

## **RETHINKING GORKHA IDENTITY: OUTSIDE THE IMPERIUM OF DISCOURSE, HEGEMONY, AND HISTORY**

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### **ABSTRACT**

The primary focus of the paper is the study of the colonial construction of the Gorkha identity and its later day crisis. Taking the colonial encounter as the historic moment of its evolution, the paper makes an attempt to map the formation of the Gorkha identity over the last two hundred years or so by locating the process of formation within the colonial public sphere that emerged in Darjeeling in the early part of the twentieth century. The paper tries to cast new light on the nature of contestation and conflation between the colonial identity or the martial identity inscribed on the body of the Gorkha by the colonial discourse of “martial race” and the cultural identity that was emerging in course of time. It also tries to establish the fact that the colonial forms of representation of the “Gurkhas” as the “martial race” is still the dominant form of representation foreclosing all other forms of representation that had become possible as a new self-identity emerged with the cultural renaissance in Darjeeling and elsewhere. It also looks into the problem of double consciousness of the deterritorialised Gorkha subjectivity that is torn between two seemingly conflictual impulses of a primordially constructed notion of the Gorkha *jati* (community) and the demands of a modern nation-state. The paper also argues that the Gorkha identity has somewhat failed in securing a political space for its cultural identity leading to deep fissures in its multi layered identity.

“Critique is the movement by which the subject gives itself the right to question truth on its effects of power and to question power on its discourses of truth...in a word, the politics of truth.”

Michel Foucault

### **Introduction**

The phase we are living in is one of the most crucial in human history. It is a phase marked by contradictions and confusions, and a

phase that is increasingly characterised by the interplay of two seemingly opposing and yet complementary forces of essentialism and hybridity. At one end of the continuum is a growing tendency in global political and economic forces towards greater integration - one that is stoked by the continual movement of people and their cultural baggage across the boundaries of nation-states, throwing up new forms of trans-national practices, locations, solidarities, and institutions that do not strictly conform to the demands and logic of the nation-state. In fact, theorists like Arjun Appadurai have already written obituaries of the nation-state.<sup>1</sup> At the other end of the same continuum, still newer forms of micro politics have secured moral legitimation, marking a distinctive shift towards the fragmentation of the cultural landscape.<sup>2</sup>

In the backdrop of this, the question of identity has saddled itself firmly at the centre stage of both academic and political debates. The argument in essence is that the old identities that had stabilised the social world for so long are in decline, giving rise to new identities and fragmenting the modern individual as a unified subject. The 'crisis of identity' is now increasingly seen as a part of a wider process of change which is dislocating the central structures and processes of modern societies and undermining the framework which had until now given the individual a stable anchorage in the social world.<sup>3</sup> In the rarefied terrain of academics we are witnessing debates that raise significant questions about the very legitimacy of the fundamental axioms of enlightenment and the way 'history' has been conceptualised as an irreversible process of modernity. With this movement, the earlier notion of a universal human subject has come under serious attack and the notion of a 'decentered subject' seems to be acquiring greater salience in academic parlance.

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<sup>1</sup> Arjun Appadurai, "Patriotism and Its Futures", in his *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalisation*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, pp. 158-177.

<sup>2</sup> Yogendra Singh, "A Life-World of Disenchantment: Modernity, Ethnicity and Pluralism", in *Sociological Bulletin*, Vol.4, No.2. September 1998, pp. 155-165.

<sup>3</sup> Stuart Hall, "The Question of Cultural Identity", in Stuart Hall, David Hall, *et. al.* (ed.) *Modernity and Its Futures*, Polity Press, in association with Open University, 1992, p. 275.

It is in such an academic climate that this paper will try to understand the emergence and formation of the Gorkha<sup>4</sup>/Nepali identity in India spanning a period of over two hundred years and its continuing crisis. The crisis of identity is nothing new to the Gorkhas in India. It was co-opted together with the people as they were introduced to 'Civilisation' and 'History'. And with the passing of time it has only become that much more convoluted and complex. At a much deeper level, the problem of identity is in fact the problem of modernity. One of the most enduring and lasting features of modernity is the necessity of all modern subjects to organise themselves around the normative idea of nation.<sup>5</sup> The modern identities circumscribed as they are by the symbolic boundaries of the nation are mediated by the complex discursive structures of national culture and national identity. In such a situation the problem of Gorkha identity cannot be understood in isolation. The need here is to locate it within the complex matrix of nation, space, territory, culture, race, and history. It is by understanding the nature and dynamics of the discursive formations of these structures that our effort to deconstruct the Gorkha identity may come to fruition. This paper in that sense is a preliminary attempt to theorise the Gorkha identity by locating it in these discursive structures. In what follows, I will make a modest attempt to contextualise the emergence of Gorkha identity in nineteenth

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<sup>4</sup> The word 'Gorkha' comes from the small principality (now a district) in Nepal by the same name. The kingdom of Gorkha was established by Drabya Shah in 1559. It is located 40 miles west of Kathmandu. The names 'Gorkha' and 'Nepali' are used interchangeably in India although political movements at different times have favoured the use of the word Gorkha over Nepali in order to differentiate between the citizens of Nepal and India. T B Subba has devised an ingenious way differentiating them. He spells the citizens of Nepal as "*Nepalese*", and the Nepali speaking Indians as "*Nepalis*". See his, *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 67-74.

<sup>5</sup> Dipesh Chakrabarty argues that European imperialism and third world nationalism have together achieved the universalisation of the nation-state as the most desirable form of political community. See his "Postcoloniality and the Artifice of History: Who Speaks for the Indian Past?" in Padmini Mongia (ed.), *Contemporary Postcolonial Theory: A Reader*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1997, p. 240.

century colonial India, tracing its origins in the British colonial discourse particularly in their ethnographical writings on “martial race”. Taking the colonial encounter as the historical moment of its evolution, the paper will try to map the formation of the Gorkha identity through an inter-textual discourse study within the context of the colonial public sphere and the liberal nationalist historiography of colonial India. Further, I shall argue that the problem of Gorkha identity exists at two levels. One, the very idea of Gorkha identity is inscribed on the body of the individual Gorkha by the colonial discourse. At another level, the historical experience of the Gorkha creates a sense of a deterritorialised Gorkha subjectivity, torn between two seemingly conflictual impulses of a primordially constructed notion of Gorkha *jati* (community) and the demands of a modern nation-state.

### **The poverty of academic research and the question of Gorkha identity**

The ‘life-world’ of the Gorkhas in India is located both literally and figuratively on the margins of the imagined nation. This ‘marginality’ is not merely a location but a byword for the oppressed and dispossessed. It is characterised by the dispossession of narratives, the cannibalistic appropriation and the continuing colonisation of their epistemological grid. For the most part, it occupies a peripheral location in relation to the metropolitan academic research. It remains an under-researched terrain, in which the standards of the scholarship emerging from these locations struggle to measure up to the standards set by the ‘mainstream’ academia, which on its part forms a peripheral location vis-a-vis the metropolitan academia. The Gorkhas who were historically subjected to the Orientalist gaze of colonial humanist anthropology continues to remain the subject of discourse. From such a standpoint, the academic discourses on the problem of Gorkha identity, emerging both from within and without appears skewed and stifled by the disciplinary contours of traditional methods of social enquiry. Their narratives revolve around the idea of the Gorkhas as an exclusive ethnic group juxtaposed with the liberal nationalist imagination of the Indian nation. There does exist some

commendable works on identity formation, particularly the importance they have laid on collective memory of home and the experience of migration, and the changing structure of caste and village settlements.<sup>6</sup> However, a comprehensive study of the contributions of social and cultural movements in Darjeeling and elsewhere towards the formation of a distinct Gorkha identity still eludes us. What is clear in these scholarships and other forms of utterances, especially the ones that have come from within, is the evidence of the fundamental fissures that are located in the interstices of the subjectivity of the Gorkha. Barring a handful of works which can be called insurrectionary, majority of these tend to revolve around the celebration of the famed “bravery” of the “Gurkhas”.<sup>7</sup> Girdled by the colonial constraints of valour and its validation, the Gorkha subject appears ambivalent towards colonialism. Colonialism is often understood in a periodic sense rather than a well-defined set of discursive practices outliving the formal end of the more brutal forms of rule.

What is completely missed out here is the reality of the continuing discursive colonisation of the Gorkha identity. Similar is the case with the studies on the more recent movements of the Gorkhas for statehood. There is a marked tendency in these works to explain it away as stemming from economic causes like relative deprivation or internal colonialism - one that informs the paternalistic policies of the Indian state - or it is simply pitched as a case of ethnic exclusivism and “separatism”. Both forms of scholarship suffer from reductionism. Either it is an instrumentalist understanding of the problem, or worse still, it is about constructing an identity in the most essentialist image. The missing link in both these genres of works is colonialism. It is not as if these interpretative gestures and exercises have ignored the colonial history, but where they have failed is in the diachronic

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<sup>6</sup> On the factor of migration and memory, see Kumar Pradhan’s *Pahilo Pahar*, Shyam Prakashan, Darjeeling, 1982. On the changing nature of caste structure, see T B Subba’s, “Caste Relations in Nepal and India”, in *Social Change*, Vol.15, No.4, December 1985, pp. 23-26.

<sup>7</sup> In Western writings, the word Gorkha is spelt as “Gurkha” or “Goorkha”.

comprehension of the colonial primaries of the Gorkha identity-formation. We shall return to discuss all these, particularly the relations of power as it is reflected in our historiography and nationalist imagination, a little later.

Identities are as much self-constructed as it is constructed by the other. In that sense there appears a fundamental difference in the manner in which the Gorkha identity or the Gorkha '*jati*' is imagined by the 'self', and the way the Gorkha identity is conceptualised in the metropolitan as well as in the 'mainstream' Indian academic discourses. There appears a significant gap in the meanings of the word *jati*. Even while admitting that the word *jati* is a loose term that allows a wide array of meanings within its semantic field, Gorkha *jati* in the culturally specific sense signifies a cultural identity, expressed through imageries and symbols derived from its composite culture.<sup>8</sup> The Indian 'mainstream' academic discourses in their turn have merely derived from the metropolitan academia. Since the 'mainstream' academia looks at the peripheral identities and their narratives through the Western lenses, it takes a derivative form.<sup>9</sup>

### **The "Gurkha" as the *subject* of discourse and their history**

The "Gurkha" identity as a "martial race" is largely the 'discovery' of the ethnographical knowledge of the colonial state. This discovery marks off the colonial state's shift in its emphasis from the brutal modes of conquest to cultural technologies of rule - the production of colonial knowledge.<sup>10</sup> A lot has been written about

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<sup>8</sup> Kumar Pradhan talks about the multiple meanings of the word Nepali, viz, a language, a citizen of Nepal, and as a cultural identity. See his *Pahilo Pahar*, op. cit. p.4.

<sup>9</sup> Partha Chatterjee, while commenting on the nature of anti-colonial nationalism says that while nationalism challenged the colonial claim to domination, it also accepted the very intellectual premises of 'modernity' on which colonial domination was based. See his *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1996, p.30.

<sup>10</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, "Foreword", in Bernard Cohn's, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. ix. Also see, Bernard Cohn and Nicholas B. Dirks, "Beyond the Fringe: The

the ‘short, broad chested, flat faced, snub nosed men with their *khukuris*’<sup>11</sup>. In one of the ironies of history, it was the defeat of the Gorkha soldiers under Amar Singh Thapa that led to the ‘discovery’ of the “Gurkhas”. Numerous reasons ranging from the ‘run of reverses and deaths of veteran English generals in the war’ inspiring awe for the Gorkha soldiers,<sup>12</sup> the Company’s desire to cut down the number of Hindus with ‘brahmanical prejudices’, to the ‘growing Russian threat to the British Empire from the North Western frontiers necessitating the shifting of the base of recruitment from Madras and Bombay towards Punjab and Nepal’ have been cited for the Company’s decision to enlist the Gorkhas in the British Indian Army.<sup>13</sup>

It is indeed important to contextualise the decision to recruit the “Gurkhas” in the political requirements of the colonial state. The imperatives of Empire building had prompted the British into thinking that it would be better and cheaper to dominate the world if the natives could be induced to shoulder much of the Whiteman’s military burden.<sup>14</sup> But to attribute the decision to the political exigencies alone is to over simplify the issue. Furthermore, Lionel Caplan argues that ‘the theory of martial race did not emerge *sui generis* to meet specific military needs, rather it was a deeper manifestation of the wider European doctrine of biological determinism or scientific racism’.<sup>15</sup> Hence the search for the best “fighting material”.

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Nation State, Colonialism, and the Technologies of Power”, *Journal of Historical Sociology*, Vol.1, No. 2, June 1988, pp. 224–229.

<sup>11</sup> Kamal Raj Singh Rathaur, *The Gurkhas: A History of Recruitment in the British Indian Army*, Nirala Publications, New Delhi, 1983, p. 33.

<sup>12</sup> Kanchanmoy Mozumdar, “Recruitment of the Gurkhas in the Indian Army, 1814 – 1877”, *The Journal of the United Service Institution of India*, Vol. lxxxiii, April – June 1963, p. 143.

<sup>13</sup> David Omissi, “The Sepoy and the Raj: The Indian Army, 1860-1940”, McMillan Press Ltd, 1994, p.12.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>15</sup> Lionel Caplan, “Martial Gurkhas: The Persistence of a Military Discourse on ‘Race’ ” in Peter Robb (ed.), *The Concept of Race in South Asia*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2006, p. 261.

The discourse on martial race occupies an important place in the larger scheme of colonial knowledge and its relation with power and domination. The underlying idea of “martial race” was elegantly outlined by Lieutenant-General Sir George MacMunn in his, *The Armies of India* (1911) in the following way: “It is one of the essential differences between the East and the West, that in the East, with certain exceptions, only certain clans and classes can bear arms; others have not the physical courage necessary for the warrior. In Europe as we know, every able bodied man, given food and arms, is a fighting man of sort...In the East, or certainly in India, this is not so...Nor are appearances of any use as a criteria. Some of the most manly looking people in India are in this respect the most despicable.”<sup>16</sup> The theory had two main strands. One, it was based on the idea of natural qualities, emphasising that martiality was an inherited trait and therefore an aspect of ‘race’. Secondly, martial thinking introduced an element of environmental determinism. It was argued that warlike people were to be found in hilly, cooler places, while in hot, flat regions, races were supposed to be timid, servile and unwarlike.<sup>17</sup>

Within a short time, martial race enthusiasts not only reshaped the British Indian army but also systematised the new discourse. Towards the end of the late 1890s, the “martial races” began to be codified in a series of official “Recruiting Handbooks” for the different classes of the Indian Army, which were almost invariably written by British officers long acquainted with the troops concerned. Here, Caplan makes an interesting observation about the long existing huge body of literature on the ‘Gurkhas’. He senses a strong current of ‘consensus and continuity in them, coming across as monolithic and timeless, relying heavily on stereotype, and with little political and historical content’.<sup>18</sup> The atomizing effect of the ethnographic enumeration of the ‘Gurkhas’

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<sup>16</sup> Quoted in Lionel Caplan’s, “Bravest of the Brave: Representation of ‘The Gurkha’ in the British Military Writings”, *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.25, No.3, July 1991, p.580.

<sup>17</sup> Lionel Caplan, (2006), op. cit., pp.260-261.

<sup>18</sup> Lionel Caplan, (1991), op. cit., p.573.



into smallest meaningful component led to the essentialisation of the Gorkha traditions. Furthermore, the working of the Foucauldian 'system of dispersion' is quite clear in the colonial representation of the 'Gurkhas'. In a strange way, the British admiration of the 'Gurkhas' was reserved to the ordinary soldiers only and not to the Gorkha officers. Moreover, the discourse on martial race was as much about the praise of the dogged bravery and masculine qualities of the Gorkhas as it was about highlighting the cultural difference. Thus it was a commonplace belief that the 'Gurkhas' could realize their enormous potential *only* under the tutelage, supervision and leadership of British officers. The 'bravery' of the 'Gurkha' was considered to be a danger to him, forcing the British to keep him under continuous supervision. Eden Vansittart, one of the illustrious recruiting officers, is supposed to have remarked that 'without a strong hand they [the Gurkhas] would very soon deteriorate and become slovenly'.<sup>19</sup> Choicest of racist labels like 'tykes', 'little highlanders', 'little Gurkha', 'little blighters', 'doughty little Mongolian hillmen' were used even as they fetishised him.<sup>20</sup> One of the common jokes about the Gorkhas that did the round was about a mule that went lame when he kicked a Gurkha head while the Gurkha got a slight headache.<sup>21</sup>

Colonialism aestheticised the native Gorkhas in a typically Orientalist image, who squatting next to the white man would add the charm of a simple and unsophisticated native to his prepossessing presence. It was a deliberate policy on the part of the British to recruit from the most illiterate and remote regions of Nepal. The search for the most authentic Gorkha would force the *gallawalas* (local appellation for recruiting agents) go deep into the interiors of Nepal to prise open his pristine habitat. Scientific racism had led the British into believing that an ethnic group could be martial only in one's own territory. It was commonly held that the Magars and Gurungs, who had migrated to east Nepal, would cease to be martial because intermarriage would lead to the contamination

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<sup>19</sup> Ibid., p.573.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid., p.573.

<sup>21</sup> Omissi, op. cit., p. 26.

of their blood which carried military qualities. Jeffrey Greenhut, while discussing the structure of the racist British Indian Army, says that ‘Indians who were intelligent were labelled as cowards, while those defined as brave were uneducated and backward. In such a case, the British Gentlemen stood to combine both intelligence and courage necessary for a man to become officer’.<sup>22</sup> If the Bengalis were ‘effeminate’ then the Gurkhas had to be ‘brave’.

The colonial state through various measures ensured that those who joined the ranks of its army are treated well back in their society. In 1899, Field-Marshal Lord Roberts revived a dormant order granting soldiers precedence in hearing of civil suits. Five years later Lord Kitchener persuaded the Prime Minister of Nepal to exempt former Gorkha soldiers from *corvee* works. Many of them were honoured on public and festive occasions.<sup>23</sup> The discourse on martial race and the subsequent enlistment of the Gorkhas into the British Indian Army changed the entire course of the Gorkha history. At the discursive level, the colonial state firmly placed its control over the hill societies by ‘civilising’ and ‘normalising’ the ‘frontiers’. It also collapsed multiple identities and fluidities, typical of the Gorkha society then, and represented them as a single identity - the martial identity. The ethnic identities were stereotyped and continuously reproduced through a discursive practice. In fine, colonialism violently disrupted the social-conceptual world of the Gorkhas, taking away his freedom by permanently colonising his body. The Gorkha subject was dislocated by stripping off his past and relocated him back again as a deterritorialised subject of “History”.

Three battalions of Gurkha regiments were raised as early as 1815.<sup>24</sup> By the time Sepoy Mutiny was crushed, the Gorkhas had

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<sup>22</sup> Jeffrey Greenhut, “Sahib and Sepoy: An Inquiry into the Relationship between Officers and Native Soldiers of the British Indian Army”, *Military Affairs*, Vol.48, No.1, January 1984, pp.15-16.

<sup>23</sup> Omissi, op. cit., pp.68-69.

<sup>24</sup> For details, see Kanchanmoy Mozumdar, op. cit.

proved their masters right. A series of recruiting depots came up along the long stretch of areas bordering Nepal. By 1864, the British government issued a charter providing for the Gorkha Regiment to buy land for settlement stations at Dharmasala, Dehradun, Almora, Gorakhpur, Shillong, etc. In Darjeeling, the Gorkha Recruitment Depot was opened in 1890, and it continues to draw recruits from in and around Darjeeling and neighbouring Nepal. By January 1904, nearly 57% of the Indian Army (86,841) came from Punjab, Nepal or the Frontier.<sup>25</sup> Though some changes have been brought about in the recruitment policy since Independence, the discourse of martial race continues to be the guiding principle for recruitment of groups like the Gorkhas and Sikhs to the Indian Army.<sup>26</sup>

### **Colonial capitalism, plantation labour and the history of Darjeeling**

Much of the early history of Darjeeling remains in oral form, interwoven with myths and anecdotes, passed down the generations. Nepali history seems caught in a time warp where the same old hackneyed events unfailingly keep appearing in its unchanging form over and over again. For some strange reason the paradigm of social enquiry in the hills remains ossified and immune to the world of social and cultural theories. As a result the scholarship that comes out from here fails to situate itself on the broader canvas of postcolonial theoretical discourses in general and such on India in particular. One way of making amends to these inadequacies is by undertaking a comprehensive inter-textual analysis of the colonial discourse in all its varying forms, particularly the relation between colonial knowledge, power and domination. A cultural criticism of colonialism and its 'technologies of rule' will certainly open up new areas of research.

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<sup>25</sup> Omissi, op. cit., p.19.

<sup>26</sup> For a detailed discussion on the continuity and change in the recruitment policy, see Omar Khalidi, "Ethnic Group Recruitment in the Indian Army: The Contrasting Case of the Sikhs, Muslims, Gurkhas and Others", *Pacific Affairs*, Vol.74, No.4, Winter 2001- 2002, pp. 529- 552. Also see his, 'No basis in military bias', *The Hindustan Times*, New Delhi, February 19, 2006.

The most striking aspect of the history of Darjeeling is the issue of “migration”. No one seems to be taking the issue head on.<sup>27</sup> The question of “migration” is used as a favourite stick to beat the community on most occasions.<sup>28</sup> The point of contention seems to be centering around an innocuous sounding report by Dr. Campbell, who was appointed as the Superintendent of Darjeeling and who claimed to have raised the population from “not more than hundred souls in 1839 to about 10,000 in 1849, chiefly by immigration from the neighbouring states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan.”<sup>29</sup> All kinds of theories and counter theories have come up. The entire debate seems to be caught in a dangerous cycle of cause and effect or what is popularly known in migration theories as “push” and “pull” factors. But one feels that by oversimplifying the matter we are doing the greatest disservice to those who experienced it. The question of migration should be properly theorised by rescuing it from this binarism and situating it in the prevailing colonial ‘racist ideologies that identified particular sections of the people as intrinsically and biologically suited for particular tasks’.<sup>30</sup> When history is tinkered endlessly with an intention to pass some kind of a retrospective judgment on a community, it only becomes that much more hazier and confusing.

Darjeeling was sparsely populated when the British set their foot there. The boundaries with its neighbouring territories were notional and people from adjoining places would come for grazing sheep and cattle or for cutting firewood. But with the discovery of

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<sup>27</sup> Kumar Pradhan has dealt with the issue in part but there is a need for a more comprehensive research on it. See his, *The Gorkha Conquest: The Process and Consequences of Unification of Nepal with Special Reference to Eastern Nepal*, Oxford University Press, Calcutta, 1991, pp.178-179.

<sup>28</sup> See the chapter titled “A Historical Outline of the Migratory Movements”, in *Gorkhaland Agitation: The Issues, An Information Document* (A white paper issued by the Government of West Bengal, published by the Director of Information, Government of West Bengal, 1986.) pp.4-6.

<sup>29</sup> L. S. S. O’ Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Logos Press, New Delhi, 1989, p.22.

<sup>30</sup> Ania Loomba, *Colonialism/Postcolonialism*, Routledge, London, 2001, pp.125-126.

Darjeeling by the British as an ideal retreat, far removed from the “heat” and “dust” of the northern plains, much of the things changed. With the establishment of a ‘modern regime of power’ in Darjeeling, this wild frontier was gradually normalized into a “hill station”. Colonialism ended its fluidity by putting it firmly under the control of its knowledge system. This production of colonial knowledge about Darjeeling, to borrow from Sudipta Kaviraj, led to the refiguring of the ‘fuzzy’ identities into an ‘enumerated’ community.<sup>31</sup> In fact, the production of knowledge later became a necessary tool of domination and control in the hands of the colonial state. This ‘anthropolisation of knowledge’ by the ‘ethnographic state’ proceeded slowly in the context of myriad other interests and processes in this period. The decade of 1860 saw a veritable explosion in the production and circulation of Gazetteers and Manuals that included extensive reports on the manners and customs of the castes, tribes, and religion of the specific regions being studied.<sup>32</sup> Census was one of the most widely used tools for ‘transforming barbarism into civilized data, effecting a transformation of moral condemnation into moral basis of both science and state.’<sup>33</sup> What was happening in the rest of colonial India was also happening in Darjeeling. The colonial state with its superior cognitive apparatus set about collecting “facts” and creating knowledge about Darjeeling and its inhabitants. Through an extensive use of, what Bernard Cohn calls the “investigative modality”,<sup>34</sup> botanists and naturalists set about conducting studies on the local flora and fauna, local population, the products of which were voluminous treatises on the region’s plant species and other

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<sup>31</sup> Sudipta Sudipta, “On the Construction of Colonial Power, Structure, Discourse, Hegemony”, in Sudipta Kaviraj (ed.), *Politics in India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1997, pp.156-157. Also see his, “The Imaginary Institution of India”, in Partha Chatterjee (ed.), *Subaltern Studies*, Vol. VII, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1993, pp.1-39.

<sup>32</sup> Nicholas B. Dirks, “The Ethnographic State”, in Saurabh Dube (ed.), *Postcolonial Passages: Contemporary History Writing on India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2004, p.70.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, p.78.

<sup>34</sup> Bernard Cohn, *Colonialism and Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, pp.4 -5.

information.<sup>35</sup> Survey and cartography were used extensively in the 'geographical arrangement of knowledge necessary for state supervision'.<sup>36</sup> The Darjeeling Municipality, one of the very few municipalities then in India, was established in 1850, and the first official census was carried out in 1872.

Coming back to the question of migration, the colonial state adopted specific theories and administrative practices while dealing with 'frontiers' and margins. The trajectory of the expansion of the colonial state's sovereignty followed a distinct pattern, from the first outlining of territory and subjects to the reconstruction of the state and society. In considering the spread of the jurisdiction of the colonial state, Peter Robb talks about two types of borders and frontiers, viz., internal and external borders, and narrow and broad frontiers.<sup>37</sup> The narrow external frontier was the one the colonial rulers sought to draw on the map. The broad internal borders, on the other hand, represented the one in which there were various layers or zones of contestation and influence rather than a definite line of demarcation between one jurisdiction and another. Moreover, within India the indeterminate zone of authority persisted, and was even encouraged by the colonial rulers for all their claims of sovereignty. The narrow frontier implied a single rule of law within a given territory. However, there were exceptions to this rule, mainly by excluding many aspects of life, classes of people and territories (non-regulation and frontier provinces, princely states and so on) these exceptions constituted the broad internal frontiers of British rule. This demarcation was not only a physical line; rather

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<sup>35</sup> For example, J. D. Hooker's *Himalayan Journals: Notes of a Naturalist in Bengal, the Sikkim and Nepal Himalayas, The Khasia Mountain, etc* (2. vols.) Ward Lock and Co. Ltd., London, 1891. A. Campbell's, "On the Tribes around Darjeeling", *Transactions of the Ethnological Society of London*, Vol.7, 1869.

<sup>36</sup> Peter Pels, "From Text to Bodies: Brian Houghton Hodgson and the Emergence of Ethnology in India", in Jan Van Bremen and Akitoshi Shimizu (ed.), *Colonialism and Anthropology in Asia and Oceania*, Curzon Press, Surrey, 2000, pp. 66-68.

<sup>37</sup> Peter Robb, "The Colonial State and the Constructions of Indian Identity: An Example on the Northeast Frontier in the 1880s", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.31, No.2, 1997, pp. 248-249.

it was a demarcation of the various realms of transitional sovereignty.<sup>38</sup>

A similar kind of territorial concepts was in practice in Nepal. The entire territorial domain was called *muluk*. The king saw himself as a landlord or *malik* of his territory. Within the *muluk* there was *desa* or realm over which the king exercised ritual authority. The realm was an auspicious icon of the universe centered on the temple of the king's tutelary deity (Taleju) and demarcated on the perimeter by temples.<sup>39</sup> The third concept was the notion of *desa* or *des*, meaning country. The "country" consisted of unique people who experienced a common moral and natural identity by virtue of their living and interacting in the same region. People of the same country spoke a common language, shared a common lore (of proverbs, stories and songs), and observed certain customary practices that objectified as a way of life of their country.<sup>40</sup> Furthermore, the boundary of the possession depended on the collection of revenue. This boundary extended or receded depending upon the ambition and strength of the kings' revenue collectors. The ritual boundary, on the other hand, was fixed in particular localities which might be outside the administrative boundaries.<sup>41</sup> All these complexities both in colonial India and in Nepal point towards the fuzzy nature of the entire northern frontiers.

But the Nepalese did migrate to *Munqlan* (the land of the Mughals), and their numbers kept increasing with the possibilities of starting tea and cinchona plantations in Darjeeling. Migration was encouraged by feeding the oppressed and brutalized people with stories like, *chiya ko bot maa paisa falchha*, meaning money grows on tea bushes. Migration was a painful experience, a tragic event in the lives of most people, even though in the Burghardian sense it was merely an act of 'relinquishing one's tenurial contract

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<sup>38</sup> Ibid., p. 250.

<sup>39</sup> Richard Burghart, "The Formation of the Concept of Nation – State in Nepal", *Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. xlv, No.1, November 1984, pp.103-105.

<sup>40</sup> Ibid., p.106.

<sup>41</sup> Ibid. p.112.

in one polity and taking up in another polity within the “country”.<sup>42</sup> Nepal was considered to be the land of the pure, leaving which meant permanent defilement. “Immigration” was encouraged by the colonial state, as it required cheap labour for building infrastructure for its “hill station”, and most importantly for its teeming tea gardens, which had by the turn of the century formed wonderful mosaic on those “virgin” hills. There is an interesting parallel between the discourse of “martial race” and the discourses that informed the decision to employ “Hill Coolies”. Just as the “Gurkha” soldier, simple and free of religious prejudices was better suited to serve in the British Indian Army, he was also thought to be a useful plantation worker as he was casteless, docile and hardworking hill-man. It was within the matrix of race relations in the colonial situation that the colonial capitalist enterprise (tea gardens) encouraged migration. The British planters did not fail in employing *sardars* (local appellation for agents) who would go to Nepal and bring back “young” and “healthy” labourers to work in their tea gardens. The *sardars* in return got commissions from the planters. Along with this, the *sardars* had the additional duty of enforcing discipline and attendance, for which ‘he got one pice (paise) for every worker turning up for work’.<sup>43</sup>

The most significant impact of colonial capitalism was that through its civilizing mission it transformed the docile and hardworking hill-man into a proto-wage labourer. The hill-man was turned into a reified commodity.<sup>44</sup> Like elsewhere, the tea gardens in Darjeeling too provided ‘a massive spectacle of order, productivity and enterprise, a constant picture which provided the self-assurance that was so crucial to the European culture of

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid., p.108.

<sup>43</sup> E. C. Dozey, *A Concise History of Darjeeling District Since 1835*, Printed and Published by the Art Press, Wellington Square, Calcutta, 1916, p. 120.

<sup>44</sup> Kaushik Ghosh, “A Market for Aboriginality: Primitivism and Race Classification in the Indentured Labour Market of Colonial India”, in Gautam Bhadra, Gyan Prakash and Sussie Tharu (eds.), *Subaltern Studies: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Vol. X, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 1999, pp. 13-18.



colonial rule?’<sup>45</sup> While the discourse of martial race had succeeded in creating the Gurkha regiments as a domain for continuous disciplining of the body of the “Gurkha”, the tea gardens on the other hand created a rival domain in which the “hill-man” was turned into a hard working labourer, disciplined and controlled by colonial science – the Imperial botany. The British Indian Army and the tea gardens while competing with each other completed the process of colonisation of the body of the “Gurkha”.

**The emergence of a community and the stirrings of an alternative identity**

Towards the middle of the nineteenth century the colonial state started consolidating its power through a series of territorial acquisitions from Sikkim and Bhutan. By early twentieth century the colonial state had firmly established itself as a ‘modern regime of power’. Like elsewhere the expansion of the colonial rule towards the frontiers like Darjeeling led to the ‘institution of European forms of civil society even though it always remained an incomplete project’. Furthermore, as Partha Chatterjee observes, the process of legitimation of the colonial state by creating a public domain in the form of civil society was fundamentally limited as it could confer only subjecthood on the colonised. The colonised in response refused to accept membership of this civil society of subjects and began constructing their identities within the narrative of community.<sup>46</sup> Moreover, this civil society did not spread evenly, limiting itself to a small section of ‘citizens’ which meant that the enlightened elites often engaged in a pedagogical mission in relation to the rest of the society.<sup>47</sup> Darjeeling also witnessed somewhat similar kind of developments. By the middle of the second decade of the last century there had emerged a sizeable middle class in Darjeeling. They often engaged in pedagogical missions, educating the masses for a need to form a strong

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.14.

<sup>46</sup> Partha Chatterjee, *The Nation and Its Fragments: Colonial and Postcolonial Histories*, Oxford University Press, Delhi, 1995, p.237.

<sup>47</sup> Partha Chatterjee, “Beyond the Nation? Or Within?”, *Social Text*, Vol.16, No.3, Fall 1998, p.6.

community. Pratyoush Onta identifies general education and improvement of Nepali language and literature as the two special areas of emphasis of the reform movements of this time.<sup>48</sup> A flurry of civil society organisations like the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan (1924), Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan (1932), Sri Hitkari Sammelan (1945), Himalaya Kala Mandir (1950) and many others emerged which were actively involved in redefining and creating a new self-identity based on the idea of kinship - Nepali *daju bhai*. Another major factor in this amalgamation was the standardization and universalisation of Nepali language. The efforts of these organisations and many other factors led to a pluralist synthesis of the myriad groups that together constituted the Gorkha *jati*, secured and sustained by a pluralist culture and imagination. In a rather strange way colonialism became, to invoke Marx, the “unconscious tool of history”, providing a basis for fashioning a new self-identity. This has led scholars like T. B. Subba to argue that nation building which has been the national goal of Nepal, to have realised itself outside the boundaries of Nepal.<sup>49</sup>

Here, it will be an interesting exercise to study the Gorkha subjectivity. To be sure, the problem of Gorkha subjectivity is not so much the problem of cultural displacement as it is a sense of being deterritorialised. There was a certain sense of lack that kept haunting him as he left his home and hearth. His subjectivity was bitterly torn between the calling of the home and the hard reality of never returning to see it again. There was optimism and hope when he said ‘*suna ko lingo, chandi ko ping, ek jieu khana launa lai thikai chha Darjeeling*’, meaning Darjeeling will take care of me. But there was also a fear of the uncertain. This liminality of the deterritorialised subject was clearly reflected in the cultural

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<sup>48</sup> Pratyoush Onta, “Creating a Brave Nepali Nation in British India: The Rhetoric of *Jati* Improvement, Rediscovery of Bhanubhakta and the Writing of *Bir History*”, *Studies in Nepali History and Society*, Vol.1, No. 1, June 1996, p.39.

<sup>49</sup> T B Subba, “Nepal and the Indian Nepalis”, in Kanak Mani Dixit and Shastri Ramachandran (eds.), *State of Nepal*, Himal Books, Kathmandu, 2002, p.126. Also see Harka Gurung, “Nepali Nationalism a Matter of Consolidation”, *Himal South Asian*, Vol.14, No.3, March 2001, p.22.

production of those times. It was not surprising that it created, to borrow a phrase from Appadurai, a `diasporic public sphere', in which even while the nascent community was making ceaseless efforts to ground its new self-identity, was also at the same time lamenting the fact of leaving home. Nepal was present everywhere, within the subject as a memory, and more strongly in its literary utterances. The memory of migration was at once an occasion to feel lost, and also a historical moment from where one had to chart a different course of history. It was also a moment for readying oneself to the regimen of new life. People would often say '*ek jhumro launchhu, ek mana khanchuu*', meaning "I will live frugally".

This material history was subjectively reproduced in many famous literary works like Lil Bahadur Chhetri's *Basai* and *Brahmaputrako Chheu Chhau Maa*, Laina Singh Bangdel's *Muluk Dekhi Bahira*, Rudraraj Pande's *Prayaschit*, Asit Rai's *Naya Chhitijko Khoj* and many others that were based on the motif of exploitation and migration.<sup>50</sup> This also explains the unprecedented popularity of Man Bahadur Mukhia's *Ani Deorali Roonchha*, a play that captured the plight and oppression of the people caught in the cycle of debt in late nineteenth century rural Nepal. Agam Singh Giri, in many ways, epitomises this double consciousness of the subject that swore by the primordial form of communal self-identity that was beginning to locate itself within a nation, which had just begun its career. In his works one can trace the self-identity constructing its moral ideological foundations on the spiritual conception of *pahaad* (hill), *kamaan* (tea garden), and *maato* (land). These ideological foundations were grounded on the notion of *bir Gorkha jati* which for its own historic reasons became the foundational narrative of a deterritorialised community recreating its home in a somewhat alien place. His poems like, "*Mayaloo paakha chiyaabaari*", "*Suna hai suna Nepali*", and "*Pahaad ki*

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<sup>50</sup> Michael Hutt, "Being Nepali without Nepal: Reflections on a South Asian Diaspora", in David N. Gellner, *et. al.* (eds.), *Nationalism and Ethnicity in a Hindu Kingdom: The Politics of Culture in Contemporary Nepal*, Harwood Academic Publishers, Netherlands, 1997, pp.102, 140.

*raani Darjeelinglai*” exhort his fellow folks to reconcile to the reality of Darjeeling as their new home<sup>51</sup>. But there are also indications of a somewhat diasporic community’s yearning for home, located in the interstices of the text. The ambivalences of the subject stand out very clearly in poems like *Meechi lai baato sodhera*, *Shri panch Maharajdhiraj prati pravasko sadhbhavna*, and *Samachar yahi bhanidinu*.<sup>52</sup>

The process of Gorkha identity formation was the product of the cultural renaissance in Darjeeling. However, this process of formation of a strong cultural identity in the shape of Nepali identity was again unsettled as it was relocated within the matrix of the national culture and identity of the Indian nation. The problem of identity arises when this national culture not only provides resources for defining the identities but also mediates it. National cultures, as Stuart Hall reminds us, are not composed of cultural institutions but of symbols and representations. Furthermore, national culture is a discourse - a way of constructing meanings that influences and organises both our actions and conceptions about ourselves. National cultures, he argues, construct identities by producing meanings about the nation with which we can identify.<sup>53</sup> Furthermore, the process of the formation of self-identity was dislocated by the Nepali historiography which while carving out a political space in the liberal nationalist imagination of India constituted its subjectivity in the pre-colonial Gorkha glory and bravery. It is not that there were no indigenous conceptions of martiality and valour. The problem with Gorkha history is that these very ideas and values were appropriated by the colonial state by giving a scientific sanctity to the great tradition. Thus the narrative of the *bir* Gorkha quite logically conflates with the discourse of “martial race”. It creates a peculiar situation in which the *bir* Gorkha is self-idealized and reified into a brave soldier but since the

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<sup>51</sup> See, Mohan Thakuri (ed.), *Agamsingh Giri Rachna Sanchayan*, Sahitya Akademi, New Delhi, 1992.

<sup>52</sup> See Bijay Kumar Rai (ed.), *Agam Singh Giri Rachnaavali*, Vol.1, Nirman Prakashan, Namchi (Sikkim), 1998.

<sup>53</sup> Stuart Hall, op. cit., pp.291-292.

identity is deeply implicated in the colonial history, it remains tied to the white master with feudal loyalties. In such a case ambivalence towards colonialism becomes inevitable. The Gorkha subject while attempting to liberate itself from the hegemony of colonial discourse creates a new subjectivity in the self-identity which is again reconstituted by the same discourse from which it came out. Thus, the emerging cultural identity of the Gorkha remains hostage to the racial identity inscribed on the body of the Gorkha by the white man through colonial state. Colonialism not only created hierarchy of knowledges, it also created a hierarchy of human beings in which the “Gurkha” was consigned to the role of a supplicant, first to the white man and then later to the inheritors of that colonial knowledge.

### **The problem of Gorkha identity and the discourse of freedom**

The Gorkha identity has been treading a difficult path in which it has tried to strike a fine balance between its cultural identity and the demands of citizenship and national culture of India. The Gorkha identity constituted in the narrative of the community had to submit to the postcolonial state ‘embedded as it was within the universal narrative of capital which does not necessarily recognize within its jurisdiction any form of community except the single, determinate, demographically enumerable form of the nation.’<sup>54</sup> The problem of the Gorkha identity arises from everyday experiences and the necessity to carve out a political space for its cultural identity in India. The identity often claims its legitimacy by citing its contribution to the anti-colonial struggles. This moral claim is often buttressed by the denial of history, the historical link with Nepal. Hence, the lexical juggleries like *Indian–Nepali*, *Bharatiya-Gorkhali* or *Bhargoli*. Part of the problem also stems from the manner in which the Nepali historiography has charted its path. One feels that in these historical works there is no serious attempt to interrogate colonialism. One also senses a subtle fixation of our historians with colonial knowledge. There is an innate feeling that the native’s history can be authenticated only when it is culled from

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<sup>54</sup> Partha Chatterjee, 1995, op. cit., pp.237-238.

Western sources - the Vansittarts, the Hookers, the O'Malley's. In effect, the very colonial discourses have become the canonical texts for the production of knowledge about the community both from without and from within. The native voice is often lost in the cacophony of the metropolitan and 'mainstream' voices. The immediate impact of this historiography is the endorsement of the idealised and orientalised identity as the self-identity. In other words, the historiography orientalises the Gorkha identity. As Edward Said would like to remind us, the Orient was Orientalised not only because it was discovered to be "Oriental" in all those ways considered commonplace by an average nineteenth-century European but also because it could be – made Oriental.<sup>55</sup> The colonial knowledge system at once participates in the construction of reality and also gets itself constructed.<sup>56</sup> The true goal of the Gorkha historiography should be 'to recover their own particular forms of subjectivity from the universalising modes and reconstitute them and restore in history'.<sup>57</sup> There is a need to reconstitute the Gorkhas as a historical character, rehabilitate their consciousness and agency in history. This can be done by engaging with the canonical texts, reading them against their grain and unsettling the discourse. This will eventually liberate the Gorkha identity from the hegemony of discourse and the totalising tendencies of Western history.

The liberation of the Gorkha identity from the colonial discourse should create fertile grounds for further hybridisation of the identity and not towards essentialisation of identity. Identities, we must remind ourselves, are always hybridised. Identities often keep changing boundaries making culture the prime site of contestation of the multiple layers of identities. It should be thought

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<sup>55</sup> Edward Said, *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin Books, New Delhi, 1995, pp.5-6.

<sup>56</sup> Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Construction of India", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.20, No.3, 1986, pp.444-445.

<sup>57</sup> Rosalind O' Hanlon, "Recovering the Subject: Subaltern Studies and Histories of Resistance in Colonial South Asia", *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol.22, No.1, 1988, p.190.

of as a 'production' which is never complete, always in process, and always constituted within, not outside, representation.<sup>58</sup> The Gorkhas are spread across South Asia, most of them hybridised by the local traditions, languages, and cultures. In such a case, it will be more useful to think of the Gorkha identity as a post-national identity or a South Asian identity.

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<sup>58</sup> Stuart Hall, "Cultural Identity and Diaspora", in Padmini Mongia (ed.), op. cit., p.110.

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