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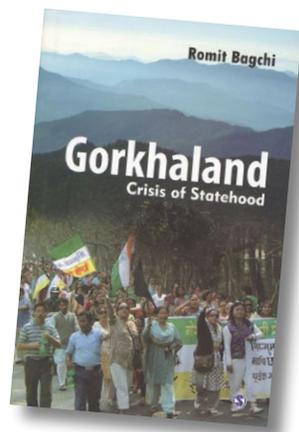


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# Book Reviews



## ***Gorkhaland: Crisis of Statehood***

**Romit Bagchi.** New Delhi; Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications India, 2012. Pp. 447. INR 895 (hardback). ISBN 978-81-321-0726-2.

### **Reviewed by Roshan P. Rai**

Romit Bagchi introduces his book as “Gorkhaland – A Psychological Study,” a statehood demand of Gorkhaland from the Indian state of West Bengal. The demand is of a regionally marginalized mountain community that is socio-ecologically completely different from the rest of Bengal and whose identity is not acknowledged at the national level. He presents the psyche of two inflexible actors: the people who demand and will settle for nothing less than Gorkhaland, on the one hand, and, on the other hand, the people who are unable to envision a divided Bengal and so refuse this demand. He points out a belief among some Bengalis that “Gorkha settlers are incapable of self-rule ...supposed to be lacking in political acumen and administrative deftness in handling a serious business like ruling a state” (p. xvi). This is as far as the promising psychological study goes.

Bagchi narrates the chronological history of the movement from the first demand for a separate administrative setup by the Hill people of Darjeeling in 1907 to the agreement between the Centre, State and the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha, a Darjeeling-based political party, for the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2011. This enables the reader to get a quick

grasp of the movement. But the major focus is on the post-2007 period of the movement as a means to discuss the ‘Crisis of Statehood’, which extremely limits the narrative depth of the book.

At the outset, the author lays out his opinions that the demand has more to it than just statehood, “with more sinister implications” (p. 3). He implies links with the idea of “Greater Nepal” (p. 3). There is an in-depth analysis of the ‘Nepal’ factor that questions the legitimacy of “a demand put up by a group of immigrants” (p. 13) who have a “split loyalty”(p. 17) between India and Nepal. Heavily loaded words like “settlers” and “migrants” are used freely without looking at the region from the perspective of a transboundary landscape with historical connectivity, making the commentary extremely tilted.

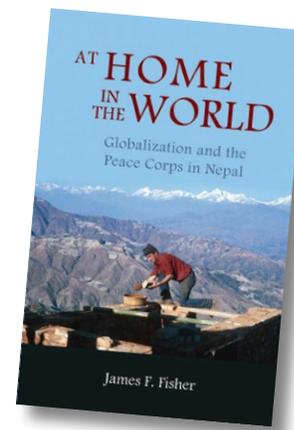
The author quotes anti-Gorkhaland groups with theories of population increase through recent migration that question the citizenship of the Darjeeling community. He places too much stress on conspiracy theories rather than looking at population disaggregates, internal migrations and geographical concentrations of migrants. He fails to scratch beyond the surface of the argument of recent migration.

Bagchi summarizes the complicated documented history of Darjeeling under the various rulers of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, East India Company, British Empire and subsequently as a district in West Bengal. He interprets a limited selection of legalistic historical documents to

press home his point that the demand for autonomy is not justified, rather than expand his research to question the existing politically constructed history.

Political views vis-à-vis Gorkhaland are traced from the Communist Party of India’s demand in 1942 for Gorkhasthan, to the demand for separation from Bengal by the All India Gorkha League in 1943 and the present day signing of the GTA. The views of national parties including the Congress, who are opposed to small states, and the Bharatiya Janata Party, who support smaller states, are presented within their historical contexts. He discusses the state ruling parties of the Communist Party of India (Marxist) and Trinamool Congress as varying in their approach but with a universal stand that Bengal cannot be divided.

The Gorkha National Liberation Front, a Darjeeling based political party that spearheaded the movement under Subash Ghishing in the 1980s that resulted in the formation of the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council in 1988, is mentioned in the book. Ghishing’s autocratic demeanor and obsession with the inclusion of Darjeeling under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution led to the rise of the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha under Bimal Gurung, who renewed the movement after 2007. The author enumerates the various actors and their relationships, the strategies adopted and critical landmarks of the movement till the interim resolution of the demand for Gorkhaland with the devolution of powers to the GTA in 2011.



Bagchi concludes with reflections of “Black Darjeeling” (p. 289), the theme of a student film festival, as an introspection of the darker aspects of Darjeeling by the younger generation. It is also a commentary on inter-party violent clashes, statehood demands preceding development, and the leaders’ insensitivity to the needs of common people. These reflections are supposedly representative of a large community but in actuality are extrapolations of a very small number of people.

The book is not an attempt to narrate a movement but a section of a movement for statehood, from a person who does not believe in the demand at its core. Bagchi’s account is slanted rather than an attempt to critically understand this complex historical demand. He uses narrow definitions of national identity, patriotism, state, political boundaries, and ethnicity with no attempt to view it from a larger historical landscape and recently constructed phenomena. Further, Bagchi does not debate the complexities of identity, migration, and marginalization, which for me are essential to analyse and deepen the discourse on such demands.

The discourse is oversimplified and the tone is condescending, projecting Darjeeling as a quintessential place in a time warp filled with simple people where visitors can come to rest occasionally in the “pristine grandeur in Nature and the simple people who grew up in her lap, largely untrammled by the demands of an artificial civilization” (p. 311). This ‘pristine grandeur’ is being spoilt for the author due to the

demands made by a few middle class politicians. Conclusions like this deny the struggle for existence of an entire community in the Darjeeling Hills. The book essentially is a narrative of an anti-Gorkhaland author who makes no attempt to critically analyse the movement and draw inferences from the universal phenomenon of the struggle of marginal communities for identity and autonomy.

Bagchi in his epilogue views “the Telangana trajectory moving fast, things seem all the more uncertain for the hills” (p. 377), which is prophetic as the formation of Telangana has been endorsed by the Centre and the demand for Gorkhaland has been renewed. The Chief Executive of the GTA has resigned and an indefinite strike since the 3rd of August 2013 has created possibilities for a more in-depth and balanced commentary.

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### **At Home in the World: Globalization and the Peace Corps in Nepal**

**James F. Fisher.** Bangkok: Orchid Press, 2013. Pp. 212. \$26.00 (paperback). ISBN 978-9745241572.

#### **Reviewed by Jonathan Zimmerman**

James Fisher and I have a lot in common. We both served in the Peace Corps in Nepal many moons ago, and we have both returned there in the intervening years. We’re both academicians, and we’ve each written a book based in part on our own Nepal experiences. And we both see the Peace Corps as an emblem as well as an engine of a key shift in American sensibilities. Discarding the smug combination of ignorance and arrogance that characterized so much of the mid-century United States, Peace Corps volunteers embodied a freshly critical, open-minded, and culturally nuanced view of our nation and our world.

But Fisher’s view of this change is almost entirely positive, while I gave it a more mixed review. Drawing upon a fascinating set of interviews with his fellow volunteers—and on his own training as an anthropologist—Fisher paints a rich ethnography of the first Peace Corps group in Nepal, where he and 69 others arrived in 1962. His sources provide eloquent testimonies to the many ways that their years in Nepal gave them a more “globalized” perspective. My own sources—including diaries, letters, and Peace Corps evaluation reports—confirmed that trend, but added a dose of skepticism about its meaning and implications. The more