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Flighty Subjects: Sovereignty, Shifting Cultivators, and the State in Darjeeling, 1830–1856

Catherine Warner

This paper focuses on the historical experiences of shifting cultivators who lived in the eastern Himalaya in the areas around Darjeeling, Eastern Nepal, and Southern Sikkim in the early 19th century. These groups played an important role in state-formation in the precolonial period, as regionally expansive states relied upon them for labor, military levies, and revenue. Shifting cultivators were organized under headmen who dispensed justice, collected taxes, and negotiated with the state on behalf of their clients. The author argues that such groups formed the basis of sovereignty on the frontier, where control over subjects was more significant than control over clearly demarcated territory. Patrons of labor were well-versed in political negotiations and dexterously managed the shift to East India Company rule in Darjeeling in 1835; however, the Company administrators changed the terms of governance, even as they drew upon the headmen's services in accessing laborers. By positing the labor market as the appropriate means of securing labor, the Company officials denied the role of the state in accumulating labor power. In addition, colonial discourse fixed shifting cultivators as backwards and in need of protection, undermining their important contributions to state formation under the previous dispensation. By distancing itself from patron-client relationships as vital to state formation and discrediting these networks of labor organization in favor of market logic, the Company in theory moved the terms of sovereignty towards territory rather than people.

Keywords: Darjeeling, borderlands, colonialism, history, shifting cultivation.

Introduction

In April of 1925, a Lepcha in Dikchu, Sikkim, told an anthropologist a story about the bat who evaded paying taxes. According to the storyteller, Chyope, in the past the birds had demanded revenue from a bat.[1] "When *Nun-bong-pono-ong-fo* (the king of birds) demanded his tax, he [the bat] showed his teeth, and snarled, saying he was not a bird, but that he belonged to the family of rats (*ka-lok*) and would not pay any tax [to which birds were subject]." The rat king, hearing this, came to collect his due, but the bat flourished his wings and insisted that, as a bird, he was exempt from paying any tax on rats. The two kings held a council and decided to kill the bat for refusing to pay any taxes. The next day, the bat casually hung from the eaves of a thatched roof and loudly proclaimed that although soon he would be killed, he had many bat relations working in the service of their own king who would seek revenge. Overhearing this and fearing the bat's many supporters, the two kings fled. Chyope explained in conclusion: "So that is why the bat is free from all taxation. Everybody in the world pays some sort of revenue, even we human beings, but the bat is free and doesn't. That is why he always hides in the day time, and flies at night" (Stocks 1975: 47-48).

Although the anthropologist, De Beauvoir-Stocks, recorded this story some decades after the events of the period I shall address—the East India Company's annexation of Darjeeling from Sikkim in 1835 and the initial development of the colonial hill station through the 1850s—it evokes key historiographical questions regarding sovereignty and identity in the borderland. In the story, the kings, who collect taxes on the basis of shared identity, collaborate with one another to support their own authority vis-à-vis their respective subjects. Sovereignty, then, is depicted as exclusive and vested in the relationship between ruler and subject, one based on shared qualities—one is either a subject of bats or rats or birds. This view of kingship, interestingly, does not match the multi-ethnic model of the Namgyal rulers of Sikkim with which the Lepcha storyteller would have been most closely acquainted; rather, the story suggests that state authority (as encompassed in the right to collect taxes) rests with the heads of clans or ethnic groups. For the subjects, belonging to such a group meant protection from multiple, competing authorities, all of whom might claim taxes or forced labor, in return for subordination to a single ruler. Such patron-client relationships were crucial foundations for building state sovereignty in the pre-colonial dispensation and became key sites for colonial intervention in the initial period of Darjeeling's development as a hill station.[2]

Following the Anglo-Nepal War of 1814-1816, the East India Company assumed the right to adjudicate the border between Sikkim and Nepal, signaling its territorial ambitions in the eastern Himalaya (Aitchison 1862). In practice, the Company's assumption of the right to arbitrate a spatially defined, exclusive border between the two states produced little change until disputes within Sikkim spilled over the border into Nepal in the 1820s. The Company's attempts to insert boundaries between Sikkim, Nepal, and its own territory after Darjeeling's annexation in 1835, depended upon its ability to understand—in order to shape—local hierarchies, systems encompassing not only patron-client relationships but also their attendant social and economic obligations. In this light, territorial disputes proved inseparable from disputes about sovereignty over people. As a colonial power, the East India Company was unable to create strong linkages with Indian society or create hegemonic influence at the grassroots level (Yang 1989; Guha 1997). Thus, even as the Company engaged patron-client networks to procure laborers for building the hill station, these unequal relationships could no longer be considered the basis for legitimate rule. The notion that sovereignty adhered to territory rather than to people became an essential fiction for early 19th century colonial governance.

My argument builds upon the work of scholars who have noted the colonial state's territorialization of governance and move towards unitary, non-overlapping forms of sovereignty in contrast to the "divisible and negotiable" forms of a pre-colonial dispensation (Jalal 1995: 14). Many scholars have also offered insights into the ways in which colonial rule was territorialized by creating geographical inequalities and then employing discourses that naturalized these inequalities. Such trends often meant that forested and mountainous spaces demarcated as 'indigenous' became ruled as exceptional spaces in need of authoritarian forms of control, as colonial discourses defined indigenous people as less capable of participating in the new colonial dispensation than other colonized South Asians (Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Rai 2004; Shneiderman 2010; Sharma 2011; Ludden 2012). In accordance with this changing notion of sovereignty, Company administrators described their efforts to attract and maintain manual laborers for carrying provisions, clearing and preparing building sites, and constructing roads, as the creation of a labor market where none had existed. By positing the market as the ideal and just system for appropriating labor, the EIC administrators discredited and contained existing patron-client relationships even as they utilized them to gain access to laborers. This move undermined the power of labor patrons with whom pre-colonial states had formed alliances to achieve a territorial presence in the frontier.

The colonial state would become the arbiter of territory and leave the control of labor to the 'market,' effectively reversing the terms, rather than practice, of sovereignty in the borderland.[3]

Shifting Cultivation, Territory and State in the Eastern Himalaya, c. 1650-1800

In the Eastern Himalaya and bordering *tarai* (plains) from the 17th to the early 19th centuries, communities of shifting agriculturalists, including Lepcha, Limbu, and Mech peoples, were important partners in state formation—a dynamic often ignored in the standard colonial narrative of gazetteers written after the mid-19th century (Hunter 1876: 18-19; O'Malley 1907: 19-25). Indeed, over the last several decades, scholars have illuminated the integral and enduring roles shifting cultivators played in regional state formation and trade networks, even late into the 19th century, across the Indian subcontinent (Pouchepadas 1995; Sivaramakrishnan 1999; Pratap 2000). On the basis of conversations with Lepcha elders in Sikkim in the 1930s, ethnographer Geoffrey Gorer (1967) speculated that Lepchas had largely abandoned fixed agriculture in the 18th and 19th centuries and practiced more nomadic lifestyles in an attempt to remain free of enslavement and other abuses during frequent conflicts between regional, expansive kingdoms. Therefore, shifting cultivation should be understood as a historically specific strategy for maintaining distance from as well as negotiating with the state rather than a relic from previous modes of production.

Regional states based on monarchies with non-local genealogies seem to have taken root in the eastern Himalaya from the 17th century. Saul Mullard's recent work on Sikkimese state formation highlights the importance of the '*Lho Mon Gtsong gsum* agreement' of 1663, which brought into alliance the three major ethnic groups of Sikkim (the *Lho pa*/ Tibeto-Sikkimese, the *Mon*/ Lepcha, and the *Gtsong*/ Limbu). A number of chiefs or headmen of the three ethnic groups provided their signatures, agreeing to abolish "separate governments of *Lho*, *Mon*, or *Gtsong*." The agreement encapsulated the signers' intent to form a united government under the Namgyal lineage, and to oppose outside influences that might intrude and disturb the *dharma* (religious order) within the kingdom (Mullard 2011: 140-146). The Namgyal Rajas, also known as 'Chogyal' (*dharma raja* or upholder of the sacred order), employed *dharma* and a unique legal code as a way to demarcate sovereignty over ethnic communities who resided in Sikkim as well as several neighboring states. Other scholars have noted that the extension of state space in the Eastern Himalaya was closely bound up with the spread of 'high religion' (namely Hinduism and Buddhism) and the re-definition of ethnic identities (English 1985; Ortner 1989). In the case of the Lepchas, those who adopted the symbols and rituals of Buddhism seem to have gained higher status and greater claims to local resources vis-à-vis their communities (Kilgour 1897). Similarly, the Hindupati Sen Kingdom of present-day eastern Nepal, also established in the mid-17th century, governed by emphasizing religious patronage and extra-territorial connections as Hindu rulers over a primarily animistic population (Pradhan 1991; Krauskopff 2000).[4]

While regional courtly lineages, such as the Namgyals and Sens, built state power by defining the boundaries of group identity among the subject population in the Eastern Himalaya, resistance to such rule might idealize horizontal bonds within ethnic groups to subvert the state. As James Scott (2009) has argued in a different context, one can interpret the defining and policing of communal identities as a state strategy spread across colonial and non-colonial states. Mullard, on the other hand, views ethnic groups as partners in state formation in his emphasis on the agency of Lepchas, Limbus, and Tibeto-Sikkimese in the *Lho Mon Gtsong gsum* agreement establishing Sikkim. Espousing a view closer to Scott's, late 20th-century Lepcha activist A. R. Foning argues that this was a case of divide and rule. In his view, the Namgyal lineage authored the pact in order to engineer a political break between Lepchas and Limbus, who otherwise shared common origins and many cultural practices. Foning argues that Lepcha society never took on a hierarchical structure—only seniors were accorded special rank—and only the import of Tibetan feudalism created a distinction between elite and commoner Lepchas. The Lepchas had only consented to the installation of the Namgyal dynasty in 1642, Foning contends, to honor an older pact formed when a Lepcha senior "was coaxed into ceremoniously swearing eternal friendship of brotherhood with the Tibetans who were gradually infiltrating into [their] land" (1987: 8). Taken together, Mullard's and Foning's historical arguments about identity formation suggest that both the community and the state negotiated, and at times contested, the terms of belonging and identity as part of a dynamic social and political dispensation in the pre-colonial Himalaya.

The kingdom of Gorkha expanded eastward in the late 18th century and, after it dismantled the intervening Sen kingdoms, its frontier came to rest against that of the kingdom of Sikkim. For several decades, the frontier between Gorkha and Sikkim remained contested, without much apparent anxiety to either side. When Francis Buchanan (later Hamilton), a physician and servant in the Bengal

Medical Service, constructed a history of the Eastern Himalaya and border *tarai* in the early 19th century at the behest of the Company, he expressed significant doubt about who controlled which areas. Indeed, an open frontier may have been desirable in a situation in which neither state had sufficient military power to police the border. In some places, Sikkim and Nepal seemed to have shared control of territory—for example, of Nagri fort near a frontier trade route (Hamilton (1819) 1971). Yet while two kingdoms might share territory, not so high-status subjects. In the late 18th century, as Gorkha expanded into the Pallo Kirat region of present-day eastern Nepal, a number of important local people fled to Sikkim. Gorkha king Prithvi Narayan Shah's agents were deputed to offer Sikkim the choice of turning out the refugees or facing battle. Sikkim chose the former option (Vajracharya and Shrestha 1978). Thus, both states vied for exclusive access to networks of local patron-client networks, in the majority Limbu region, as a way of asserting their local influence over trade routes and hill products and resources.

Patron-Client Relationships among Shifting Agriculturalists

The frontier areas of western and southern Sikkim and eastern Nepal (an area encompassing present-day Darjeeling), in the early 19th century, were largely populated by groups of shifting agriculturalists allied with regional states. These alliances, apparently reaching back to the consolidation of regional states in the 17th century, formed around powerful men who could mobilize labor and impose a tax on agrarian surplus. An agreement between the Sen kings (the regional rulers preceding Gorkha expansion) and the Kirats (of present-day eastern Nepal) stipulated that the Kirat headmen must keep lists of tax-payers, and maintain watch over who entered and left their areas of jurisdiction. Headmen were also responsible for producing stipulated numbers of trained warriors on demand (Naraharinath 1966: 92-95). Mullard's work supports the notion that regional states were keeping written records of tax obligations to some degree in the 17th century; Mullard has translated a fragment listing Sikkimese subjects of various ethnicities (primarily Lepcha and Limbu) contained in a Tibetan manuscript compiled from 1645 to 1676, or a few decades after the Namgyal establishment. Later documents resembling this list found in the Sikkim archive are explicitly labeled tax lists (Mullard 2011). That censuses were taken by the regional states for the purposes of taxation also seems to be borne out by the experience of the colonial census takers in Darjeeling District in 1871: a number of locals fled across the border into Nepal to avoid being counted because they feared enumeration and taxation went hand-in-hand (Baines 1892).

Given the scarcity of labor, local social norms were necessarily incorporative. Limbu activist and scholar Iman Singh Chemjong's translation of codes pertaining to community adoptions suggests that incorporating new members into the group was significant for defining Limbu cultural practice. Adoptions would take place during an assembly of representatives of the ten chiefs of the districts, a ceremony that included the adopter and adoptee. According to his translation, the priest would remind the assembly that this was an old tradition sanctioned by the wisdom of their forefathers who had promoted population growth as a collective good. He would also remind them of the words of the forefathers: "If any member of any other nationality or race or tribe or family or cast or creed desires to join your family, let him be accepted among your children as members of the same fold." The ceremony ended by declaring that the adoptee "no longer belong[ed] to [his] old caste or race or tribe." The assembly would record the decision in a written agreement with all present signing as witnesses, subject to a set fine if any among them should go on to speak badly of the adopted person (Chemjong 2003: 60-62). Thus, group sanction ensured acceptance of new members.

More details about the organization of shifting cultivators emerge from colonial administrators' observations about Mech and Dhimal groups located in the low foothills to the southwest of Darjeeling and Lepchas in the hills around the new station from the late 1830s. These groups paid revenue and provided free labor to Sikkim, which claimed them as its subjects. Rather than living in condensed villages, families were spread out across a loosely defined jungle area, partially clearing land for cultivation through cutting and burning and moving on after three years. Sikkim's tax structure encouraged such movement with increased rates imposed after the third year. Shifting cultivators also gained leverage with the state authorities to whom they paid taxes by holding out the threat of relocating to a neighboring sovereign's area. Each cultivator paid a tax determined by his number of tools to a headman who was acknowledged to have first found and settled the clients in the area.[5] As a Mandal heading a group of Mech and Dhimal cultivators asserted in the mid-19th century, Mandals "get followers and Ryots when ever [sic] they can, they bring them from other countries to their own, and in whatever part of the country between the Mechi and the Teesta [Rivers] the person so brought may reside. The Meches recognise no territorial division among the Chowdrys. It is the Ryots [sic] that are divided..." The Mandals acted as the headmen of a group of tax-paying shifting cultivators,

provided some judicial authority, and handed the taxes over to a *Chaudhari*, or regional revenue official, who then conveyed the payments to Sikkim.[6]

Lepchas were also organized under headmen, but in contrast with the Mech of the lower hills, were more closely integrated into Sikkim's military service structure. Many Lepcha headmen owed armed service to Sikkim while others owed service and tax to Buddhist Lamas. Anthropologist Lionel Caplan argued that the customary rights of "first settlers" formed the basis of the *kipat* (communal system of land tenure) in the Limbu region of eastern Nepal (1970). The ways in which Mandals gathered and settled *raiyats* (subjects), possibly by force, in the region suggest that the rights of first settlement were in part established by the regulation of shifting cultivation and allowed the Mandals stronger claims to land than their clients. In the hills, the Lepchas grew dry rice and maize without use of the plough. Mech agriculture followed the same pattern but also included cotton, which cultivators marketed in local bazaars. Like the Kirats in the late 18th century, as discussed above, group membership depended on patronage, organization of shifting agriculture as producing an (at least marginal) economic surplus, and a loose relationship with geography, rather than strictly defined ethnic or territorial sovereignty (*The Dorjeeling Guide* 1845; Hooker 1854; Gorer 1967; Pinn 1986).[7]

Patterns of shifting cultivation were structured by obligations of forced labor, including personally attending or guarding a person of rank, carrying supplies, and domestic or agricultural labor owed to headmen and the Sikkim Raja. As the East India Company annexed Darjeeling in 1835 and moved into the region, the balance of authority seems to have tilted towards the Chaudharis. For example, the Mech Chaudharis in the foothills continued to collect unlimited *begar* (forced labor), even as they helped their clients to negotiate an increased revenue payment in return for excused labor obligations to Sikkim. Substituting cash payments for forced labor indicates a move towards equating labor with a particular and definable value. The Mech people were accustomed to trading their agricultural and forest products, especially cotton, in the markets located in their own forests as well as in Darjeeling.[8] Increased market linkages helped the shifting agriculturalists to negotiate their relationship with the regional state (especially the labor obligation) through access to cash. Indeed, cash commutation for labor taxes was not limited to Sikkim; in the late 18th century the Gorkhas introduced a new set fee in eastern Nepal for Limbus to pay in substitution of forced labor. The practice of optional cash commutation spread to the rest of Nepal by the early 19th century (Sagant 2003).

Shifting Cultivators and Clients Talk to the Company

During the Anglo-Nepal War between the East India Company and the Gorkha state (1814-1816), the Company wanted to curtail Gorkha expansion to the east but lacked the military manpower to do so. Instead, Captain Latter (stationed with troops in Purnia) provided Sikkim with limited weapons and the assurance that if their armed forces could overthrow the Gorkhas in their territory, the Company would support them after the war (*Papers Respecting the Nepaul War* 1822). Lepcha and Limbu officers and soldiers revolted against the Gorkha outposts, and the Company penned a treaty fixing the territorial gains. The Company then effected a separate non-treaty agreement with Sikkim transferring the *tarai* region to the royal lineage and heirs "in consideration of the services performed by the Hill tribes under the control of the Raja of Sikkim" (Aitchison 1862: 143). Thus, while the crucial role of the "Hill tribes" in effecting the military victory is acknowledged, the spoils went to the monarchy. This treaty can be read as a first step in the Company's efforts to reduce the influence of groups of shifting cultivators in the region, in favor of engaging unilaterally with Sikkim's monarchy.

The East India Company justified its claim to the Darjeeling area by factitiously arguing that only under its influence could the local population co-exist peacefully and then seized upon the occasion of a border dispute to expand into the region. In 1826, the Lepcha Prime Minister, Chagzot Bolot (also known as Buljeet) was murdered by a court faction as Tshudpud Namgyal (r. 1793-1863) attempted to reassert his lineage's authority and overturn the puppet status to which the Lepcha 'Bar phung clan had subjugated him. The Prime Minister had supposedly taken the king's red seal and misappropriated the revenue, both understood as treasonous acts. This was not a simple Lepcha versus Tibeto-Sikkimese power struggle, as by this time the royal and ministerial families had become linked through marriage—Bolot was the uncle through his wife to Chogyal Tshudpud Namgyal. Bolot's nephews fled to Ilam (Nepal), part of their patrimonial estate, taking about 800 Lepcha households from Chidan and Namthang (Sprigg 1995; Mullard 2010). Apparently, Colonel Lloyd, the Company's intermediary with Sikkim, had encouraged the Lepcha faction to leave Sikkim, as he thought it would simplify political affairs in the country. The Lepcha refugees, protected by Nepal, were based near Ilam on a hill called Onto situated between the headwaters of the Mechi river, but Jerung

Kazi requested the Agent for the North-Eastern Frontier Colonel Lloyd's permission to return to his patrimonial estate around Darjeeling (O'Malley 1907). Moreover, the refugee Kazis claimed that Lloyd had encouraged their exodus from Sikkim and as such he owed them some land in compensation. Sikkim and Nepal's dispute over possession of Onto, then, was as much about jurisdiction over people as territory, yet nevertheless fell within the treaty's stipulations of Company arbitration. Archibald Campbell of the Nepal Residency, Colonel Lloyd, and the Commercial Agent from Malda, G.W. Grant, mediated the initial border mission. Grant and Lloyd noticed Darjeeling's favorable landscape and exhorted the Governor-General to negotiate with Sikkim for the territory whenever possible in order to create a sanitarium in the eastern Himalaya accessible to the Bengal Presidency. In the winter of 1834-1835, Sikkim accused the Lepcha refugees in Nepal of intruding into the Sikkim Morang, leading to fresh border disputes. Colonel Lloyd returned to the region and used this opportunity to secure the succession of Darjeeling in return for repulsing the refugees.[9]

At this time, the border dispute was still unsettled, as the Mechi River had been designated the accepted border between Nepal and Sikkim in the treaty of 1817 without, however, designating exactly where this river originated. The Company deposed deputies for Sikkim and Nepal to settle the border for the last time in 1838 (several years after the annexation of Darjeeling) from which a number of transcripts survive.[10] From this series of depositions and commentary, we gain a sense of the way territorial control was structured around patron-client relationships as well as a hint of the perspective of the clients (the 'bats' in the Lepcha folktale). The Lepchas controlled the area on the ground, but many of the men interviewed had worked in various capacities as local functionaries (even as *shikhari*, or huntsman) for Nepal, Sikkim, and Lepcha Kazis, who were semi-independent of Sikkim at different times. Limbus, Lepchas, and some migrants from the mid-western Nepal hills had previously cultivated the area, and it had recently been connected by road (constructed through the use of local forced labor) from Ilam to Nagri and towards the Mechi River but not yet up to the Company frontier. It seems that following the war, Sikkim had captured and relocated Onto's shifting cultivators within its own territory. Later, a number of them had returned to Nepal.

In the depositions from the border settlement of 1838, when questioned about the impetus behind their patterns of movement between Sikkim and Nepal, the clients provided conflicting testimony. Ajuk (known to other Lepchas as '*Adhikari*' or 'Secretary'), formerly acted as an orderly for Chatrajit, also known as Chutup, Lepcha leader of the Sikkimese forces.[11] Ajuk claimed that he was taken by force from his home near Ilam by Sikkim troops and relocated to Chongtong in Sikkim after the Anglo-Nepal war of 1814-1816.[12] When asked by the Company translator if he was "taken by force or with his [own] consent," he replied that he was taken "by force." However, when questioned how long he remained in Sikkim and whether he had been free to leave, he replied that he remained for "six or seven years...of [his] own freewill."

Humsbarra, a 47-year-old Limbu, responded to the boundary agents' questions by explaining in greater detail the capture of local people by armed Lepchas from Sikkim after Jaintia Khatri, the Gorkha *Subah* (commander) posted at Nagri, had been forced to retreat to Nepal following the war. Humsbarra said that the "Sikkim people" came and "carried away Elam Sing and Eknaggree and many Lepchas and Limboos." Upon further questioning, he stated: "They took all the Lepchas. The Limboos fled to Phakphoi westward." When asked for names, Humsbarra mentioned "Aka Limboo. Eknaggree and gooling Soobeeas. Debria Jimpan. Lupchas [sic]. And others." The examiner asked Humsbarra to verify Ajuk's story (noted above) that he was captured and taken by the Sikkimese party. Humsbarra clarified: "They carried away his Chief, he [Ajuk] hid himself at the time and followed them afterwards." Clearly, there was a different understanding of ethnic or corporate identity in which Lepcha and Limbu identities overlap, even if some distinction was understood by local people.[13]

Testimonies contained in the report of 1838 also indicate that revenue obligations could cross state boundaries. Kookah, a 75-year-old Lepcha, reiterated that after the war "[s]ome soldiers from Sikim [sic] came and took away the [military/civil officers] and carried them across the Rumbong river to Nagree." He said that he too was taken, as well as his Chief. Kookah remained in the area across the Rumbong River in Sikkim and cultivated for one year, after which he returned to his place of origin, Siddileang [Nepal]. His Chief, Gooling Jumpun [Dzongpon?], settled at Chongtong in Sikkim. After returning to Siddileang, Kookah continued to pay revenue intermittently to his chief at Chongtong (although they were technically under two different states). He stated that he used to go to Chongtong and take the chief things, "[s]ome as Nuzzur some as revenue." This statement suggests that a degree of voluntary action and reciprocity existed in this relationship, as *nazar* would have been a gift, perhaps for protection, which Kookah made according to his own means and needs, whereas *revenue* would have indicated a more bureaucratic and fixed demand. Kookah further stated that in this manner,

he paid revenue for two years to Gooling Jumpun and then he did not pay anyone for two years—a statement which further underscores Kookah's relative autonomy vis-à-vis his chief.

These testimonies taken from the boundary commission reveal that Nepal was still working to insert itself into the local political economy around Ilam (formerly subject to the defunct Sen kingdom) in the early 19th century. Further, the eastern boundaries of Nepal and Sikkim overlapped, with each state having promoted the settlement of subjects within the same territory. At the same time, Lepchas clearly held the balance of power in the area, as the Nepali subjects had to leave when the Lepchas 'revolt[ed]' during the war of 1814-1816 (Aitchison 1862: 149-152; *The Dorjeeling Guide* 1845: 66). Sri Kishan Gharti Havildar, of Ilam *gadhi* (fort) in Nepal, stated that his older brother had been deputed by Nepal to settle people in the Khoegurry ridge at the time when Jaintia Khatri was *Subah*. The settlers would not pay revenue for five years, after which time they were to pay their revenues to the Gorkha company stationed at Nagri. The brother of the *havildar* (low-ranking officer) brought *raiyats*, including 20 families of his caste, as well as his own family from Majh Kirat. They had to depart the area after one year, however, because the war broke out, followed by 'the revolt of the Lepchas.' When Nepal allowed the settlement of the Lepcha refugees near Ilam some 20 years later, they too were to pay their revenues to the military outpost, and the appointed *jagirdar* (land grantee) was exhorted to settle more *raiyats* from 'Bhot' and 'Muglan' in the area (Vajracharya and Shrestha 1978).

These examples reveal an intricate sense of service and patronage encompassing both free and unfree forms of labor, and spanning state boundaries. Moreover, these testimonies indicate that the ability of actors within patron-client relationships to constitute and effectively negotiate extra-territorial networks underscored their shifting and relative power vis-à-vis one another. The hegemony of the intermediaries locally is highlighted by the tendency in the depositions for calendric time to be reckoned by the tenure of such intermediaries rather than the reign of regional monarchs. For example, many deponents refer to 'the time of Jaintia Khatri' (the Gorkha Subbah or commander) or 'the time of Yukunda Kazi' (a Lepcha chief who paid revenue to Jaintia Khatri) to situate past events. State extension was made possible through personal ties of patronage in which intermediaries accepted allegiance to one of the states, but the majority of shifting cultivators maintained no direct ties with the regional state, so their status as state subjects remained ambiguous. For example, while Ajuk initially hid from the Sikkimese soldiers, he later felt compelled to follow his patron. Perhaps because the Sikkimese understood this degree of obligation in the relationship, they only took the more important men, the military officers. While the relationship between subject and chief seems in some ways as one of total dependency, which Chatterjee and Eaton (2006) have defined as slavery in the South Asian context, there was also an apparent degree of latitude. Kookah only intermittently offered presents to his chief and after two years seems to have stopped altogether, despite the relationship of dependency remaining socially acknowledged. The folktale about the bat and the rat and bird kings cited above offers some sense of the calculations upon which clients may have relied to gauge their current or former patron's political standing and thus his ability to enforce payments or, alternately, positively intervene on behalf of the clients within larger networks. Indeed, Superintendent of Darjeeling Campbell explained the frequent visits of the Kazi's representatives from Ilam (in eastern Nepal) in the late 1830s and early 1840s as important for the Kazis, not only in negotiating their relationship with the governors of the new hill station but also, and equally so, in convincing their clients of their enduring political influence, despite recent changes.[14] The fluidity and reshaping of such networks is captured well by a group of Lepcha shifting cultivators near Darjeeling who claimed that they paid revenue 'to anyone' when questioned by the new colonial authorities in 1839. Patron-client networks remained essential for the shifting cultivators of the eastern Himalaya as they faced political changes concomitant with the colonial encroachment.

Colonial Intervention: Separating Shifting Cultivators from the State

Company officials also took advantage of networks of patronage to build infrastructure and provide services in the new hill station. In 1838, shortly after annexation, Colonel Lloyd counted 21 Lepcha 'families' settled close by the hill station, totaling 51 males and 37 females. About half of them paid revenue to the Sikkim Raja, the other half to an unnamed 'head Lama.'[15] Until the plantation economy reconfigured the landscape in the 1860s, land revenue was collected on an *ad hoc* basis, which the first official settlement of 1850 simply maintained. Collections were funneled through the old patron-client system and resembled more closely "the superintendence of a private estate than the collection of Government revenue" (Jackson 1854: 11). Darjeeling's first official Superintendent, Campbell, attempted to gain the favor of various Lepcha Kazis, Mech Chaudharis, and other labor patrons, drawing in part upon his initial encounter with local notables near Onto

in 1838 (Campbell 1869). For example, Campbell sent gifts to the Tibeto-Sikkimese *Kazi* of Bhadaong, who controlled a tract straddling the Tista River; in return, the Kazi sent craftsmen to Darjeeling. For this favor, Campbell spent about Rs.42 to buy presents as well as a gun, as requested. In this case as in others, initially the supply of workmen seems to have benefitted the patron rather than the workers.[16] Campbell openly admitted that he drew upon such cross-border ties to attract almost 2,000 laborers to Darjeeling in the initial years after annexation. He explained to his superiors:

> Formerly, the resort of Nipalese [sic] to Darjeeling for service or trade was discountenanced, if not altogether prohibited, by the authorities at Ilam. Now...the people are encouraged to resort hither for the purposes of trade and servitude *and the same is pointed to by their rulers as an honorable and easy method of obtaining money for the payment of their rents* a mode preferred at Ilam to the usage of doing so in grain, cattle or labor as they were wont from impossibility of concerting the produce of their labor, or their labor itself into Cash.[17]

In other words, Campbell drew upon the needs of patrons, especially their desire for cash, rather than the interests of their subjects in order to obtain manual laborers.

While Campbell insisted in his correspondence with the Government of Bengal that he was creating a local labor market to supply the station's needs, the political nature of the networks was all too obvious to his Company superiors. Government expressed appreciation that Campbell had settled the Lepcha refugees from Nepal in Darjeeling, as well as some Mech shifting cultivators formerly subject to Sikkim, but cautioned Campbell against inviting groups from neighboring countries because it might lead to political conflict.[18] On the one hand, Sikkim repeatedly called for its subjects who had settled in Company-controlled Darjeeling to be returned. On the other hand, a number of local intermediaries realized the potential for vastly expanding their own influence if they could corner a monopoly on settling people around Darjeeling.[19] Thus, for example, Jerung Kazi petitioned Colonel Lloyd in 1839 to allow him to bring his dependents from Ilam and to "be restored to the situation of collecting the revenues, managing the country in the hills and Morung, and exercising the office of the Dewan as held by [his] uncle Buljeet" (quoted in Pinn 1986: 171). Jerung Kazi apparently viewed the exchange of the labor power of his dependents as meriting an official position.[20]

Campbell built the hill station through developing long-term relationships with intermediaries who controlled dependents, rather than developing a labor market as he claimed; yet, he refused to accord bureaucratic position to the intermediaries who supplied him with labor. Chebu Lama became one of Campbell's closest Lepcha associates, one who mediated Company-Sikkim diplomacy initially as *vakil* (diplomatic agent) for the latter and later in a more private capacity for the former. In return for his loyalty, Campbell granted him a tract near Darjeeling in 1850.[21] Nevertheless, the Superintendent patronizingly regarded Chebu Lama as a sort of pet informant who, he asserted, displayed the extent of "mental and moral development attainable by a Lepcha—namely, through European influence and guidance" (Campbell 1869: 153). While Chebu Lama filled the role of a Lepcha native informant, his mother was a Lepcha and his father a 'Bhotia' (Tibeto-Sikkimese), as Campbell acknowledges (Campbell 1869). Since descent was often determined by the father's side of the family (thus the Namgyals could marry Limbu and Lepcha wives, for example, without producing Limbu or Lepcha children), and Chebu Lama's father was not, as mentioned, a Lepcha, he probably retained the option of identifying with Tibeto-Sikkimese circles (Hooker 1854; Risley 1894). In fact, this pedigree may have helped Chebu Lama remain influential in a court setting in which Lepcha factions had so recently been expelled from favor. Whereas Chebu Lama had worked as *vakil* to Sikkim, he had to negotiate with the Company on the basis of his indigenous status. As indicated by the language of the treaty between the East India Company and Sikkim which set the state for Company influence, 'Hill tribes' would no longer be accorded political status in subsequent negotiations. Thus, Chebu Lama gained land and wealth, but undermined his own claims to state authority in the new colonial dispensation by emphasizing his Lepcha rather than Tibeto-Sikkimese background (Hooker 1854; Aitchison 1862).

That local patrons of labor came to understand the terms upon which they were to engage the Company—as indigenous representatives rather than state officials—is further highlighted in a petition from a group of Mech shifting cultivators conveyed by Superintendent Campbell to the Government of Bengal in 1850. At the time, a Company military contingent had occupied the Sikkim Morang (plains) following a dispute with Sikkim enflamed by Campbell's unexpected arrest and detention while visiting Sikkim in the fall of 1849.[22] The disagreement between the two states largely arose because Sikkim claimed that the Company's administration in Darjeeling was taking its subjects and obstructing its trade, thus eating into its revenue base. In response, Campbell declared Sikkim's subjects to be slaves

who preferred the so-called free market in Darjeeling. Campbell's labor market clearly resembled the pre-existing patron-client relationships far more than he admitted: as he tried to find manual laborers for porterage and jungle clearing for his military campaign, he called on local "ethnic" leaders, to whom he had given the right to settle shifting cultivators in the new territory, to provide conscripts. His claim to forced labor in return for his recognition of the headmen's position directly paralleled the previous dispensation he claimed to have overturned.[23]

In the petition, penned while his home territory (the Sikkim Morang) was under military occupation, Bir Singh Chaudhari leaves out the immediate political context, as well as his own negotiations with Company representatives stretching over several decades from the time of the original border surveys. Indeed, the first acting supervisor of the station, Lloyd, had appointed Bir Singh in 1838 to collect taxes from the Mech and Dhimals in the Company's new territory and to collect a transit duty on merchandise entering and leaving the station, even before the Government had approved such a measure. Moreover, his residence near the road built from Titalya (now in Bangladesh) to Darjeeling in the early 1840s ensured contact with European travelers who expected him to provide laborers for carrying baggage. Yet, the area of the Morang in which he, as well as the cultivators, resided, was contested by Nepal, Sikkim, and increasingly the Company (as its only approach to the hill station from Bengal was via Sikkim's plains). Perhaps to escape such conflicting demands, he somewhat successfully petitioned the Company in the 1830s to allow him to become its subject rather than that of Sikkim, although the latter did not recognize this distinction.[24]

Bir Singh's first petition, co-authored with twenty Mandals (headmen) who apparently worked under him, is couched in oddly ethnographic rather than political terms. The petition begins with the line: "The following are our customs and habits" and goes on to argue that the Mech homeland is different because of the organization of shifting cultivators there. This formulation likely comes from his close association with Campbell, who admitted to his superiors that "the petition [was] in some degree personal to [himself]."[25] Further, Campbell had previously collected ethnographic data from Bir Singh's clients to study and write about the Mech people. The petition suggests that Bir Singh understood Campbell's ethnographic interest as integral to the latter's official duties (rather than as a hobby as Campbell likely regarded it). Bir Singh argued that his people could not be attached to Purnia because they could not adapt to traveling outside of the jungle to attend court and engage with the government there. The distinction between living in Purnia, a district of Bengal, and Darjeeling, a non-regulation district in which Bengal's legal system was mediated by the paternalistic authority of the Superintendent, was not lost on Bir Singh. The Chaudhari clearly would benefit from joining Darjeeling, where his status as patron to about 200 Mech cultivators would be recognized and rewarded, yet he framed his petition by arguing that as an indigenous group, they needed protection. Moreover, Bir Singh seems to have been engaged in a long-standing dispute with neighbors in Purnia, who he feared would involve him in court cases there. He concludes his second petition by once again downplaying political considerations:

> If we are made over to the Purneah authorities we shall have no one to understand our affairs, and cases, as our languages are quite unknown there, and we know not the languages used there. We are poor people, and are not in any way rebellious. Purneah and Darjeeling are both in the British dominions, but we hope that we may be placed under Darjeeling, so that our lands and homes may remain to us under your protecting Rule.[26]

Thus he claims the need for protection because he and his people were "ignorant of the manner in which the business of the Courts is transacted in the Company's territories," whereas he seems actually quite aware of the implications of attachment to Purnia.[27] Like Chebu Lama and various Lepcha Kazis, Bir Singh found it expedient to negotiate with the Company as an indigenous representative who could mediate on behalf of a supposedly backwards group, because he realized this was an effective language to employ with the Company representatives.

Bir Singh's Victory and a Conclusion

Bir Singh Chaudhari's calculations may seem shortsighted, as the indigenous people around Darjeeling would be steamrolled by the spread of tea plantations from 1856. Yet, if we set aside our present-day knowledge of dispossession and marginalization by the colonial plantation economy in Darjeeing in the latter half of the 19th century, we might better appreciate Bir Singh's efforts as he, in fact, got his way. As of February 1850, the Company had decided to annex the entire Sikkim Morang to Purnia, in accordance with the idea that hills and plains should be administered separately. A month later, after a number of shifting cultivators had fled to Nepal, the Government of Bengal reversed the decision—the lower foothills around Pankhabari in which the Mech resided would be annexed

to Darjeeling instead of Purnia. The Secretary to the Board of Revenue even warned local authorities that Purnia's establishment should have little contact with the Mech since they would be attached to Darjeeling, but that "whenever occasion for communication may arise, the Purneah Authorities should be as considerate and conciliating as possible in their dealings with them, for the accounts show that they are such a timid and ignorant people, a trifling misunderstanding might cause them to abscond into Nipal or Bootan." Threats of desertion worked, yet the terms upon which Bir Singh Chaudhari and the Mech Mandals achieved temporary victory (as a "timid and ignorant people" when this was far from the case), would aid the Company in undermining the rights of shifting cultivators in the new dispensation ushered in with the spread of tea plantations just a half dozen years later.[28]

In conclusion, let us revisit the folktale about the renegade bat. In the story, it is the bat who wields power over the rather ridiculous and vulnerable figures of the rat king and the bird king. They are quick to threaten violence, but end up running away when the bat outwits them by playing with the boundaries of identity. By the 1850s, this strategy was waning in effectiveness. With the extension of colonial rule, there were few such figures left who could operate outside state control by negotiating the fuzzy areas between corporate identities and mobilizing personal relationships for support. While shifting cultivation may have represented a strategy for maintaining distance from competing regional states in the 18th and early 19th centuries, it offered limited scope for doing so over time as the East India Company came to define the terms of sovereignty in the borderland as territorial rather than based on control over subjects. In this way, negotiation with the state based on defining and/or subverting group identities, as the bat had demonstrated, became a losing proposition. By delimiting group identities as fixed and immutable, and redefining sovereignty as territorial, the colonial state ensured that bats would always remain bats, but that kings, be they of birds or of rats, would get their due.

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Endnotes

1. 'Lepcha' is the Nepali term for the supposedly indigenous people of the Darjeeling area; as colonial administrators and missionaries observed, 'Rong-pa' or 'people of the ravine' was their own label. For example, see Kilgour (1897).

2. See Kennedy (1996) for a nuanced discussion of the initial growth of hill stations as sanitaria in the hill areas of the three Presidencies in the early 19th century. The trend represented a response to concern for the excessive mortality especially of lower-level European civil and military personnel; this was an era when climatic rather than a germ-theory of disease directed public health efforts. Europeans in the Presidency towns who wanted to escape the plains and reproduce British social life away from the supposedly corrupting influences of Indian life eagerly supported the development of hill stations.

3. Following the abolition of slavery in the British Empire, the language of the free market became a way for British administrators to claim that colonized people were able to enter contracts to exchange their labor of their own volition. This discourse was used to justify the massive export of indentured labor to the West Indies as well as legitimize other appropriations of labor, as for example, in Darjeeling (Banerjee 2010). For a greater elaboration of the role of colonial ethnography in defining indigenous identities in the eastern Himalaya, see Chapter Two of my dissertation (in progress), 'States of Labor: Migrants, Markets and Sovereignty in the India-Nepal Borderland, 1800-1930.'

4. The Sens of Vijaypur (present-day eastern Nepal) were linked though kinship ties to the Palpa Sen rulers who had consolidated rule over the Himalayan foothills and tarai from Palpa (north of present-day Gorakhpur) in the 16th century. The Sens were only able to expand into the eastern Morang through the invitation of powerful Kirat chiefs who

had been acting as king-makers for several generations and wanted to overthrow their nominal rulers in the mid-17th century (Pradhan 1991).

5. Some of the clients were likely to have been kidnapped. See *The Dorjeeling Guide* (1845).

6. From A. Campbell to J. P. Grant, Darjeeling, 1 March 1850, No. 458, Foreign Department (Hereafter FD), 14 June 1850. National Archives of India (Hereafter NAI).

7. See also, No. 458, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

8. No. 458, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

9. Affairs of Nepaul, 74755, F/4/1813, 1839-1840, Boards Collections (Hereafter BC), India Office Library (Hereafter IOL).

10. The following depositions are all found in: Proceedings held by Lt. Coll. Lloyd, and A. Campbell Esqr, 14 Oct 1838, 74755, F/4/1813, 1839-1840, BC, IOL.

11. For Chtrajit's (Chutup's) role, see Moktan (2004: 247).

12. That a number of people migrated from the Ilam region to Sikkim after the war is also corroborated by Nepali sources (Manandhar 1983).

13. Foning, writing in the late 20th century, claims that the Limbus and Lepchas were once related tribes, the Limbus having settled to the west (in present-day eastern Nepal) and the Lepchas having settled towards the east (in present-day Sikkim). The people in the middle region around Ilam were mixed and could easily assimilate with either Lepchas or Limbus. He explains that the Ilam people used to be humorously labeled "Nembang-moo Rongs, meaning two-and-a-half Lepchas" because they were known as exceedingly "clever and quick-witted." According to Foning, many of the Ilam Lepchas settled in and around Darjeeling and assisted the missionaries in their activities from the mid-19th century (1987: 131-132).

14. Affairs of Sikkim & Darjeeling, 87212, F/4/1981, 1842-43, BC, IOL.

15. It is possible that this refers to Chebu Lama as he had remained in Sikkim's favor during the Dewan's assassination and subsequent Lepcha exodus, so he would have been one of the few high-ranking Lepchas in a position to collect revenue near Darjeeling prior to annexation. No. 72, FD, 10 July 1839, NAI.

16. Proceedings relating to Sikkim and Darjeeling, 83500, F/4/1934, BC, IOL.

17. Emphasis added. Nepaul and Catmandoo Residency, 87211, F/4/1981, 1842-43, BC, IOL; Affairs of Nepaul, 74755, F/4/1813, 1839-1840, BC, IOL.

18. Proceedings relating to Sikkim and Darjeeling, 83500, F/4/1934, BC, IOL.

19. Affairs of Sikkim & Darjeeling, 87212, F/4/1981, 1842-43, BC, IOL.

20. It is also interesting to note that the Jerung Kazi regarded the office of 'Dewan,' held by his uncle who was assassinated over 10 years before, as entirely divisible from the Sikkim government. This suggests that the office of Chief Revenue Minister or Diwan was fashioned to incorporate alternative sources of power into monarchical lineages, rather than created from within the lineage. See for example, Hamilton (1819); Regmi (1975).

21. Chebu Lama seemed to maintain a firm grip over the services of shifting agriculturalists who he allowed to settle on his land; in 1864 when Sir Ashley Eden attempted to stage a diplomatic journey from Darjeeling into Bhutan, his porters deserted at the Tista River, unwilling to cross into Bhutan. As no other laborers would carry for the expedition, Chebu Lama within three days returned with his own tenants to provide the service. Apparently the porters had good reason to desert—the snows proved much higher than anticipated, many suffered of frostbite, some attempted to go back and were flogged as a result, and ultimately four died from exposure to the cold (Rennie 1866).

22. For a more detailed discussion of this incident, see Chapter Three of my dissertation (in progress), 'States of Labor: Markets, Migrants and Sovereignty in the India-Nepal Borderland, 1800 to 1930.' The former Queen of Sikkim (from the mid-1960s until the 1970s when her husband was deposed), Hope (Cooke) Namgyal, has provided insight into the Sikkim court's position on Darjeeling's annexation. Namgyal argues that the Sikkim Raja was considered the owner of all the land and that others could only be granted rights to usufruct. Thus, the Raja of Sikkim still considered himself sovereign over the land grant of Darjeeling and considered the residents his subjects (Namgyal 2004). While this view of the king as owner of the land is a by-product of 19th-century colonialism, still it indicates the deeply entrenched view in Sikkim that claims to Darjeeling were not entirely superseded by the grant of 1835, by which the Company had procured the hill station from Sikkim.

23. Respecting the interruption of friendly relations with the Rajah of Sikkim, 369-560, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

24. Until the military campaign of 1850 Sikkim claimed him as a subject and even thereafter, some of his clients were taken into Nepal's Morang by a soldier of the latter state. 36-40, Political C. Consultation, FD, 6 August 1852, NAI; Pinn 1986.

25. No. 459, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

26. No. 458, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

27. No. 459, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

28. Nos 464-468, FD, 14 June 1850, NAI.

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