comparative perspective derived from anthropology, has posited the concept of Zomia to examine the relation between mid- to high-altitude dwellers and states centered in river valley civilizations in a swathe of peninsular Southeast Asia. Will

Kymlicka, also a political scientist, but one who works within the disciplinary subfield of political theory, and known for his theory of liberal multiculturalism, posits that the liberal state has a different basis of engagement with historically incorporated national minorities from that with the dominant majority or immigrant minorities. This paper, building on the previous work of both anthropologists and political scientists, analyzes the applicability of Scott and Kymlicka's theoretical frameworks to Darjeeling. I argue that while Scott and Kymlicka start from different theoretical premises, they surprisingly end up at similar positions regarding peripheral minorities' engagement with the state. This end point is not supported in Darjeeling despite the applicability of their theories to other aspects of the Darjeeling case. The paper concludes with an argument for the robustness of a different political science approach, that of historical institutionalism.

“Local Political Competition and Escalation of the Gorkhaland Demand”

Bethany Lacina, (University of Rochester)

A long-standing argument in comparative politics holds that demand for ethnoterritorial autonomy are made by hegemonic regional elites. A regional leader establishes a fiefdom of political and material resources in the periphery and then challenges the center. I use the case of the Gorkhaland movement in Darjeeling to challenge that logic. There, periods of limited local political competition have been associated with limited autonomy demands. Regional elites' primary incentive to mobilise ethnic grievances is to outflank local political rivals. Therefore, mobilization for ethnoterritorial autonomy has only been extensive after some kind of "shock" destabilizes political incumbents in Darjeeling. New Delhi is willing to help local elites consolidate personal political power because a secure regional leader can help to bottle up autonomy demands.

Between ‘Jana Andolan’ and Party-Politics: Questioning the Movement Character of the Gorkhaland Agitation

Miriam Wenner, (University of Zurich)

Despite of the growing body of research on the Gorkhaland agitation, the descriptions of the type and characteristics of the movement have so far largely been reduced to the labels of “ethnic” or “ethno-regional”. I here want to explore the question whether (or not) the Gorkhaland movement can be considered as a “social” movement (or *jana andolan*) as opposed to a party-political movement. While the former attempts to distinguish itself from electoral party-politics and draws strongly on ideology, the latter is mainly run by political parties striving for electoral success. Proposing to view the Gorkhaland agitation as a party-political movement, and the ruling party in Darjeeling as a “movement-party” which utilizes both “social movement” and “accommodative party” identities, I want to challenge common distinctions between party and movement, and raise the question in how far the “social” and “political” in Darjeeling can be so clearly distinguished.

“Moving forward to become ‘Backward’: The Formation of Ethnic Associations and Claims for Recognition as Schedule Tribes in Darjeeling.”

Nilamber Chettri, Jawaharlal Nehru University

The growth of ethnic associations and the demands for recognition as schedule tribe in Darjeeling escalated after the publication of Mandal Commission's Report. These ethnic demands further consolidated in the early 2000 and peaked at the time I was conducting my fieldwork in 2014,

when there were ten ethnic groups demanding recognition as schedule tribes. Based on empirical fieldwork this paper will try to delineate the nature of claims made by these groups and the trajectory of ethnic associations. The paper will also deal with the internal contestation within the ethnic associations regarding some fundamental aspect of their culture and the formation of splinter organization in contemporary time. In order to understand this complex process of ethnic renewal and the formation of splinter organizations among groups, this paper will look into ways ethnic groups interpret their notion of culture, identity and 'tribe' amidst claims and counterclaims and how such interpretations shape and structure the nature and course of their demands.