

More than Tea – Environmental Decay, Administrative Isolation and the Struggle for Identity in Darjeeling

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Abstract: The victim of both geographical, historical and administrative isolation, Darjeeling owed its growth to tea cultivation in the hills by migrants from neighbouring Nepal collectively called Gorkhas. Their contributions notwithstanding, they felt discriminated by West Bengal's residents to whose state they were administratively attached. Poverty and poor working conditions, with no voice in the tea estates, and poorly maintained infrastructure that brought frequent landslides have fuelled demands for "Gorkhaland", a homeland separate from West Bengal, where the distinctiveness of their identity and their role as Indian citizens would be fully recognised. It did not help that the Darjeeling district had been administratively detached from the political mainstream. Periodic agitations against the state government have weakened local institutions, disrupted the local economy impacting adversely tea production and tourism on which the local economy and the Gorkhas depend. The West Bengal government had partly recognised Gorkha demands by establishing the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) each vested with limited autonomy. But disagreements on autonomy have left the Gorkhaland issue unresolved. In the meantime, Darjeeling continues to experience gradual decay, absent adequate support from the West Bengal government and from Darjeeling's local government, including the GTA itself.

Keywords: Tourism economy, migrant, institutional development

JEL classification: R1

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* This work was supported by MOE (Ministry of Education in China) Youth Foundation Project of Humanities and Social Sciences with project no. 21YJC790116 and the Shandong Technology and Business University, China with Grant no. 2019ZBH2008 and no. BS 201928.

1. Introduction

The name Darjeeling is nowadays identified with a type of premium tea. That identification not only understates the narrative associated with the name and underestimates the district's role in history. While tea is indeed a specialty of the district of which the town Darjeeling is the centre, the story of Darjeeling goes much further, historically, culturally, economically and administratively with the tea industry woven into the area's history, economic fabric and identity (Agarwal, 2017). These factors also impact the efficacy of the local institutions in dealing with the provincial and central government.

Geographically, Darjeeling (21 degrees 01'59" N; 88 degrees 16' 00" E) is a town located at 2127 m above sea level. Administratively, it is in a district of the same name in the Indian state of West Bengal. The Darjeeling hills are located at the foothills, the Lesser and the sub-Himalaya belt of the Eastern Himalayas. It is blessed by a pleasant climate with a cool average temperature of 16.7°C that attracted the British in search of a hill resort and a retreat from the intense summer heat in the Indian plains. However, its abundant rainfall, averaging 3,500 mm (140 inches) a year renders the whole area susceptible to landslides (<https://en.climate-data.org/asia/india/west-bengal/darjeeling-33809/>). In relation to the rest of India, its situation in a 27 km corridor connecting the bulk of the Indian subcontinent to its north-eastern territories and hemmed in by the borders of Bangladesh and Nepal likened it topographically to "the chicken's neck". Thus, geography has helped to add distance between Darjeeling and the rest of India.¹

But it is not just geography that separates Darjeeling from the rest of West Bengal and India. Its brief history also contributes to its distinctiveness. History's role is more than about the area's distinctive features. It set the tone for all subsequent developments, and therefore deserves elaboration.

2. Historical Review

Historically, the first King of the Gorkha kingdom was said to be Dravya Shah in 1559 (Hamilton, 1819). Around 1736, the Gorkha Kingdom embarked upon a campaign of expansion that took in the area around Darjeeling, at that time under the dominion of Sikkim, but not deemed to be of any importance and for which no clear boundaries existed. But beyond their expansion eastwards, they controlled much of Sikkim, driving the Raja (Chogyal) of Sikkim from power. The Gorkha Kingdom reached its height early in the 19th century but this raised British (East India Company)² concerns that the Gorkha Kingdom might control their entire northern frontier. The result was the Anglo-Nepalese War which broke out in 1814 and which the British won. The Treaty of Sugauli in 1815 forced the Gorkhas to relinquish their conquests to the East India Company. Then in the Treaty of Titalia in 1817, the conquered Sikkim territory was returned to the Raja of Sikkim (Government of West Bengal, 2021).

¹ The journey from Bagdogra airport, the closest airport, to Darjeeling, about 90 km away on an often congested two-lane road, can take 3 hours.

² Founded on December 31, 1600, the East India Company extended its control of the whole of India from the mid-1700s (Johnson, 2017).

2.1 A No-man's Land Discovered by Migrants

History records the rise of Darjeeling³ itself from a sparsely occupied no-man's land to an area famous for its brand of tea through the toil of migrant workers who settled in the area. Just over two centuries ago, Darjeeling was less an area of some importance than of contestation between neighbouring kingdoms Nepal and Sikkim, ownership varying between Nepal which the Gorkha won by conquest and Sikkim before that. Its only value was as a buffer zone between the rival kingdoms of Bhutan, Nepal (the Gorkha Kingdom) and Sikkim. Darjeeling itself was a small settlement occupied by fewer than 100 tribal inhabitants (Lepchas⁴ and Limbus), others having abandoned the settlement to seek their fortunes elsewhere.

But its temperate weather and the imposing views of the Himalayas would prove its attraction as a resort when 'discovered'. This 'discovery' did not take long to materialise. In another dispute between Nepal and Sikkim, British officers from the East India Company, Lloyd and Grant, were deputed by the Governor General of British India to settle the dispute. On their way in 1829, they stayed in Darjeeling, then known as the Old Gorkha Station of Darjeeling, and found the village, at an elevation of 6,700 feet above sea-level, climatically invigorating, an ideal venue as a hill station for the British as a retreat from the tropical weather in much of the subcontinent (Kenden, 2021). Their recommendation for its development as a resort, military and trading post was accepted by the Governor General. With its ownership under Sikkim, Lloyd was sent to negotiate its lease from Sikkim. The Raja had no problem leasing the area described in a survey as "a worthless uninhabited mountain" to Britain in 1835 for which a small sum of compensation was paid to the Raja in 1841 (Kenden, 2021).

2.2 The Emerging Tea Area After the First Opium War

More significantly, at approximately that time, rising prices for tea from China and China's prohibition of opium imports to pay for the tea saw the outbreak of the First Opium War (1839-1842) between Britain and China and persuaded the British to look for alternative venues to grow tea. The suitability of parts of India for growing tea was established by 1824 (Butterworth, 2015). Meanwhile the planting of tea in Darjeeling on an experimental basis in 1841 saw the rise of the tea industry that came to be identified with the name of the town. Success in Darjeeling persuaded the British to convert Darjeeling from a quiet resort to a busy tea growing area. But the local inhabitants were reluctant to clear the forests, plant tea and build infrastructure.

Fortuitously, in 1839, the transfer of Campbell from Kathmandu to Darjeeling and put in charge of administration marked the beginning of the area's development. Through Campbell's friendship with the Nepalese prime minister who had deposed the Nepalese king, he was primarily responsible for the mass migration of Nepalese who suffered increased hardships with the king's deposition to Darjeeling. These migrants provided the labour to clear the jungle and build infrastructure including

³ The name 'Darjeeling' was said to have originated from two Tibetan words – 'Dorji' – which means 'thunderbolts' and 'Ling' which means 'place'.

⁴ The Lepcha are an indigenous minority in India, Nepal and Sikkim.

a road construction (Agarwal, 2017). Thus, the major influx of Gorkha⁵ from Nepal and returning Lepchas from surrounding areas saw to this challenge as the town's population grew (Government of West Bengal, 2021).

With the labour problem temporarily solved, tea which had been grown successfully since 1841⁶ could be planted in newly opened plantations. Thus, the number of tea plantations grew – starting with 3 gardens in 1852, 4 established between 1860 and 1863, with 10 more started during this period (Naulakha, 2012). In 1866, 39 gardens were producing Darjeeling tea. By the end of 1874, there were 113 commercial tea gardens. By 1905, the number of tea gardens had risen to 117. Today, tea production of about 8,500 tonnes annually comes from 87 gardens spanning the 7 valleys of the Darjeeling Hills.

2.3 *The Isolated Migrants*

But in solving the pressing labour problem, another longer-term challenge emerged. As the population of Darjeeling expanded, a sizeable minority of these were migrants from Nepal. Most of these stayed beyond their contracted period partly because conditions in Nepal were even more dire and partly because they incurred debt which they needed to pay off. Over time these migrants became permanent residents of Darjeeling, and, with Indian independence, citizens of India but formed an enclave isolated from local residents culturally, socially and economically. This was the source of demands for a Gorkha homeland and distinct political identity.

This is because in almost all respects, the Gorkha migrants had little in common with the inhabitants from the plains and West Bengal state, from whence the elite come. With the trading class dominated by the Marwaris who also made up the wealthy, the Gorkha community in Darjeeling found themselves more isolated and marginalised than ever (Kenden, 2021). These distinctions and disparities have sharpened ethnic consciousness of which the demand for Gorkhaland is the most visible manifestation (Khawas, 2017).

The call for a separate homeland could be dated from when trouble brewed between Bhutan and Darjeeling, prompting another British expeditionary force that captured Bhutan with the passes ceded to the British. In 1866, peace returned to Darjeeling but the call for an independent homeland was building, and was first voiced by a group called the Hillmen Association in 1907 (Kenden, 2021). India became a sovereign state on August 15, 1947 and the Gorkhas in Darjeeling then became Indian citizens. But it could also be argued that Darjeeling was leased from Sikkim which joined the Indian dominion only in 1975.

It needs to be noted that while the term Gorkha has been applied to all Nepali-speaking people in India (Zurfluh, 2008), the Gorkhas are themselves from different regions and groups in Nepal and politically divided. While some Gorkha activists want nothing short of an independent Gorkhaland separate from West Bengal, others are

⁵ The term Gorkha applied originally to the people of the Gorkha Kingdom, from which the Kingdom of Nepal expanded, but has since been applied to all people of Nepal.

⁶ Darjeeling's resident, Campbell, was also given credit for the successful experimentation with Darjeeling tea in his garden (Naulakha, 2012).

prepared to live with greater autonomy as a more viable alternative, with the respective movements' leaders not adverse to reversing their attitudes and/or loyalties (Zurfluh, 2008). For this reason, many among them are pessimistic that they can ever escape from their plight as an underclass.

3. Political Turmoil

3.1 *The Autonomous District and Historical Legacy under Subhash Ghisingh's Leadership*

Political activity is the outcome of the community's history and geographical settlement described above. As already indicated, political activism to create a separate territory, eventually to be called "Gorkhaland" separate from West Bengal, began well before India's independence as a sovereign state. In 1907, a demand to have a separate state was submitted to the Morley-Minto reform panel (Mitra, 2021)⁷ by the Hillmen's Association of Darjeeling, who also raised periodic demands in 1917, 1930 and 1934. Agitations also occurred in 1941 and in 1947. Shortly after the last demand, India became a sovereign nation. With Indian independence, the call for a "Gorkhaland" separate from West Bengal has not abated. In 1952, the Akhil Bharatiya (All India) Gorkha League (ABGL) submitted a memorandum to then Prime Minister Nehru demanding separation from West Bengal (Mitra, 2021). It was joined by other parties – the Indian Communist Party and the Pranta Parishad. In 1955 another memorandum was submitted to create a separate state made up of Darjeeling, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Bihar. In 1977, to calm the agitation, the West Bengal government passed a resolution to create an autonomous district council consisting of Darjeeling and related areas.

But by 1981, activism was on the rise again with the Pranta Parishad Party writing to Prime Minister Indira Gandhi demanding a separate state (Jajoo, 2021). The demand for Gorkhaland really took off in 1986 under the leadership of Subhash Ghisingh and his Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF). Violent demonstrations saw over a thousand protestors killed. Despite his views, he was not averse to the compromise offered by the West Bengal government in the form of the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) with some autonomy over Darjeeling. In 2004, Ghisingh was given the stewardship of the DGHC, but his authoritarian and non-transparent style, coupled with rampant corruption soon saw confidence in the DGHC eroded (Tamang, 2017).

Ghisingh's leadership failures were capitalised upon by Bimal Gurung, a protégé of Ghisingh who left GNLF to form the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). GJM was seen initially to be a legitimate successor to the GNLF, but in its ransacking of GNLF members' homes, GJM proved to be no better. The West Bengal Chief Minister Marmata Banerji took a leaf out of West Bengal's earlier playbook by offering Gurung a seat and made him leader on the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) which was to replace the DGHC (Tamang, 2017). Years down the road, GJM's objective of seeing Gorkhaland created remain unrealised, periodically submerged by contests between political rivals (Bhutia, 2021; NDTV, 2021).

⁷ The Morley-Minto reforms embodied in the India Council Act of 1909 increased the number of members of the legislature to 38 nominated members and 27 elected members, thus protecting British majority in the legislature.

The Gorkhaland issue festers unresolved today. And it takes very little to remind Gorkhas of their distinct identity. Thus, the formation of Telangana in 2013 reminded Gorkha activists of the statehood they were hitherto denied. In 2018, as much to protest against their deteriorating living condition as their identity, a coalition of trade unions and GJM organised a total strike that halted a shipment of tea (Wenner, 2020). And most recently the West Bengal's decision to impose the Bengali language for classes I to IX in all schools has sparked violent protests from Gorkhas who speak no Bengali (Mitra, 2021).

3.2 Separate Homeland and Separate Identity

What accounts for this persistent demand? Two factors can be adduced. The first is the Gorkhas' quest for their ethnic identity. Historically, the Gorkhas felt that the distinctness of their ethnic identity would make a separate state a natural administrative choice. In addition, Darjeeling has never been a part of Bengal and also states in India are created on an ethnic and linguistic basis. Ethnologically, the Mongoloid and semi-Mongoloid Gorkhas have more affinity with the hill tribes of Assam than with the people on the Bengal plains. Geographically, Darjeeling district, Jalpaiguri and Cooch Behar are completely cut off from the rest of West Bengal (Khawas, 2017). And linguistically, they are Nepali-speaking rather than Bengali-speaking.

The second factor compounding the drive for separate identity is that their identity as Indian citizens has been called into question. As Hardin (2017) noted: "The Gorkhas felt and continue to feel like second class citizens. Working conditions are routinely very poor, wages are low and they have no say or stake in how Darjeeling estates are run." In addition, as Khawas (2017) noted, during British rule, "the rulers never allowed the district to come within the national mainstream and within the purview of the general administration." And after independence, "the (West Bengal) government's lack of care in their region, specifically the lack of resources – for basic services and infrastructure and the degradation that has occurred as a result" have left the community aggrieved and feeling victimised (Hardin, 2017). Unemployment from the closure and abandonment of tea plantations pose additional major threats (Wenner, 2020; Agarwal, 2017).

Thus, although the quest for a separate homeland is by no means the only pressing issue, it has been the focus of attention to the point that the institutional framework for development has not been given adequate attention. Further, cut off from the administrative mainstream, Gorkha representatives in the DGHC and the GTA never developed skills to govern locally.

4. Economic Development

4.1 Challenges Faced by the Tea Industry

Darjeeling depends heavily on tea and tourism⁸ both of which are affected by demands for Gorkhaland as the Gorkha homeland and the onset of the recent pandemic. Quite apart from these external factors, the tea industry has been in a bad way for years,

⁸ Besides the two "t's", tea and tourism, Darjeeling used to rely on a third "t" – timber – but extensive deforestation had reduced timber as a major resource.

Table 1. Darjeeling’s tea economy, 1992-2020

Year	Tea production ('000 kg)	Av. yield in Darjeeling (av. yield)	Av. yield in West Bengal (kg/ha)	%/WB	Area under tea (ha)
1992	12,355	640	1,492	42.9	19,309
1993	13,026	674	1,619	41.6	19,324
1994	11,092	575	1,589	36.2	19,280
1999	8,653	492	4,395	11.2	17,604
2002	9,180	526	1,662	31.6	17,463
2003	9,582	545	1,770	30.8	17,580
2004	10,065	574	1,882	30.5	17,522
2018	7,690	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2019	7,960	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2020	6,700	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.
2021 Jan-May	1,380	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.	n.a.

Source: Indian Tea Board.

suffering from structural challenges. As Table 1 shows, Darjeeling’s tea production had been fluctuating, the product of a declining area under tea and low/stagnating yields (Darjeeling’s average yields are on average less than 50% of West Bengal’s). Indeed Wenner (2020) cites references arguing that India’s tea economy is “in crisis”, the result of stagnant exports, sluggish or declining prices and low profits that have seen workers’ welfare neglected despite legislation to protect them. Bangladesh, Kenya and Sri Lanka sell cheaper tea. While Indian labour regulations – housing, pension, medical costs – have contributed to increased costs of Indian tea, causing some tea holdings to turn to tourism by converting their houses to tourist accommodations (Haber, 2004) tea workers feared that fair trade premiums paid through estate owners had been expropriated to defray costs rather than used to compensate workers (Besky, 2013). Continued low wages had resulted in high absenteeism on the farms as workers search for work elsewhere (Chhetri, 2021), with obvious consequences for productivity.

Low profitability of tea estates has resulted in little investment in new or replanting of tea which has a gestation period from 6 to 9 years to grow tea plants from nursery to mature bushes, twice as long as tea in the plains. Bhattacharya (2018) estimates that for the last 40 years, the replanting had occurred at a rate of just 2%. It is therefore a miracle that the existing bushes, many dating from the British period and over 100 years old, have been able to maintain yield through fertilisers, pesticides and careful field husbandry in the face of soil depletion.

Yet the institutional structure to support research and extension exists. The Tocklai Tea Research Institute in West Bengal was established in 1911 and funded by the tea industry (<https://www.tocklai.org>). And in 1994, Institute NITM was established together with the Darjeeling Tea Research and Management Association to build expertise on tea management on tea estates (NITM, n.d.). Even earlier, in 1977, the Darjeeling Research and Development Centre (DTR&DC) was established in Kurseong to provide research

and development support for the Darjeeling tea industry. Yet, despite these centres' claims of successes, research and extension has a long way to go in terms of coverage and substance.

4.2 Inadequate Public Investment in Halting Tea Industry

Most recently, the severity of the Covid virus has seen tea workers labouring in situations with inadequate physical infrastructure and minimal medical support. Low testing and even lower vaccination saw asymptomatic persons working close together with unaffected workers and contribute to spreading the virus. It and the threat of lost wages have led to extensive self-medication the effectiveness of which is dubious (Sobha, 2021).

Other climatic conditions have contributed to the reduction in both the quantity and quality of Darjeeling tea. The first flush plucking that produced the best quality tea is usually done from March to April. But 2021's dry spell reduced the first flush production from 0.92 million kg to 0.66 million kg. Cash starved garden owners also plucked early, affecting leaf quality. The Darjeeling shortfall is, however, made up in other West Bengal areas where the production in April this year was 18 million kg compared to 9 million kg in 2020. Auction prices are also higher for Jalpaiguri and Dinajpur tea at Rs144 and Rs163 a kg compared to Darjeeling's Rs135 (Roychowdhury, 2021).

The crumbling infrastructure reflected by inadequate maintenance, slow construction pace of public works (GeoXchange, 2020) and a lack of new public works has seen landslides, caused by heavy rains, steep slopes, partially completed construction, extraction of timber, mining, agriculture and population growth, devastated tea areas, roads and human settlements, even by the admission of the West Bengal government.⁹ In a report of the local economy, it was stated that roads were at least half a century old and had not been upgraded, with current traffic 5 to 7 times the number of vehicles, especially goods vehicles, driven along these roads than were originally designed to carry. Heavy traffic was also responsible for, and aggravated, landslides along roads. Development projects progressing at a snail's pace have left dug-up roads that compounded landslide risks (GeoXchange, 2020). Illegal quarry operations also impact the environment, overburdening rivers and their tributaries with silt (Government of West Bengal, n.d.).

4.3 Economic Loss with Lower-price Nepalese Tea

Arguably the most damaging to the tea economy is the Gorkhaland periodic agitations that have costs that extend well beyond the loss of revenue for estate owners. Hardin (2017) reported on petitions to demand separate statehood in 1917, 1929, 1930, 1941, 1952, 1980 and 1986 when protests turned violent and resulted in over a thousand deaths. More recently Basak (2013) reported on a major strike in 2013 in which while tea gardens were not part of the strike, they could not transport their tea products to

⁹ This is despite the existence of studies of landslide susceptibility of the area which would have allowed remedial actions. See Chawla et al. (2018), Ghosh et al. (2012).

sell. The result was a drop of tea production from 9 million kg in 2008 to 8.2 million kg in 2012. In a recent strike in 2017, apart from disrupting production, it facilitated the infiltration of lower-price Nepalese tea into Indian markets, some of which was blended and sold as Darjeeling tea. Bhattacharya (2018) noted the consequences of this industrial action to include the loss of some workers who migrated to the plains in search of work. On this industrial action, Hardin (2017) noted that “Darjeeling has officially shut down for business. Tea production had ground to a complete halt. The Darjeeling tea industry is set to lose 20% of its annual production and 40% of its annual profit.”

4.4 Another Hit to Economy: Unsound Social Welfare System

A major source of Gorkha unhappiness has been the plight of tea estate workers. The approximately 85,000 permanent workers (THEDC, 2018) are supposedly legally protected by the Plantations Labour Act 1951 under which workers’ children’s education, health and social services are to be provided by tea estates. In practice, these terms are seldom honoured. In addition, fair trade premiums have been paid to estate owners who have used the amounts to defray costs rather than pass to workers (Makita, 2012). Some estates have been abandoned, some closed, leaving workers unemployed. The temporary workers do not even have these legal remedies. Clearly the Plantations Labour Act under which the state government supervises plantation management has failed to provide workers and their families the protection promised (THEDC, 2018). And the central government which is bound to provide in circumstances of stress under the Tea Act of 1953 has also not lived up to its obligation to help workers in distress. Tea holdings workers have thus become part of West Bengal’s rural-urban migrants on account of “agricultural distress” (Chatterjee, 2019, p. 264). Chatterjee (2019, p. 264) observed that “Non-remunerative agriculture has forced people to search for alternative sources of livelihood.”

4.5 The Fragile Tourism Industry

The Gorkhaland issue not only affected high-value premium tea production but the equally high-valued tourist trade which earns Darjeeling, dubbed the Queen of the Hills, and a top tourist destination in India, an equal amount of Rs450 crore a year. Tourist statistics for 2001-2014 are shown in Table 2. Between 2008 and 2009, there was a noticeable drop in tourist arrivals, especially domestic. This was likely on account of the hunger strike called by Gorkhaland activists (Dawn, 2009). While there has been an increase in the number of tourists over the period 2001-2014, the bulk of the tourists have been locals.

Foreign tourists who spend more than locals especially plan well ahead and do not like to be disturbed by random strikes and disruptions. As a result of the 2017 disruptions, Zee Media Bureau (2017) estimates the loss of 90% of the tourist traffic. The disruptions also affected private education. In Darjeeling is found 50 schools with 10,000 boarders, of whom 5,000 are foreign students. The latest iteration of the Gorkhaland dispute has seen the movement disintegrate into factional tussles for leadership, disappointing many of the local Gorkha residents (NDTV, 2021). Thus, for the local Gorkha

Table 2: Darjeeling tourist arrival, 2001-2014

Year	Tourist arrivals			% Foreign to total
	Foreign	Local	Total	
2001	11,100	242,986	254,086	4.5
2002	12,350	249,032	261,382	4.7
2003	18,700	284,315	283,015	6.6
2004	18,090	261,596	280,496	6.4
2005	27,218	415,901	443,119	6.1
2006	30,394	460,769	491,158	6.2
2007	29,669	444,253	473,922	6.3
2008	26,346	359,258	385,604	6.8
2009	23,819	342,813	366,632	6.5
2010	27,218	372,741	399,959	6.8
2011	–	–	–	–
2012	–	447,954	–	–
2013	–	378,902	–	–
2014	–	609,455	–	–

Source: Banu (2019).

population, who needs to eke out a living, it is no longer a choice between whether to fight for Gorkhaland but whether further action would inflict more damage to the region's tourism on which many locals depend (Bhattacharya & Chakraborty, 2021).¹⁰

To these disturbances is added the impact of disruptions caused by the Covid 19 infections. In 2020, shortly after welcoming tourists to Darjeeling, the GTA announced on July 8 restriction of tourists' entry to Darjeeling Hills until July 31, a deadline since extended to August 8, 2020 (Srivastava, 2020).

But tourism also brings with it environmental damage, especially if it is unplanned or poorly planned. Banu (2019) cites infrastructural construction related to tourism – hotels, roads – deforestation, water scarcity, vehicular pollution and generation of solid waste as well as soil and land degradation. These costs, many long-term, must be set off against the increased revenue stream.

The answer to this ecological destruction is said to be implementation of "sustainable tourism" (Bhutia, 2015). Requiring the involvement of all stakeholders – the host community, government bodies, tourism industry, tourists, pressure groups including non-government organisations, tourism specialists and the media – sustainable tourism involves the preservation/stabilisation of the already damaged environment, promotion of activities that impact minimally the environment, such as biospheric reserves, wildlife sanctuaries and designated trekkers' trails, conservation of urban amenities, and provision of "greener transport facilities" (Bhutia, 2015, p. 7). Unfortunately, neither the local nor the provincial government has demonstrated the capability to implement these initiatives.

¹⁰ Bhattacharya and Chakraborty (2021) quoted resident Bishal Tamang saying, "So many agitations, so many deaths. All in vain. Everyone let us down.... Our bellies are tied with tourists. Another lockdown will finish us."

5. Administrative Structure

5.1 Administration Before Independence

The administrative history of Darjeeling is one in which Gorkha concerted attempts to see Gorkhaland were rebuffed by the West Bengal and central governments for fear it would create a precedent for other minorities in other states to follow, even though they were willing to concede to limited autonomy (Zurfluh, 2008, p. 2).

But Darjeeling's administrative history had always differed from that of other states. Khawas (2017) characterised Darjeeling as suffering from a state of "administrative negligence" on account of rules that did not apply to the district both before and after India's independence. In its early days, Darjeeling was "unregulated" in that Acts and regulations did not apply to it unless explicitly extended to it. In 1874, Darjeeling was listed as a "Scheduled District" in which laws applicable to other areas were still only partially applicable to it. In 1919, it was renamed "Backward Tracts" and the Governor of Bengal was empowered to administer the area. The Government of India Act 1935 designated Darjeeling as a "partially excluded" area to which no Act was to be extended to it. Thus, Darjeeling remained outside the administrative machinery and isolated during the era of British India and remained so partially even after independence.

5.2 Failure of DGHC and Rise of GTA

After independence, the district is governed by two development agencies, the District Collectorate and from 1988 the DGHC. In its website, the West Bengal government stated that the district administration had been working on: infrastructure development, education, poverty eradication, rural health and towards the economic development of Darjeeling (Government of West Bengal, 2021). Implementation of such an ambitious program was left in the hands of the Darjeeling District Administration and the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) formed in 1988 to cater partly to the Gorkhas' demand for autonomy. Gorkhaland campaigner Ghisingh was appointed to lead the DGHC.

But Ghisingh proved inept, inaccessible and non-transparent in running the DGHC which lost the community's support. Further, quite apart from management issues, the DGHC did not receive strong support from Darjeeling's Gorkha community itself because its standing was perceived to be inferior to state bodies (Khawas, 2017). For one, although it has many functions of a state legislature, it actually reports to the West Bengal state government. This means that any development initiative needs to be approved by the state. The state's late approval of funds has been alleged to stifle DGHC's development projects. For another, DGHC has proved itself incapable of undertaking integrated development projects. As an example, poorly planned roads are testimony to DGHC's failure in rural construction.

The Gorkha community therefore have good cause to blame both the West Bengal government and their own representatives at the DGHC and the GTA. They realise that the lack of area development could be traced to both neglect by West Bengal and to Gorkha local government incompetence. Thus, to the factions who demanded nothing short of a separate Gorkha homeland and those willing to live with a measure of

autonomy, a third group has to be added – those who despair of a positive outcome for their demands.

In 2012, in partnership with another faction, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM) and the West Bengal Government constituted the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) as the successor to the DGHC. Its objective was to establish an autonomous body to administer the region and its people. 45 elected representatives plus 5 nominated by the Governor make up the GTA and the Hill Affairs Branch of the Home and Hill Affairs Department, Government of West Bengal, to supervise the GTA. The GTA proved to be as impermanent as its predecessor the DGHC, having no control of “the three Fs – funds, functions and functionaries” (Chattopadhyay, 2017). In 2017, following violent protests, Gurung led the elected representatives to resign their positions.

It is clear that with not many changes to the GTA’s functions compared to the DGHC, the same problems that plagued the latter will afflict the GTA which, like the DGHC, can prove to be transient (Sarkar, 2015). It did not take long for trouble to brew between the GTA and the provincial government (Samaddar, 2017). The key issue was how much autonomy did the GTA have. While the activist GJM wanted more power to the GTA, the government wanted to limit GJM’s influence through setting development boards for Darjeeling, like for the Lepchas, bypassing the GTA. The GJM called for strikes and other agitations which the government suppressed. GJM leader Gurung led elected representatives to resign their GTA positions. Fundamentally, even with this round of agitations over, with the government of Bengal’s decision not to allow the spinoff of Gorkhaland into a separate state, the standoff shows no prospect of settlement soon.

6. Spatial Planning and (Piece-meal) Development

Darjeeling district, with 60.9% of its land under Himalayan dense forests offering considerable biodiversity and climate variations, appears to offer great scope for agricultural development. Indeed, the district is famous for its hill resort and tea economy. Besides tea, millet, maize, potato, ginger and cardamom are agricultural crops grown. However, scientific land suitability analysis reveals that only 5.1% of the land is highly suitable for agriculture, 29.8% moderately suitable, with 65% of the land marginally suitable or unsuitable (Pramanik, 2016, p. 1). Challenges like natural disasters, environmental damage from tourism and land cover disturbance, and migration on account of unemployment would have diminished the area under cultivation.

Darjeeling suffers from largely unregulated rural to urban migration that brought about urban sprawl and congestion. “Pollution, loss of landscape aesthetics and of architectural heritage has seen what was and still is a tourist city lose its charm, becoming an increasingly congested city much like other regional towns in India (Ganguly-Scrase & Scrase, 2015, p. 246). Unlike in some cities where rural-urban migration is the result of growing urban affluence, Darjeeling’s has resulted from rural poverty driving migrants to the town in search of work. Rural poverty has resulted from the poor conditions of the tea holdings, with many paying workers at levels below minimum wages, refusing to provide social and health benefits, abandonment and closure of holdings leaving workers unemployed, and leaving some families susceptible to malnutrition and even starvation.

Rural-urban migration has also led to tension between rural migrants and urban residents (Brown et al., 2016). One reason is the participation of rural migrants in local politics has empowered them to challenge the standing of urban residents. Rural migrants are also seen as competing with urban residents for scarce resources, including habitable land, which, with frequent landslides, is in short supply. Together with the prevailing downbeat environment in the tea holdings, the urban residents have pinned the blame on the rural migrants and their push for Gorkhaland. This makes for conflict between rural migrants and urban residents.

These colliding interests make spatial planning well-nigh impossible. As one traveller describes it, Darjeeling is more like an “urban jungle in the mountains” in which the following are apt descriptions (Baxter, 2020):

- where zoning laws and codes are either ignored or don’t exist;
- where utility cables and water lines intermingle and remain unapologetically in full view for all to see (and);
- where homes are added over the years and decades whenever the money trickles in.

Darjeeling is additionally described as “a crazy mess of steep, twisting streets and alleyways and towering hotel and apartment blocks slowly decaying in the clouds beneath a permacoat of neon moss and dampness” (Baxter, 2020).

However, this state of affairs is only partly attributable to urban-rural tensions. Also relevant is the agitation for Gorkhaland by Gorkha activists, and the absence of a development and/or conservation perspective in the GTA and the West Bengal state government.

7. Conclusion

Together with the fame the town earned for the premium tea it produced, Darjeeling’s history has been turbulent and a factor running through its politics, economics, administrative structure and absence of spatial planning. That history charts the arrival of Gorkhas to develop and provide labour for the growing tea economy in the hills around Darjeeling. In time this migrant community became an enclave located in India, in close proximity to their Nepalese cousins but isolated geographically, ethnically, culturally and linguistically from the rest of the state to which it was administratively attached. A history of administrative neglect has cut the community off from the political mainstream, and deepened their isolation.

But the sources of tension today are only partly attributable to history. Their distinctiveness and isolation have sharpened their sense of identity, strengthening activist demands for separate statehood and narrowing the space for negotiation and prospects for compromise. Their deteriorating living standards, particularly on the tea estates, only reinforced their demands.

For its part, the West Bengal government had made some effort to cater to Gorkha demands for self-government in the establishment of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council and Gorkha Territorial Administration. But the government’s efforts to contain the activist GJM, the limited autonomy these local councils enjoyed, together with the

limitations of the leaders who headed the Gorkhaland agitations, saw both institutions doing little for the development of the area. But the responsibility for Darjeeling's development, past, present and future ultimately rests with the government of West Bengal and also the central government. That neither had allocated sufficient resources to ensure the development of an area that produces a high-value premium product and is a major tourist attraction suggests the dominance of non-economic factors over economic rationale in decision-making. Introducing irritants of the Gorkha community shows a lack of empathy for the community by the West Bengal government in the face of the Gorkhas' antagonistic stance leaves little room for compromise and does not bode well for Darjeeling's future in general and the Gorkhaland issue in particular.

Yet, to the extent that years of agitation has produced little by way of results and the compromised quality of the Gorkha leadership itself combined with deteriorating economic conditions among the Gorkha community, an increasing number of the Gorkha community is ready to come to a compromise. Mediated negotiations, with some flexibility exhibited by both sides replacing the intransigent stance currently adopted, as well as some empathy may produce a longer-term solution that has so far eluded them.

Finally, the story of the Gorkha in Darjeeling is one of a group of historical migrants whose strength in numbers and dominance in a major industry encouraged them, through activist leadership, to push for the formation of a state separate from West Bengal. Given the potential precedent this might set, the state and national governments naturally opposed this demand. But in focusing on the primacy of this demand, the welfare of the Gorkha community continues to suffer both from the lack of attention from the state government and at the hands of their own leadership.

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