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Exploring Roots of Ethnic Convergence of the Indigenous and the Exogenous Hill People: A Historical Study of Colonial Darjeeling.

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ABSTRACT

The Article posits that the mid-nineteenth to mid- twentieth century colonial material imperatives had congealed impacts on the indigenous people and the exogenous hill people settled in colonial Darjeeling. The study explores how the dialectics of such transformations gave rise to ethnocide of the indigenous population at the one end, and strong ethnic consolidation of the hill populations on the other. The idea of 'Other' being different from the people living in the plains was purposefully injected in the minds of the hill people by the colonizers which produced synergic effects. Throughout the colonial period, Darjeeling was administered differently. This idea of separate administration injected aspiration in the minds of the hill people who consolidated under a single umbrella of Nepali language as the lingua franca of the majority hill people. The hill people preferred Gorkha ethnic consolidation in place of Nepali to distinguish them from Nepalis of Nepal. The Article establishes that such ethnic consolidation has had its deep-seated roots in the nature of colonial governability.

***Key-Words**: Indigenous, Exogenous People; Colonial Darjeeling; Ethnocide; Governability, Ethnic Consolidation.*

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The term 'indigenous people', randomly used in this article, 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'.[1]This 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 were therefore fewer barriers between them.[2]Thus 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]

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.[10]

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 Bhddhist 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.[11] 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"[12]

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". [13] 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 circumstance 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".[14]

To the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills, respect for Nature was reflected in their attitude to land.[15] 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.[16] This system of

paying the government through labour was prevalent in all the Himalayan kingdoms throughout nineteenth century.[17]

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 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."*[18] Hooker wtites, *"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 breath".*[19]

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".[20] 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."[21]

L.A. Waddell informs us that the Mountainous tract of Darjeeling belonged to Lepchas.[22] 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.[23] 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.

Lepchas used to rear animals to supplement agriculture like cows, buffaloes, pigs, goats, sheep, country chicken etc.[24] 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. 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 or 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 prohibitionary 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.[25] 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.[26] 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.

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.[27]

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.[28] 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 an agrarian society, the ownership and non-ownership of land provides an important basis for social cleavage and conflict.[29] 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. [30]

Importantly, on the other, Nepali settlers in Darjeeling under colonial rule did face both the processes of peasantization and proletariatization. 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.

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. [31]

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. [32]

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.[33] 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.

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".[34] 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.[35]

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. [36]

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'. 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. [37]

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 assemblaze 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.[38]

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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