

CHAPTER – VI
INDIGENOUS AND EXOGENOUS PEOPLE IN COLONIAL
DARJEELING

The term 'indigenous people', randomly used in this Chapter, refers to a group of people or a community having cultural distinctiveness, living in a defined space/ region, a sense of belonging together, having its own knowledge production system which is distinctly different from modern positivist knowledge system. Thus, endogen provides for a distinctive cultural system, a place and her people different from place, people and culture system of the 'Other'.¹This sense of 'other' in respect of the majority population settled in colonial Darjeeling has been conspicuously absent. Such emigrant population settled in Darjeeling principally from eastern part of Nepal had only a thin veneer of Hinduism. The 'Mulki Ain' in Nepal, which codified Hindu Caste laws and incorporated Tibeto-Burmese speaking minority population basically non-Hindu minorities practicing animism into the caste hierarchy in Nepal, was promulgated in 1854. The immigrated Nepali populations in Darjeeling had therefore fewer barriers between them.²Thus the exogenous Nepali population settled permanently in Darjeeling for over generations has had so many commonalities in terms of place and culture system with the indigenous people.

The study attempts to unravel the impact of colonial interventions on this maiden hilly tract which largely affected her indigenous people and immigrated population settled permanently in Darjeeling tract. An attempt has been made to understand the status of both the indigenous and immigrated exogenous population, forming majority Nepalis population of the Darjeeling tract, penetrated by colonial modernity. As far as the records show the Lepcha are the original inhabitants of Sikkim as well as of the district of Darjeeling which was at one time a part of Sikkim. Bhotias of Sikkim had come

from Tibet in the 17th Century A.D. and converted the indigenous animistic Lepchas into Tibetan Buddhism and established monarchy as a centralized theocratic political system in Sikkim.³ These immigrant Bhotias freely intermarried with the Lepcha and the native population was welded to the wider system of the greater Tibetan civilization. The native Lepcha population started to wear Bhotia dress and hold annual festival according to the Buddhist calendar and today, they and the Bhotia constitute one religious and cultural entity, thus producing one of the distinctive frontier cultures within the Tibetan cultural area.⁴ In the early part of the 19th Century the Nepalis migrated to Sikkim in waves from their relatively infertile and overpopulated land of Nepal. They worked as a dependent tenant under the Bhotia or Lepcha land lords and gradually made their entrance into the socio-political scene of Sikkim and Darjeeling, ultimately becoming a major force to reckon with. The trilingual setting of the region has given the native people the advantage of social and economic contacts with Nepali and Tibetan speakers. This helped them to interact with different cultures. In such a social system, interaction did not lead to the liquidation of ethnic differences through acculturation; cultural differences persisted despite interethnic contact and interdependence.⁵

In the pre-colonial setting, the Lepcha could maintain ecological equilibrium with their environment. They lived in the zones of abundant natural resources to support a relatively small population, which they successfully exploited with a low level technology of hunting and gathering. As the number grew, a primitive form of cultivation like slash and burn or shifting hill cultivation was adopted. In course of time as population further increased and the Nepali immigrants settled in the area in large numbers the land gradually became scarce and the Lepcha were somewhat compelled to take up settled plough agriculture in the terraces and thus began the era of better use of natural resources with pre-modern technology.⁶ But the Lepchas had never been in a position to compete with the immigrant Bhotia and Nepalis.

First the Bhotia and later the Nepalis, as stronger groups had intruded in the region in search of better economic prospects. With a higher level of technology they took control of the better resources and the Lepcha subsisted on poorer and scanty natural resources. In Darjeeling except a few villages in Kalimpong sub-division Lepchas' control over the natural resources were being minimized by the Nepalis. However this competition for resources acted in a different way in the case of the immigrant Bhotia who had come earlier than the Nepalis. Bhotias were fewer in number and they did not really compete for land rather they controlled the political structure of the region (Sikkim) till 1864.⁷ In the economic sphere Bhotias preferred to work more in trans-Himalayan trade and trans-humans than to settle down in one place and till the soil. The tremendous amount of in-migration of the Nepalis in the hills of Darjeeling badly affected the ethnic composition, ethnic balance and both social and power structure of the region. The end result of such processes, as encountered by the Lepchas, was what Stavenhagen has called "ethnocide".⁸ Ethnocide for the Lepchas also meant the almost total replacement of their traditional values, beliefs, festivals, rituals and even language. Although few of them restricting them to the remote corners had been retaining their culture and language, the overall impact was devastating.⁹

The British notion of Nature as indoctrinated in the mindscape of the colonial officials engaged initially in the making of colonial Darjeeling was fundamentally different from the notion of Nature of the indigenous people who in fact lived in and lived with Nature. Unlike Europeans, forest to the indigenous people was their natural abode and means of subsistence and was certainly not a source of profit extraction. The colonial rulers ruthlessly avoided if not ignored the life process of the indigenous people of staying in and staying alive with nature in their zeal of civilizing mission and extracting natural resources in sublime.

The change of demographic complexion in colonial Darjeeling has been the product of a long and complex process of migration not only from Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan but also from countries of South-East Asian region and China. The aboriginal people have been broadly recognized as the Kiratas as justified by the best known scholar Suniti Kumar Chatterjee. To quote Chatterjee, “ *It is the consensus of opinion among Indologists that in Sanskrit the term Kirata indicated the wild non-Aryan tribes living in the mountains, particularly the Himalayas and in the North eastern areas of India, who were Mongoloid in origin.*”¹⁰ Primordial people living in this area mostly held Mongoloid culture and civilization and remained far away from Aryan/ Dravidian civilization/ cultural fold. All this has created high degree of ethnic and cultural differentiation positing thereby a vital historical links between the subcontinent and those of South and South East Asia.

In the pre-colonial period, frequent subjugation to invasions and conquests by the neighbouring countries such as Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan vying each other to hold possession made life of the native population in Darjeeling tract unsettled which originally belonged to Sikkim.¹¹ During pre-colonial phase, the Rajah (King) of Sikkim, Phuntshog Namgyal, divided the country into twelve regions (Dzongs). One of such Dzong was the sparsely populated forested tract- Darjeeling- in which Bongthing (Lepcha Priest/Kazee) supported by a council of monks had the authority. The Monks(Lamas) induced the Dzongpens (people living under the Dzong) to symbolically surrender their lands to the Rajah of Sikkim.¹²

Every Lepcha family in Zongu was supposed to have an ingzong across the border in Tibet. This was a formal relationship with a religious sanction and the two ingzongs were regarded as brothers and inter-marriage between their descendants was forbidden. The Lepcha used to set up the trading relationship only with the Tibetan Bhotias and Bhutanese but never with the Nepalis. Bhotias were basically traders and trans-humans so there was less conflict. The Lepcha and

Bhotias mutually lived in the same niche with mutual exploitation of allocated resources. Moreover the Bhuddhist Bhotias (the King belonged to this class) converted the animistic Lepcha into Buddhism which helped them to maintain a brotherly relation with them. But the Lepcha fled from the invading Nepalis, whom they considered war-like enemies, representing death and slavery, at the least, loss of their possessions.¹³ Lepchas were unable to compete with the more industrious and competent Nepalis. Consequently they developed “a way of life suitable for isolation; neither in war not in competition could they stand up to other people”¹⁴

When the tribes from Tibet, and later from Nepal, came into Lepcha territory to settle down permanently and had taken the land from them, there was no account of their resisting the Tibetan colonization because the Lepcha had a symbiotic relationship with the Tibetan – Bhotia. The Bhotia used to give them salt and dress materials in exchange of forest produces and animals supplied by the Lepchas. It was at that period the institution of trading friendship called *ingzong* had been established between the Lepcha and Bhotia at the individual level. Every Lepcha family in Zongu was supposed to have an *ingzong* across the border in Tibet. This was a formal relationship with a religious sanction and the two *ingzongs* were regarded as brothers and inter-marriage between their descendants was forbidden.¹⁵

At the time of colonization, Darjeeling was a ground of contestation between the Rajah of Sikkim and Gorkha rulers of Nepal. The British East India Company Troop was engaged in skirmishes against the Nepalese throughout the entire length of its northern frontier. The British conquered the entire contested area confirming its holdings. The Treaty of Sagauli was concluded with Nepal in 1815.¹⁶

The British reinstated the Rajah of Sikkim to power in 1817 in the conquered territory covering Darjeeling tract and later in 1835, the Rajah of Sikkim gifted Darjeeling back to the British EIC for “enabling

servants of the Government suffering from sickness to avail of its advantage.”¹⁷

Immediately after colonial occupation of Darjeeling tract in the mid- thirties of of nineteenth century, it was the Lepchas that the British first came into contact which followed, by the Tibetans, the Bhutias and finally the Nepalese. As reported in the British official records, Darjeeling tract had been sparsely populated if not “uninhabited”.¹⁸ Captain Herbert described Darjeeling as a place “completely clothed with forest from the top to the bottom”. However, Lloyd reported that the spot so identified as Darjeeling “was formerly occupied by a large village or town (an unusual circumstances in the country) and some shops were set up in it; one of the principal Lepcha Karjees resided here, and the remains of his house, and also of a gombah or temple built of a stone are still extant; also several stone tombs or chatyas of different forms, Karjees and Lamas”. Captain Herbert reapproves the fact that twelve hundred able bodied Lepchas forming two thirds of the population of Sikkim, have been forced to fly from Dorjeling and its neighbourhood, owing to the oppression of the Raja”.¹⁹

Lloyd, the EIC’s Agent in Darjeeling was assigned with the responsibility to persuade Lepcha Kazee (Chief) and his followers to return from Nepal to their former place of residence at Darjeeling. However, Lloyd’s mission of persuasion had been a failure. Lloyd dispatched the EIC Authority at Calcutta a list of Lepchas who still remained in Darjeeling tract living in four specified places in twenty three settlements having fifty-one males and thirty-seven females.²⁰

To the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills, respect for Nature was reflected in their attitude to land.²¹ To them, land was not a commodity but a gift of Nature and their allegiance to the King, the Raja of Sikkim, was without question. The proprietary right over land and forest was a concept traditionally alien to them. The traditional

economy was run on barter system and taxes due to the Sikkim Raja were paid in kind or through labour. Hope Namgyal informs us that the land was not assessed and the subject was only obliged to give a small share of his labour, or the result of his labour to the State.²² This system of paying the government through labour was prevalent in all the Himalayan kingdom's throughout nineteenth century.²³

Till Darjeeling tract was brought under colonial control, the indigenous people were continued to be governed by their customary rules, rituals and practices. The British occupation of Darjeeling and their concomitant interventions in forests significantly altered their vision of life and pattern of subsistence of the indigenous people. The replacement of barter economy by the monetary economy brought about fundamental changes in their life and pattern of livelihood. The imposed political boundary fundamentally altered new system of economy prevented indigenous people from natural inner transmigration which was essential both for shifting cultivation and cattle grazing and even for small trade.

The colonial notion of rights over forest land had been a contested issue between the indigenous people and the colonial state with its temporal powers as self-proclaimed guardian of Darjeeling and her forest. Col. Lloyd's Proclamation on 12 October, 1838 is well apt to quote here while it reads, "the people settled on the Darjeeling tract were now subjects of the Company and the laws of Sikkim would not apply to them...".²⁴ Immediately in the next year Dr. Campbell's appointment as the Superintendent, Darjeeling in 1839 was not only the phase of officially asserting British political rights over Darjeeling but also ushered in a new phase of colonial state making.

An attempt has been made to present the impact of colonial absorption of Darjeeling and her forests and corresponding dispossession of the indigenous people and their consequent disruption due to economic changes that had ebbed and flowed across the

landscape of Darjeeling since the middle of nineteenth century. On the other end, the indigenous people were gradually outnumbered by the growing number of people migrated principally from the Eastern part of Nepal. Resultantly, the outnumbered and marginalized indigenous people had failed to establish any social voice or consciousness to be created by sustained socio-religious, cultural and economic institutions. These material historical processes and their mutual intersections gave rise to a unique state-society relationship in Darjeeling Hills.

The British historiography approves the fact that Lepchas (originally called “Rong”) are considered to be the most ancient of all communities and are the original people inhabitants of Sikkim-Darjeeling. Historians like Gorer, E.C. Dozey, G.B. Mainwaring, J.C. White, and many others have agreed to this argument. Campbell informs us, *“Lepchas are most interesting people, and I believe the undoubted origins of the mountain forests surrounding Darjeeling.”*²⁵ Hooker writes, *“The Lepcha is the original inhabitant of Sikkim and the prominent character in Darjeeling...the race to which he belongs is a very singular one; still he differs from his Tibetan prototype, though not so decidedly as from the Nepalis and Bhutanese between whom he is hemmed into a narrow tract of mountain country, barely 60 miles in breadth.”*²⁶

In his account of the principal aboriginal tribes and races, Hunter describes, *“The Lepchas are considered to be the aboriginal inhabitants of the hilly portion of the district. At all events they are the first known occupiers of this tract and of independent Sikkim.”*²⁷ Gorer observes, *“The Lepchas are a Mongoloid people living in the Himalayas on the southern and eastern slope of Mount Kanchanjunga. It seems certain that they were originally the only inhabitants of this large tract of mountain land, but during the last three centuries, or possibly longer, their land has been taken from them by conquering invaders, the Tibetans, the Nepali, and finally the English.”*²⁸

L.A. Waddell informs us that the Mountainous tract of Darjeeling belonged to Lepchas.²⁹ Lepchas call their homeland 'Mayel Lyang' which was spread over a large areas of land initiating from Arun, Tamor and Koshi rivers in the west up to Tagong La, Thong La and Rudok river in the east. In the north, the land included Kanchanjunga, Gopmochi peaks and Chumbi Valley and was extended up to Titalia in the south.³⁰ Due to power struggles and politico-geographical reorganizations at different phases of history, Lepchas were subjugated by different exogenous rulers and were divested from their own homeland. Lepchas experienced Tibetan Rule in Sikkim, Bhutanese Rule in Sikkim, and Gorkha Rule and finally colonial occupation of Darjeeling from Sikkim and subsequent occupation of Kalimpong had segregated Lepchas in their homeland. The original Mayel Lyang of the Lepchas has been divided among five countries: India, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and Bangladesh.

The indigenous people of Darjeeling had an intimate association with forest and forest played the most important role in their material and social life cycle. Forest played an inclusively crucial role in their social, economic and religious life too. Lepchas living in and around the forests had their religion which was a sort of animism or nature worship what was distinctively different from the religious practices of the people living in the plains. It has been claimed that Lepchas are agriculturist by nature. However the method of cultivation was not settled plough culture; instead, their method of cultivations was Jhuming (shifting cultivation) by burning down the forest. However, cultivation did not provide them with even a basic subsistence as they were found to subsist on wild roots, mountain spinch, fren tops, fings etc. ³¹

To the indigenous people, Livestock husbandry was not an appendage to agriculture, but a significant component of their economy.³²

Lepchas used to rear animals to supplement agriculture like cows, buffaloes, pigs, goats, sheep, country chicken etc.³³ Lepchas became familiar with the forest ecology from their childhood as they spent their life time with the forest zone for shifting cultivation and grazing the cattle. Thus the indigenous people depended fully on forest and forest produce for their subsistence. Lepchas used forest products- roots, leaves, fruits and tubers- for everyday life. Fruits and tubers provided nutrition to their family members. Herbs were used for medicinal purposes. The oral knowledge of such use of herbs transmitted through generations. Besides the use of wood for fuel and house building purposes, wood was used for agricultural implements like yokes and plough. Bamboos made excellent fences, baskets and umbrellas. Leaves were used as disposable plates and for different other purposes such as fuel and fodder. Creepers were used as ropes and thorny barks were used to grate vegetables. This material linkage of life with forest came under strain with the advent of colonialism in Darjeeling Hills. The functioning of the Lepcha subsistence agricultural system had received jolts within an increasingly changing environment which resulted transition of this indigenous population from hunting-food-gathering and shifting agricultural stage to settled agriculture resulting complex production system.

The British held absolute proprietary rights over forests. The Forest Act of 1865 reads, “the local government may from time to time constitute any forest land or waste land which is the property of government, or over which the government has proprietary rights, or to the whole or any part of forest produce of which the government is entitled, a reserved forest.” The provisions of the said Act provided for management and preservation of forests and regulated exploitation of forest resources. Regulations were imposed on the dwellers of forests on the collection of forest produce. The Act provided for a series of prohibitions but nothing was there regarding the principles of managing the forests. The Forest Act of 1878 was more comprehensive

than 1865 Act and divided the forests into (a) Reserved; (b) Protected; (c) Village Forests. Local Governments were given the right to notify any forest or land as protected forest. The Forest Act of 1927 consolidated further the state control over forest. Duties were levied on transit and forest produce such as timber and other forest products. The Forest Act of 1878 was more stringent and ruthlessly restricted the users of forest. Grazing, pasturing of cattle, shifting cultivation by burning woods was also strictly prohibited in the Reserved forests. The Government held unfettered rights of ownership in reserved forests and their products were not to be used by forest dwellers unless specifically permitted by way of grant of privilege and not as a matter of entitlement. In the meanwhile cattle-trespass Act, 1871 prohibited pasturing of cattle in the reserved forests.

The most serious consequence of colonial forestry was the diminution of customary rights as well as the decline in traditional conservation and management systems. The curtailment of communitarian ownership of forests of Darjeeling by the colonial state had severely undermined the subsistence economy of the indigenous Lepchas. Collection of Bamboos, Wax and Lac from the Darjeeling forest was prohibited by issuance of licenses. Like all other British India forests Jhuming or shifting cultivation was discouraged without providing appropriate alternative arrangement or land to the Lepchas for settled agriculture. As a consequence, there had been displacement of Lepchas from their natural forest land habitats. Restrictions on collection of forest produce imposition of prohibitory norms on grazing and gradual dwindling of grazing grounds of different seasons affected badly the indigenous people of Darjeeling hills. Nowhere in the British forest policy or in the colonial Acts, had the rights of the indigenous Lepchas been specifically mentioned. Ultimately Lepchas had to leave Reserved Forest of Darjeeling and they were instructed to move south-west part of the District, between the hilly tract and the plains.³⁴ Again during 1920s Lepcha tenants were evacuated and

resettled. For their resettlement due to expansion and construction of Kalimpong as an urban area, deforestation of 999 acres of forest land in Lolegaon Reserved Forest was proposed and sanction for such deforestation was granted by the colonial government (proceeding of the Government of Bengal in the Revenue/forest Department for the month of April, 1921).³⁵ Being displaced time and again, the Lepchas became refugees in their own land.

No official records on Colonial Darjeeling or oral narratives would have us believe that there had been forest conflicts or intensive indigenous opposition to the colonial state sponsored forest conservancy at the one end and forest clearance on the other in the name of scientific forest management. What the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills had to witness as a dormant spectator was the expanding power play of the colonial state in reorganizing and reshaping the landscape by way of infusing colonial capital in tea cultivation. In fact, forest clearance had taken place for Tea Plantation well before scientific forestry initiated in Darjeeling. Massive expansion of commercial tea cultivation, Cinchona Plantation, Forest Management, Military Installation and Civic Urban formation, Roads and Railways construction impacted heavily on the people, flora, fauna and human land use in particular and on the environment in general. Curbing of local access to forests brought fundamental changes in traditional pattern of resource use and resulted diminution of the rights of indigenous people of Darjeeling.

Prohibitory rules in the name forest conservancy, prohibitions on the use of forest resources and grazing were randomly imposed by the local forest government. Rules relating Grazing were modified time and again in Darjeeling Forest Division from 1913 to 1925. All these put the indigenous Lepchas to an extremely pitiable condition and they were destined to be displaced. The letter of A.A. Wace, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, addressed to Commissioner of Rajshahi Division, bears the testimony of such plights. The letter reads, "*Anxious as I am to*

secure permanently the interest of Lepchas in this district, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that, as they exist in our unsettled tract, they are an obstacle to all improvement cultivation or increase of revenue. They settle in a forest, clear a bit and sow it, and then pass on to cut down new forests, without giving in return for the valuable timbers destroyed. What we should aim at is to see them as they can afford to pay an easy rent for. As a regards the Lepchas on the tract under reference, I would give them the option of building on 15 to 20 acres each where they now are, securing their interests by giving them one of our Kalimpong Leases, or moving to the Lepcha blocks north of Kalimpong on payment by Planter of a liberal compensation for removal.³⁶

In response to the above official communication, the Government ordered the local authority at Darjeeling to take affirmative action. Unfortunately, however, the Lepchas were driven to the Kalimpong range of the Hills. Ultimately, there was displacement time and again in the face of growing Tea Plantation in that area and governmental declaration of 'development area'. Lepchas were sent again to lower elevation of the Kalimpong tract where they lost both of their life and livelihood. Lepcha resettlement issue in Darjeeling hills was left much to be desired. Lepcha displacement was induced by colonial capitalist development unknown to the indigenous people. Despite such displacement and destitution, the Lepchas could not go beyond memorandum, and submission of petitions. The low numerical strength of the Lepchas, demographic changes in the process of colonial state making in Darjeeling which made them minority, the social and economic incapacity of the indigenous people to raise voice against the overarchic colonial power structure, the omnipresence of British military installations are some of the fundamental historically corroborated reasons behind the absence of overt indigenous resistance and rebellion in Darjeeling hills during colonial phase.

At least discontents were never brought to public surface. On the other, the beginning of monetary economy and infusion of colonial

capital, forest policies forced Lepchas to change their traditional forest based subsistence based on Jhum cultivation and other natural forest resources. The imperatives of colonial state making in Darjeeling were comparatively so large and huge that the small indigenous people were not at all in a position to intensify any resistance against the colonial order except in few cases of occasional negligible breaches of the forest law in some areas in the form of everyday resistance.

The experience of colonization of Darjeeling Hills largely transformed the socio-economic profile of this sparsely populated hill tract. The fundamental change replaced the primordial pre-capitalist traditional production relations and had brought forward modern capital based production relation economy. The old clan based communities, traditional class hierarchies got dismantled in the process of material landscape transformation. Darjeeling witnessed fundamental ecological changes too due to growing tea plantation, roads and railways construction, making of towns and military institutions.. The imported labourers, principally Nepalis, Bhutias and Sikkimese from the neighbouring areas as wage earners forming a new working class could not form any meaningful voice. The new eco-imperialist order drastically replaced the indigenous ecosophical order and attempted to invest the idea of “difference” in the minds of the inhabitants through all possible channels of social engineering. The “natural” difference between the hills and the plains was purposively indoctrinated through the system of colonial governability that distinguished Darjeeling as a unique socio-economic and cultural zone and finally as a separate ecological region as a whole. ³⁷

Such a colonially articulated socio-cultural and politico-administrative powerscape of colonial Darjeeling provided for strong predicament to develop any sub-altern consciousness of resistance against the over archaic colonial state.

As a fall out, the nineteenth century colonial state making and the unquestionable colonial right over natural resources was powerfully influenced by the emergence of modernity, a constellation of ideas and institutions, as a world-wide phenomenon.³⁸ But the generalization of the impact of such notion of modernity can never be similar over every space and region. Variegated regions/local spaces and patterns of environmental and landscape change suggest qualifications that have serious implications. A close look at the colonizing process of forested Darjeeling hills would have us believe that colonized Darjeeling had been a unique experience of environmental landscape transformation devoid of any consideration for the indigenous population whose existence and survival were in the face of crisis. It may be argued that under colonialism, though the Lepcha subsistence economy had changed from hunter food gatherer to the terrace agricultural type through the intermediate stage of shifting cultivation, but the social structure of the Lepcha society, during initial years of colonial intervention, did not change considerably to accommodate the economic transformation which caused a 'cultural lag' in the Lepcha society.³⁹ Rapid change in the economic or subsistence part created strains and disturbances in the other closely related parts like social, political and religious asserting 'cultural lag' in lepcha society.

In the changing situation of the Lepcha economy, the paradoxical question of the position of the Lepcha in the tribe-peasant continuum had been issue to reckon with. The common observation is that under colonialism, the tribal communities in India were shifted from ideal tribal pole towards a peasant pole. Scholars like Risley, Bose, Ghurye, Sinha, and others have conceived the transformation of tribal society into a peasant one in relation to the Brahmanic Varna-Jati model, as a part of the broad spectrum of Indian Hindu peasantry. Sinha while reviewing the position of Indian tribes in the context of their articulation with caste based Hindu Civilization states, "*these essentially pre-literate groups, which were apparently outside the*

threshold of Brahmanic hierarchic civilization, were labeled as tribe – in their isolation the tribal societies are sustained by relatively primitive subsistence technology such as shifting cultivation and hunting and gathering and maintain an egalitarian sedentary social system. In Indian context peasant societies are further characterized specifically by Varna-Jati system of birth ascribed status hierarchy and hereditary division of labour”. ⁴⁰

But the above paradigms do not help us in understanding transformation of tribes into peasants, who belong outside the fold of Varna-Jati based Hindu civilization, such as the Lepcha. Their marked incoherence with the caste based Hindu society is significant. These scholars did not explain what would happen to the tribes who belong outside the threshold of the Varna-Jati based Hindu civilization. How to ascertain the transformation of these tribes towards a peasant pole? The Lepcha a Mongolian tribe of the Darjeeling originally of Sikkim, are mostly Buddhist in religion and in no way interested in adopting the life style of the hierarchically arranged Hindu Varna Jati civilization as a model despite their close association with the caste oriented Nepali society. However, in the process of cultural assimilation, Lepchas had been provided with tribal status in the colonial form of governance despite their different religious affinity.⁴¹

In an agrarian society, the ownership and non-ownership of land provides an important basis for social cleavage and conflict.⁴² But the dichotomy does not fully explain the complex agrarian class structure as there are some land owners owning small amount of land while others with large amount of land. In some areas of Darjeeling conflict of interests exists between the landless Nepalis and land owning Lepchas on one hand and within the Lepcha society between the large land owners and small landowners on the other.

The understanding of cultural transformation of the people who are living between two great civilization viz. Indian Hinduism and

Tibetan Buddhism, and aspiring to link themselves with values other than that of the Varna Jati based Hindu great tradition is somewhat different, because India is not under any single 'great tradition', rather two or even more 'great traditions' are operative in the Indian sub-continent. The sub-Himalayan regions like Sikkim, Bhutan and a portion of the Darjeeling district of West Bengal, like many other regions of India, are under the influence of Buddhist great tradition in addition to dominant Hindu tradition. ⁴³

Importantly, on the other, Nepali settlers in Darjeeling under colonial rule did face both the processes of peasantization and proletarianization. Provided with the lowest rank in the Hindu Caste hierarchy, majority of the Nepalis in the Eastern part of Nepal, due to their extremely pitiable socio-economic position, did not have much mixing with the Hindu cultural fold rather they felt more affinity with people having tribal mongoloid background. The landless Nepali labour force got migrated to Darjeeling and started working as wage earners. At the economic level, the presence of market oriented cash economy and a complex land tenure system along with other peasant features brought them nearer to the peasant pole of the continuum. The transformation from tribe to peasantry, outside the Hindu society, had taken place without caste being a referent group.

From the observations as depicted above, it has been largely established that Tibetans, Bhutias and Nepalese came later after their conquests and majority of the Nepalese came as immigrants. The term 'immigrants' or 'exogenous population' referring people settled in Darjeeling has been randomly used to distinguish Lepchas as indigenous people being fully aware of the fact that the colonial Darjeeling emerged out of Sikkim which was partly ruled by Bhutan and partly by Nepal for a considerable time in history. Thus, people coming from such conquering countries cannot be termed as 'immigrants' or 'exogenous' population. ⁴⁴ Having said this, the recognizable fact is that within a passage of few decades, Lepchas in

colonial Darjeeling presented themselves as minority. O' Malley informs us, "Beyond a few Lepchas and Limbus with their little clearing in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the tablelands of Tibet, the Darjeeling hills were practically uninhabited.⁴⁵ About the brisk transformation and the change of demography in Darjeeling, Risley writes in his "The Gazetteer of Sikkim, "The settlement of Darjeeling advanced rapidly, its population having risen from not more than 100 souls in 1839 to about 10,000 in 1849 chiefly by immigration from the neighbouring states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan..."⁴⁶

It is to be noted that the census of 1891 is a good pointer of the rate of Nepali Settlement under British patronage. The Census recorded a population of 30458 for Darjeeling of which 18814 were Nepali. The Lepchas became a minority in their own place. By 1931, Nepali population in Darjeeling constituted 52 percent, 21 percent were of the Scheduled castes and Tribes from Indian Plains, Lepchas and Sikkimese Tibetans formed 4 percent, Bhutanese 1 percent and the rests were the upper caste Hindus, Muslims and non-tribal Christians. The census of 1941 further shows the steady growth of Nepali population (67.6 percent) and gradual decline of Lepcha population (3.2 percent). Gorer observed that the "Lepchas are a dying race".⁴⁷

The requirement of labour to be engaged for building of roads and other infrastructures for making Darjeeling a health and military station was largely felt by the East India Company official deputed for the purpose. It was indeed an uphill task to find and depute labourers at this hazardous hilly forested rain-clawed terrain. Scarcity of labour had remained a constant headache due to low number of people and their expressed unwillingness to work without the consent of the ruler of Sikkim. It was due to the constant encouragement of Dr. Campbell to invite people from the neighbouring eastern part of Nepal, the first Darjeeling road connecting Darjeeling hill station with the plains was built in 1839. In addition, the EIC Officials encouraged migrant

labourers from Nepal to cultivate the fertile hills. Thus well before coming to work as tea garden labourers, a large number of people from eastern Nepal toiled on British road building projects, in the making of buildings, in menial activities as supporting staff and above all in the British army as soldiers had settled down in Darjeeling.⁴⁸

Thus, immediately after the political consolidation, the British Raj encouraged migrant labourers from Eastern Nepal to settle in Darjeeling tract where a level of economic success and social mobility appeared within the reach that would be unimaginable in the caste-constrained traditional Nepal society. The permanent settlers in Darjeeling represented Nepali ethnic groups such as Gurung, Limbu, Magar, Rai, Tamang or Thami and few such other groups. Historically, migration from eastern Nepal began on a small scale as a response to the Gurkhali conquest of both the terai and hilly tract of Darjeeling originally belonging to Sikkim. Such area of Sikkim was inhabited mainly by Kiranti population. The Gurkha ruler conquered the Darjeeling tract and a portion of Western part of Sikkim in 1780 and held on to these territories until 1816. The peasant cultivators, principally landless peasants belonging to lower rung of the Hindu caste hierarchy of Nepal (Rai and Limbu), were encouraged to migrate to the less densely-populated conquered land.⁴⁹ The Rais and Limbus emigrated in large numbers. The term “emigrated” is purposefully used keeping in mind that for most of such people, the distance involved would have been only a few score miles and that too at a time when nations were less clearly conceptualized and national boundaries had remained porous.

The British absorption of Darjeeling in 1835 had accelerated the emigration of the Nepalese population. The colonial state-making processes along with expansion of commercial tea plantation within two decades of such absorption had created job opportunities and cash wage earning for the unskilled labour force and primarily for those who were landless in their homeland of Nepal. By 1876, Darjeeling tea

industry (both terai, mid-hill and uphill) absorbed 19000 workers of whom over ninety percent came from eastern Nepal. The settlement of Nepali community based on tea industry in Darjeeling has appeared to have taken place between mid-fifties and end of nineteenth century.⁵⁰ Resultantly, the inhabiting indigenous Lepchas' control over the land was being minimized by the Nepali emigrants who proved themselves far better cultivators and laborious people than the Lepchas. It has been estimated that between twelve and fifteen percent of the total kiranti population emigrated from eastern Nepal to Darjeeling Terai between 1840 and 1860⁵¹.

Not only the attraction of works in tea gardens, "the body of men formed to build and maintain roads in Darjeeling district in 1839 was composed almost entirely of Nepalis".⁵² Another major pull factor which augmented Nepalis emigration in Darjeeling had been the recruitment of Gorkha soldiers into the British Indian Army. Such recruitment process was initiated immediately after the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814-1816. 4500 able-bodied Nepalis got themselves enlisted being attracted by the fact that the British paid in cash and not in kind. The Gurkha rulers of Nepal, due to inevitable loss of manpower having potentials to fight in the war fronts in the upper Himalayan front, imposed restrictions on the recruitment of British army inside Nepal. As a part of strategy the Nepalis were encouraged to settle in the British part of the hills remained outside the borders of Nepal for recruitment in the British army.⁵³

Despite restriction, the British recruited soldiers from inside Nepal through their agents. Between 1887 and 1902, Gorakhpur in India's plains having close proximity with Nepal and Ghoom near Darjeeling along with close proximity with eastern part of Nepal had been the formal centers of recruitment of Gurkha soldiers. These recruitment centers attracted mostly Rais and Limbus of the Nepalis origin. By 1908, approximately, 55000 men had been enlisted. Most of the Nepali soldiers got permanently settled in and around the

Darjeeling district after their retirement and wrested lands from indigenous Lepchas.⁵⁴

Interesting to note that in order to provide a generic name to the people migrating from Nepal representing different sects and communities, the British authority in their official communication started using the term 'Nepali' moving away from the use of 'Gorkha' or 'Gorkhali'. The Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (Nepali Literature Association) founded in Darjeeling in 1924, was the first social institution to use the term 'Nepali', while in Nepal, 'Gorkha Bhasa Prakashani Samiti (Gorkha Language Publication Committee) established in 1913 was renamed as Nepali Bhasa Prakashani Samittee in 1927. The emergence of a cohesive ethnic identity among Nepalis in India became consolidated during mid-twenties of the twentieth century.⁵⁵

Significantly, majority of the Nepali emigrants in Darjeeling tract who founded the Diaspora communities were of Tibeto-Burman extraction. It has been well approved by the British historiography that the majority of the emigrants in Darjeeling tract had come from eastern part of Nepal. Such emigrant populations had only thin veneer of Hinduism. It has been referred to that the 'Mulki Ain', 1854, in Nepal, codified Hindu caste laws and incorporated Tibeto-Burmese speaking minority population basically non-Hindu minorities practicing animism into the Hindu caste hierarchy in Nepal. The emigrated Nepali population in Darjeeling had, therefore, little barriers to accommodate with indigenous people Lepchas practicing animism having Tibeto-Mongoloid origin.⁵⁶

In colonial Darjeeling, a little more than eighty percent of the Nepali population included Rais, Limbus, Tamangs, Magars, Gurungs, Sunwars and Newars, while Lepcha, Bhutia, Tibetan constituted altogether nine percent of the population. These latter groups had adopted Nepali language as a medium of social expression and made common cause with the Nepalis for over the years. Thus the language

'Nepali' became an essential ingredient in the emergence of a cohesive ethnic identity. The deep-seated sense of insecurity felt by the emigrant Nepalis had added momentum for such ethnic consolidation. However, other exogenous people settled in Darjeeling under colonialism, such as few Europeans, Bengalis, Marwaris, Biharis, Punjabi, Persians and a few other communities did never identify with the Nepali majoritarianism in terms of language and culture.

Interestingly, colonial Census Reports (initiated from 1872) initially enumerated the different caste varieties of the Nepali population keeping Lepcha, Bhotia and Tibetans apart. From such enumerations, the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling district, at the end of colonial rule, had altogether a huge Nepali population of 445000 forming more than eighty percent of the population. Another interesting point is that originally, among the Nepali caste groups, Bahuns (Brahmins), Thakuris, Chetris, Kamis, Sarkis and Damias used to speak Nepali as ancestral mother tongue, however, they constituted only twenty percent of the Nepali population in the three sub-divisions. In due course of colonial phases Nepali as a lingua franka had been adopted not only as a language but also as the symbolic reproduction and representation of a nation combining all races of Nepal mostly settled permanently in the Eastern Himalayas of which Darjeeling hills forms a part. In this process of consolidation, the communities/ groups such as Magars, Gurungs, Kirati, Newars and Limbus were merged with Nepali ethnic consolidation.

Since the beginning of their early settlement in Darjeeling, as emigrant workers Nepalis suffered hardship and faced extreme form of exploitation under colonial dispensation. The emigrants Nepalis not only belonged to the lower castes but also lower classes. Most of them were petty agriculturists of artisans who could not cope up with the growing strain on their employment opportunities. No other option left for them except emigrating Darjeeling to serve as minimum wage earners. Notwithstanding the fact that Nepalis constituted majority of

the workforce, they were not the owners of production process. At the last phase of colonial rule, Nepalis comprised 25 % of the clerical staff and lower cadre officers in the forest offices but 85% of the menials, e.g. orderlies, drivers, watchmen, tour operators and tea labours etc. Barring few, most of them lived in tea gardens land and through generations of their settlement they have become the natural population of colonial Darjeeling overcoming the exogenous components diluted by colonial modernity. The hill people as a whole taking both Lepcha, Bhutia, Tibetans and Nepalis together gave birth to a form of cultural insularity in the Darjeeling hill society which had gained patronage of the colonial ruling class represented by planters, missionaries and colonial state apparatus.

It is reiterated further that the ethnic consolidation in Darjeeling hills had its deep seated colonial roots of governance. In order to enjoy Darjeeling hills for bodily comfort and to extract her natural resources to augment revenues, the colonial rulers attempted to invest the idea of natural 'difference' in the minds of hill people through all possible channels of social, administrative communications that distinguished Darjeeling as a separate administrative unit, as a unique economic formation, as a distinctive cultural and linguistic zone and a separate region having distinctive topography, climate and ecology. The idea of 'other' or the cultural insularity invested in the minds of the hill people of Darjeeling had gained patronage, if not a tacit approval of the colonial masters represented by the assemblage of the planters, foresters, bankers and above all the colonial state apparatus. Thus the 'aporia of self-rule of the hill people in Darjeeling, the origin of which was rooted in colonial governmentality, had become manifest since the beginning of twentieth century. The term 'governmentality' has been used here in Foucaultian sense. To Foucault, 'to govern means to govern things or to govern human beings by turning them into 'things'. To fulfil this task, the governmental rationalities embark upon an assemblage of institutions, procedures, calculations, tactics, strategies

etc. which are being used for governance and thereby to transform the ruled into 'things'. These complex institutional processes backed by knowledge of science of governing constitute in essence what is called as governmentality.⁵⁷

As a matter of fact, colonial Darjeeling used to be administered by certain unique forms of governance system. For example, initially administered as a non-regulatory area with waste land grants where the normal regulations could not be acted upon without specific sanction of the Governor General, Darjeeling had become a district in 1869. From 1907 to 1917, Darjeeling was administered as Scheduled District. Then the District was administered as Backward Tract till 1934. Till the end of colonial rule, Darjeeling remained as Partially Excluded Area. As a natural corollary, the idea of separate administrative arrangement for Darjeeling had been indoctrinated in the mindset of the enlightened hill people. In 1907, the first ever demand for separate administrative set-up was placed before the colonial government by the leaders of the hill people representing Lepcha, Bhutia and Nepali communities. Thus the basic foundation of hill ethnicity was developed. Again in 1917, the representatives of the Darjeeling District submitted a memorandum to the Chief Secretary, Government of Bengal demanding creation of a separate unit for Darjeeling by way of inclusion of some areas of North-Eastern Frontier Province.⁵⁸

The Hillmen's Association was formally formed in 1921 to "safeguard and advocate the legitimate interests of the hill people in the sphere of politics."⁵⁹ This Association, in collaboration with Darjeeling Planters' Association and the European Association, had resolved in a joint meeting to fight for the exclusion of Darjeeling district and Dooars from Bengal.⁶⁰ On October 25, 1930, the Hillmen's Association along with other local associations, sent a memorandum to Sir Samuel Hoare positing "*the district of Darjeeling, where the Gorkha population predominate, should be excluded from Bengal and be treated as an*

*independent administrative unit with the Deputy Commissioner as an Administrator vested with much more powers than that of District Magistrate assisted by a small Executive Council (like the Provincial Governor's Executive Council), representatives of all interests, in the administration of the area.*⁶¹ This was for the first time, the concerns for the interests of the Gorkhas were raised. All the hill people were subsequently brought under a single umbrella in the name of Gorkha ethnicity. The difference between indigenous and exogenous hill population got diluted. Within a passage of a decade, the Hillmen's Association was defunct and in its place, All India Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha Association was born in the early March, 1943. However, under the leadership of Damber Sing Gurung, in May 15, 1943, this Association was renamed as All India Gorkha League. The League convened three consecutive conventions at Darjeeling, Kurseong and Shilong and had become a consolidated force to the cause of Gorkhas.⁶² The League received a jolt due to premature death of its leader D.S.Gurung. The League's subsequent attempt to join hands with the leaders for the creation of a new Uttarakhand Pradesh could not make much head way. ⁶³However, the sentiments of the Gorkhas were so deeply founded that even the undivided Communist Party of India, Darjeeling District Committee, after keeping aside the principal motive of the emancipation of the working class through class struggle, had demanded in 1947 (06.04.1947) for the establishment of Gorkhasthan, the homeland of the Gorkhas to be constituted of three contiguous areas of Darjeeling District, Southern Sikkim and Nepal. However, within four years, such demand was revised and the asking was for complete regional autonomy of the Gorkhas settled predominantly in Darjeeling hills throughout the colonial period. ⁶⁴

Thus Nepalis settled in colonial Darjeeling or elsewhere in British India for generations together strived hard to popularize Gorkha identity as a replica of Indian identity for the Nepalis of Indian identity and origin and such categorization would separate them from the

Nepalis of Nepal. These differentiated community identities of the Nepalis, the Lepchas and Bhotias had been ultimately converged into a generic identity called Gorkha identity at least at the superficial level to realize the socio-economic and political aspirations living within the colonial fold. The colonial governmentality and the corresponding material transformations had significantly brought changes in the socio-political demographic consolidation in colonial Darjeeling which continued unabated in different forms of ethnic convergence and assertions in the post-colonial period.

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