

Indigeneity is the Absence of India

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Abstract: *Through the metaphor of visiting Gorkhaland this paper raises questions on the impact of the formation of colonialism, borders, and nation-states on historically mobile communities. It provides an insight into how a region and its people imagine their history and future outside the existing nation-state while continuing to negotiate with the present marred in blood and state-led violence. The paper further informs about the politics that unfold around ethnicity, linguistic, regional and indigenous identities in the wake of the totalitarian state.*

Gorkhaland lies between Sikkim and the rest of the north-eastern states. It happens to be a part of West Bengal. But how did we become a part of West Bengal? It is because of the three treaties that were signed between different Himalayan kingdoms and the East India Company. Before going ahead, let me just say that we do not share anything with West Bengal in terms of culture, language or shared heritage.

Now that I have located it geographically, I am just going to go back to history for a bit. Before the arrival of the British, there used to be different Himalayan kingdoms in this region. There was the Chogyal dynasty, and then there is the Dzungkha (Drukyl) dynasty, which ruled modern day Bhutan, and there used to be the Gorkha dynasty. But the term ‘Gorkhaland’ is not derived from the Gorkha kingdom. People’s articulation of Gorkhaland has a very different meaning from the Gorkha dynasty. That is because the Gorkha kings are not indigenous to what is known as Nepal today. Even before the British arrived, a lot of different settlers came and settled down in different parts of this land. One of these settlers happened to be the Arya settlers who are Nepali speaking people and they were brutal, massacring many communities. In the recent past there has been some form of retelling of stories about what the Aryas have done after the monarchy fell. Before that people were not even allowed to speak what happened to indigenous communities.



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One of the Gorkha kings started calling his dynasty the Gorkha dynasty because of an indigenous place named Gorkha in a region called Ilam in Nepal. He had also built a temple of Gorakhnath (lord of Gorakh), he would worship him, and would also force the indigenous communities to worship him. He enlisted indigenous people in his army and started calling it the Gorkha army. The Arya settlers were a warring community. So they obviously started warring with other Himalayan kingdoms. Before that there wasn't so much tension between other Himalayan kingdoms such as the Magar kingdom, the Tharu kingdom, the Newa kingdom. These were all Himalayan kingdoms with indigenous kings who were warring with Aryas. But there were also people who did not have kings; not all people had the same administrative structure as a monarchy. For example, my people, we never had a king. We were more like matriarchal communities without kings and were more mobile communities. My people would move between what is modern day India, Bangladesh, Tibet and Bhutan. Even today my people are in Nepal and in all of these other countries as well. As indigenous people these countries are all very recent systems to us.

Coming back to the Aryas being a warring kingdom, they had a war with the Chogyal king of what we know as Sikkim today. It was brutal. The king lost a lot of his land and the Gorkha king continued to conduct wars, extending his empire up to modern-day Punjab. All of that tract was under his rule. I am not sure about the date as I did not write that down. Around that time, he looked at the unification of Nepal as well. The Arya king totally destroyed other kingdoms, indigenous kinships and communities, and forced other kingdoms to adopt the Nepali language, erasing others. It was afterwards, when the British arrived that they started developing an interest in this region. They were interested in maintaining stronger frontiers against China. They were also interested in Mount Everest and wanted to scale it. The British wanted to do British things!

The British wanted the Chogyal king of Sikkim to come together and help them. They signed the treaty of Titalia by which the British worked with the Gorkha king, along with the Chogyal king, to make the Gorkha king retreat to what we know as Nepal today. The British wanted a part of that land as well. The then king of Sikkim was asked to give a piece of that land to the British so that there would be harmony, and by which the Chogyals could keep a kingdom of their own, and Sikkim would thus, still be an independent nation. So, they gave Darjeeling to the British and that is how we became a part of Bengal.

That is the history of the British coming to India and setting up their headquarters in Calcutta. They would visit Darjeeling, using it as a summer resort and for that reason they also started developing it. Around that time, the British wanted still more land, for which after a war with Bhutan, they signed a treaty known as the treaty of Sinchula by which they got a part of the land from Bhutan, called Kalimpong. So, Darjeeling came from Sikkim and Kalimpong came from Bhutan. And these places were used by the British as their summer headquarters. They also opened schools and colleges there for their families. They developed these places along the lines of the

cities they lived in. Because of their relationship with China, they also started changing the terrain of this region, so that it was good enough for them to grow tea. That is how Darjeeling became a tea state. They started planting tea gardens there.

Once the British marked their territories and all these treaties were signed, some very interesting things happened. For the first time, there was a concept of citizenship among the Himalayan people that did not exist before this. Suddenly, there were questions being asked and people being recorded as citizens and non-citizens, as foreigners and migrants. These things were not done previously because a large part of indigenous communities were just mobile communities who would be walking across invisible borders that were drawn afterwards. The developmental strategies were enforced with the establishment of tea gardens and projects like cinchona plantation, hydroelectricity projects etc. For this they needed a lot of labour and that is how they started enlisting people as plantation slave laborers. That culture still continues. After the British left, the tea gardens came to be owned by the Bengali upper-caste people or corporates. The same group of people who worked in the tea gardens continued to work there. Even though we had different kinds of colonizers coming in, it was the British, who, for the first time changed the topography of this land and actually started using spaces that were considered holy or sacred spaces by indigenous communities. We also had a lot of conversions. This was actually the third set of conversions. Our ancestors were made to go through forceful conversions by the Chogyals and the Tibetan Buddhists. After that, there were the Hindu kings, and then the Christian missionaries that came from England and other places. In between somewhere, there were the Mughals, and that is why we have some populations of Muslims too.

When the British left, Darjeeling was a part of East Pakistan for three days. When we got independence from the British, we did not have the Indian flag up, we actually had the Pakistani flag up for three days, and after three days it was India's flag. So it was dealt with without any seriousness. They did not really understand the economic viability of the space in the beginning, and later on, they looked at how important Darjeeling tea would be. Eventually, tourism would become very important for this part after the division of Bengal.

After the Indian independence is when our people and communities started facing brutal, militarized violence. There were a lot of killings in the tea gardens. In the 1950s, the first tea garden rebellion occurred at Margaret's Hope tea garden where they killed five people including one minor and one pregnant woman. Since then, it has never stopped. It has only gotten worse. During the 1970s, people started asking for recognition of the language in the Indian constitution, and then again, the Indian military was sent in. But the most brutal of them was in the 1980s where, even according to the figures of the state government there were 1200 people killed in one year between 1986 to 1987 under the Gorkhaland agitation that was led by Subhash Ghising. They sent battalion after battalion of military and paramilitary forces. Men had to hide underground. What my mother

and aunts tell me is that almost all the women were raped, but obviously, there is no after-care or trauma-redressal. This happened under the communist regime of Bengal. We do not really hear about these things in the popular discourse. It was in 1988, some thirty years ago, that they signed an agreement with the Bengal government for the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council. It sounds like a great name but there is no autonomy. It was created so that the agitations would stop. That went on for some time and some agreements were made with Subhash Ghising, who led the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) party. When it started it wasn't really a political party; it was a people's party for them to come together and articulate, form groups and resist. But obviously, when the government got involved, it quickly turned into a political party, and then they started participating in elections and other things, after the agreement was signed for DGHC. It went on for a couple of years. In between, there would be something that the Bengal government was not happy with, and suddenly they would blackout the entire region and bring in the army. As kids, we would hear choppers over our houses. We wouldn't know what was going on. And then, after a few days, things would be normal. Schools would reopen and there would be no *bandh*. That went on for quite some time, and then, in 2007 there was a huge coming together of people, and it was again the same thing.

The Case of United Himalayan Kingdoms

At this point, I want to go back a little bit. After the British were planning to go back, around the time of the Home Rule League and the Simon Commission, people here did not want to be a part of India and they were thinking that it would be nice to come together and unify Himalayan kingdoms, and maybe form a different space altogether, calling it Gorkhastan or something. So even before the coming together of the Indian nation there were already conversations around this. As it is, Sikkim was a kingdom of its own. As indigenous people we are connected to the mountains. How can we be divided by imaginary lines? So that articulation was always there. Things have been changing over the years with the political identity and with erasure. After Indian independence, when there was no recognition of indigenous communities, only some people were identified as Scheduled Tribes, others were not. There was a lot of disharmony and ambiguity. There was no clarity about what was happening. People still don't have clarity about whether they belong to this nation-state, and how they feel about nation-states.

The missing Indian in the 'Indian Idol'

Something happened in 2007 because of a reality show, that may seem a little weird. It was for the first time that people from Darjeeling and Kalimpong saw someone from among them in an Indian reality TV show that was not a caricature of them. It was in the reality TV show called 'Indian Idol' that there was a participant called Prashant Tamang who worked with the Bengal police. Just the name 'Indian Idol' was very validating for our people. It was like – 'oh yeah we are Indians'.

The agitation and everything around the Gorkhaland movement revolves so much around the crisis of identity, that it badly wants to be a part of the nation-state. They want to be recognized as Indian citizens. This guy Prashant Tamang participating in Indian Idol meant that there was someone representing us as an Indian. And not just as an Indian, but someone who would also give us the validation of being a great Indian because of the title Indian Idol, right? While this was happening, people started going to each house to collect money so that they could buy phone vouchers to vote for Prashant Tamang.

The Indian media was so stupid that when there was an ethnic round, they asked Prashant Tamang to wear a security guard's uniform. They are so casteist that they can only understand people by their traditionally assigned work. There was so much anger that Prashant had to return in between and address it. People were so unhappy that he was wearing a security guard's uniform and did not wear a Tamang dress, for you have your own clothes. If Gujaratis are wearing their own clothes, why wouldn't you wear yours? Then the resentment grew and everyone wanted (Subhash) Ghising to address it by taking it further and saying that you cannot do this to our people. We have our own identity and we stand our ground. We want our state and we want you to recognize it on the basis of linguistic and cultural differences. That did not happen because Ghising said, "I cannot do that and that I have to focus on other things", because it was the time of recognition of the Darjeeling region under the Sixth Schedule [of the Indian Constitution] and subsequently he wanted other people also to be recognized as Scheduled Tribes. But that was not going to happen and I don't even think it would have happened because we have been under the Bengal government. There were differences among people and that led to the emergence of another party called Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha. It was led by another indigenous person called Bimal Gurung. That is how the next series of agitations started.

Linguistic Politics and Gorkhaland Movement

It went on for some time and then, the military was sent in, people were murdered, brutally killed and all that comes as part of armed violence. Then there was again the Bengal government coming together and signing another agreement called the GTA, calling this place Gorkhaland Territorial Administration. It was the same as the DGHC, just that the name was different and now the name did not have Gorkha in it, but Gorkhaland. So, there was no big difference. Then in 2017, Mamata Banerjee said that Bengali would be taught in all the schools of Bengal and that was another point at which people went – 'hell, no! Is it not enough that in all state government exams we get Bengali question papers and as officials in Bengal you are asked to speak in Bengali and now even our kids have to deal with Bengali language, given that the other language that we learn in schools – Nepali – is not our language either'.

The language that we speak in the hills has been articulated by so many people in Darjeeling. Our elders, who are not there anymore, have written extensively on it. For example, Indra Bahadur Rai said that, because we grew up in plantations, there was a mix of these different communities coming together. Nepali was definitely a large part of the languages being spoken but it was also a mixture of other indigenous languages that made it possible for people to come together. That is why the language that I speak, although it is recognized as Nepali in the Indian Constitution, is very different from the language that is spoken in Nepal.

Around 2017, there was this re-emergence of indigenous solidarity. When the government said that now you have to learn Bengali, people weren't happy with it and immediately there was shut down of the region and people were like – we are not going to accept this. There was a total shut down for 120 days. Again, so many battalions and soldiers were stationed, with the Central Reserve Police Force (CRPF) going crazy on people. Protests back home are not like what we see in the mainland. There are no warning shots or there are no water cannons. They directly shoot you. It is brutal and barbaric. But it is not just at times of protest. Even otherwise the army is stationed at different places and you never know when someone is shot down for no reason. That is the condition people are living under.

In 2017, during the shutdown, there was no Internet, telephones were blocked, roads were blocked and there was mass starvation, people did not even have medicines. A lot of students and people who have migrated to the mainland, put their money together to buy food for back home. We had to take permission from the state government so as to let the food go through because the West Bengal government would not supply food to the hills. It was a very scary time. Since then, Bimal Gurung has been in hiding; he only came out of it recently. There are only two options for us: either you join the party which is Trinamool Congress (before Trinamool Congress it was the Communist Party of India), and accept everything that they tell you to do, or go against that them and they will kill you. What do you do in that space?

Like most people, my parents have also been resisting. There are hardly any people who don't join the resistance. It is your everyday reality. My mother and my father have been doing it since their teenage years. My father writes, and when he was younger, he would make posters. But during the 1980s he could not do much because Indian army was on a killing rampage, they would kill any man they saw. My father had to hide underground and it was during this time that my mother would take the posters my father had made and would carry them and paste them on the street walls. She was also pregnant during this time with my elder sister. That is the kind of circumstances we grew up in. We saw elders who felt responsible for protecting and honouring the land that we are in and it is just unacceptable to have men marching with guns in our land and killing people.

The demand for Gorkhaland as a separate state remains the same. Even now, if you go to Darjeeling, you will find that people are still in love with the idea of Gorkhaland as a separate entity and as a state. Like most things, they have lost faith in leadership; I don't know what to say about the leaders. Some of them made arrangements for themselves with the government and they are happy. But for others, it is just like you either do that, or you are dead. We have lost a lot of people to it.

The other thing about Gorkhaland is the Hindu identity of this entire thing. People usually think that Gorkhaland is about Hindus coming together and the imagery of Gorkha people as Hindus is very popular even amongst other protesting regions. They often think of Gorkhaland as a Hindu place, which is actually not true. Especially, because indigenous people have been saying that 'we have been facing violence from the Hindus as well, who were also settlers. They have been taking up spaces of our worship.' A lot of these places of worship of indigenous people have been turned into temples and Brahmins come and station themselves there, and the way these spaces are used has completely changed.

There is also this enforcement of proper Hindu ideology where you have to wear not your own clothes, but sarees, and you have to wear not your own jewellery, because if you do, you'd appear uncivilized. The way to appear civilized is to be more and more like Hindu settlers. People in the villages don't want to talk about how they are not Hindu because they don't want to be subjected to maltreatment. I went to my grandmother's place, and we would always have beef drying and smoking in the kitchen. Last time when I went, I was like, where is the beef? You don't have smoked beef anymore? She said it is because these neighbours are Chhetris¹, and I was like "are you scared of them?" She said, "no, we can't have it, what will they think?," Even after so many years of Aryas coming in and settling there, there is still the fear of us being considered uncivilized and savages. At the heart of the Gorkhaland movement and the articulation of us being different, us standing on our own and us being independent is the fact that it is majorly indigenous people coming together. Then again, there is this thing about Hindus: there are a lot of (derogatory) slogans and war cries that they make which are so Hindu. They say: Jai Kali Maa Kali, Aayo Aayo Gorkhali!

People in Darjeeling have always favoured the Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) over any other party because they imagine that this is going to be the party in power, and if they have a BJP member of parliament (MP), then they will address their issues and we will soon have a state of our own. We have always had BJP MPs, because our people always believed that this is the only party that is going to give us our own state, which never happened. And I do not see it happening because it is more complicated than that. Why would BJP want to upset (West) Bengal, reduce their stakes in

¹ Chhetris are caste Hindu kshatriyas. In the recent past they have started claiming an indigenous identity.

Bengal and favour us? Because (West) Bengal still looks at us as its body and does not want parts of it divided. They do not understand that it was not a part of Bengal to begin with.

In academia and other cultural spaces too, there is a lot of mis-articulation around people from Darjeeling coming as outsiders and settling down here and that the space is not an indigenous space and those things are sad, but they are also believed to be true by many communities. It is so foolish that they would buy this colonial idea that there lived only one tribe in this space and they are the only autochthonous people. For instance, the Lepcha community believes that it has been their space only and they are favoured greatly by the state government and are recognized as a Scheduled Tribe; and they also have a tribal council. They are given money to spend around the activities of their tribe. Thus, there is that articulation that we (Lepchas) are the only people of the Himalayas and the rest of you are outsiders. But that is not true because there are historical places that have different names for different indigenous communities and different indigenous people. And how would that have been possible if only one group of people were living there?

Many such ideas have been popularized by the mainstream dominant discourse, which is very scary, especially for people who have very little documentation. They have killed most of the elders and, as a result, there is very little oral history left. Simultaneously, different kinds of colonial powers have been coming in and erasing our history. When such ideas are propagated and passed down, it just leads to further erasure and greater harm to people who are so small in numbers to start with.

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