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# Producing Himalayan Darjeeling: Mobile People and Mountain Encounters

Jayeeta Sharma

This article explores the social production of Darjeeling through the social and cultural encounters that helped transform a mountain health resort for colonial functionaries into a vibrant Himalayan hub for vernacular modernity and local cosmopolitanism. While Darjeeling's high-altitude setting inextricably linked it to the intense exploitation of subaltern bodies, it evolved as a dynamic urban locality that offered mobile individuals and groups the opportunity to seek out new livelihoods and realize modernistic aspirations in a transcultural setting.

**Keywords:** Darjeeling, hill-station, colonial, Himalayan, mobile, cosmopolitan, mountain.

## Introduction

This article explores the social production of Himalayan Darjeeling through the social and cultural encounters that helped transform a health resort—originally intended for British colonial functionaries—into a vibrant mountain hub for vernacular modernity and local cosmopolitanism. Darjeeling's evolution as a transcultural locale owed much to the improvisational strategies and asymmetrical relationships of and between the mobile historical subjects who constituted this mutable mountain space as much as it constituted them. While Darjeeling's high-altitude setting was inextricably linked to the intense exploitation of subaltern bodies, it eventually evolved as a dynamic urban locality that offered mobile individuals and groups the opportunity to seek out new livelihoods, nurture modernistic aspirations, and cosmopolitan, urban lives in a transcultural setting.

## Laboring at a Mountain Town

This section examines the social production of colonial Darjeeling as a hill-station “space that has been labored on” (Lefebvre 1991: 45). It pays particular attention to the impact of a high-altitude location upon the subaltern bodies from whom essential labor services were extracted in order to create a therapeutic leisure resort for elite counterparts.

Over the nineteenth century, medical advocacy of periodic temperate recuperation for white races temporarily living outside of Europe was the main impetus to establish

high-altitude sanatorium towns in Dutch, Spanish, French, British, and American colonial spaces.<sup>1</sup> Influential thinkers such as James Johnstone and William Twining who preached that heat and humidity caused physical degeneration, nudged the British Indian state to provide a suitable setting to restore the bodies of white personnel and their families (Arnold 2006: 140-142). This environmentalist paradigm in colonial medical-science justified the substantial investment of public funds on hill-station towns in British India for more than a century (Ramasubban 1988; Arnold 1993). In 1828, when the East India Company functionaries Lieutenant-Colonel George Lloyd and J.W. Grant encountered the Sikkim mountain hamlet Dorje-ling, they had in mind the benefits of a sanatorium site relatively close to Company headquarters at Calcutta.

The next year, Captain Herbert was sent to judge the viability of the proposed settlement that was located at a height of 7000-plus feet where neither roads nor wheeled or animal transport existed. After more than a fortnight's travel from Calcutta, Herbert reached the site and ruled in its favor. The assessment was colored by his 'discovery' of the Rong-pa or Lepcha people as a promising pool of mountain labor. "A Lepcha will carry twice the load of a bearer or coolie, and he will carry it with good will...We should require (to begin with) a small population, intelligent, active, willing to be directed, sociable, and if possible, without those prejudices which obstruct our efforts at improvement every step we take in the plains" (Herbert 1830: 11). Applied for the first time to a Himalayan group, this praise appears as a classic instance of 'the romantic-idealist approval trope' that characterizes Orientalist rhetoric (Inden 1986: 401-446). His approval went hand-in-hand with a denigration of the plains laborers upon whom British rule heavily relied. As it transpired, Herbert's romantic expectations for mountain labor and contempt for plains workers grossly underestimated the ecological and human challenges of those environs.

After Colonel Lloyd convinced Sikkim's ruler to issue a deed of grant for Darjeeling in 1835, he was dispatched the next year to make a start on the site, accompanied by Assistant-Surgeon Chapman (Dozey 1922: 3). However, they were immured for months at Titalya (the last outpost in the Bengal plains before the mountains), unable to find sufficient labor to convey heavy supplies up to the site. Winter set in by the time 200-odd load-carriers were hired (Bayley 1838: Appendix B). Progress was slow for the men who carried heavy loads with scant clothing and unshod feet along fifty-seven miles of mountain terrain in November 1836. An indirect glimpse of their situation comes from a drawing made by the surgeon and artist Frederick William De Fabeck. Its ostensible subjects are European

convalescents en route to the sanatorium, but what we see are bare-chested, barefoot laborers hefting heavy *palkis* (sedan chairs) up precipitously winding paths (De Fabeck: c.1860).<sup>2</sup>

Officials imagined that once Lloyd's party arrived at Darjeeling, Sikkim's mountain inhabitants would line up to be hired. In reality, the latter were so few at the start of the settlement, that plains laborers had to be reengaged. Some Lepcha accepted state inducements to settle nearby.<sup>3</sup> But the majority were cultivators who already made adequate earnings from forests and commons. They were uninterested in arduous laboring jobs, even without discouragement from the Sikkim ruler who resented the paltry compensation he received for his gift of Dorje-ling. For the physically punishing clearance and construction work they required, officials initially had to compete with imperial plantations, factories, and mines to recruit a 'coolie' proletariat. A wealth of studies on labor in British India have examined how a new process of proletarianization resulted from subaltern dislocation and forced migration due to colonial annexations, forced commercialization, and deindustrialization. Therefore, we can assume that it was such subjects whom Darjeeling officials attempted to enlist (Ghosh 1999; Anderson 2004; Kerr 2006; Sharma 2009; Ahuja 2009).<sup>4</sup> We will discuss how matters gradually changed when as officials tapped a growing pool of waged labor who moved into Darjeeling from ecologically marginal mountain lands of eastern Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet (Childs 2002).

An early and critical priority for the colonial hill-station's sustainability that required critical infusions of labor was transport infrastructure. It was imperative to build mountain roads that would allow the passage of wheeled vehicles as well as animal and passenger transport up from the provisioning plains. The first effort, directed by Lieutenant Napier of the Bengal Engineers, was the Old Military Road whose construction was in progress from 1839 until 1842 (Anon. 1845: 10; Pinn 1986: 167-169). The Hill Cart Road replaced it in 1869, built at a lower, more accessible gradient to better accommodate carts (Dozey 1922: 4; O'Malley 1907:170-171). In addition to building internal arteries such as the Auckland and Station Roads, the Darjeeling municipality took charge of rough hill-paths that served as channels for long-distance Himalayan circulation, and upgraded them as Local Fund roads (O'Malley 1907: 173-174; Sen 1973). As early as 1855, the Bengal government considered the introduction of rail transport, shortly after the inauguration of the Bombay-Thane route in Western India.<sup>5</sup> However, ecological and technical challenges delayed a thorough rail link for twenty years until 1878, when a line was built from Calcutta to Siliguri. Three years

later, the introduction of the narrow gauge 'toy train' from Siliguri to Darjeeling reduced the journey from Calcutta to less than twenty-four hours.

The significance of this time-space compression for the hill-station and its welcome impact for Darjeeling's elite clients has to be placed against the dire consequences of high-altitude road and rail construction upon a subaltern workforce. Construction rigors across mountain ecologies cost many lives, and incited numerous desertions. Roads had to be hacked out by hand from rock and slope, with constant risk of landslides as well as the ever-present mountain challenges of rain, wind, and cold.<sup>6</sup> The Bengal government was forced to conscript famine-relief workers in order to complete its mountain rail line (Avery 1878: 9). Even after completion, Himalayan roads required constant upkeep against nature's wear and tear (O'Malley 1907: 167-168). In such extreme conditions, the retention of soldiers was easier than civilian labor who had to be recruited from the Bengal plains, a major reason why Lieutenant Napier was put in charge of a new militia: the Sebundy Sappers. Two hundred men were recruited into this militia, many from Himalayan groups such as Limboos, who came from Sikkim to enlist at Darjeeling (Anon. 1845: 25; Dozey 1922: 31; Hooker 1854: 96).<sup>7</sup> Although "ill clad, worse fed, and badly housed" (Anon. 1845: 25), such militia recruits served as the frontline troops to clear road obstructions and drains against torrential rains and numbing weather. These sappers provided a stable laboring core against a shifting cadre of civilian waged labor who often fled these harsh circumstances, causing the station's administrators to constantly request an increase in militia numbers since they were often down to thirty sappers on the actual road).<sup>8</sup> From the 1840s, such improved long-distance links allowed the functioning of crucial provisioning circuits whereby *beparee* (trading caste) newcomers, for instance, transported daily grain consignments from the Bengal plains—supplies that helped to alleviate frequent food shortages and epidemics among laborers (Anon. 1845: 27). By 1849, the visiting botanist Joseph Dalton Hooker estimated that Darjeeling's population had increased to 10,000. He exclaimed that the town's frontier spirit resembled "an Australian colony, not only in (the) amount of building, but in the accession of native families from the surrounding countries" (Hooker 1854: 80).

Channeling increasing numbers of diverse newcomers into the requirements of this colonial hill-station was the major challenge that faced Lloyd's successor, Dr. Archibald Campbell, Darjeeling's Superintendent between 1839 and 1861 (Clarke 1869; Anon. 1878). Like many Scotsmen of that era, Campbell joined the Indian medical corps as a young doc-

tor who lacked adequate capital to practice in Britain. He began as a surgeon at the convalescent depot in Landour, followed by a Surgeon and Assistant Resident stint in Kathmandu, and finally as Darjeeling Superintendent. At the Residency, Campbell learnt the Nepali language alongside his mentor, the naturalist and ethnologist Brian Houghton Hodgson (Waterhouse 2004). Together, they collated information about Nepal's inhabitants and natural products.<sup>9</sup> A few years after Campbell's arrival, Hodgson retreated from Nepal and established his household in Darjeeling (Waterhouse 2004). This background clearly influenced Campbell's decision to encourage migration into Darjeeling, especially from the impoverished mountain tracts of eastern Nepal. He evolved a careful strategy by which his administration supplied cash advances to existing laborers from Nepal as motivation for them to quietly recruit and bring back cash-strapped peasant households to settle in Darjeeling.<sup>10</sup>

These movements from Nepal are best characterized as circulatory rather than migratory to start with, since they were seldom uni-directional nor as yet were most of them intended to be permanent. Nonetheless, by the 1870s, 34.1% of the Darjeeling district's population was reported to be of Nepali origin (Hunter 1876: 85). Michael Hutt notes that when subaltern inhabitants of Rana-ruled Nepal found themselves enslaved, landless, over-taxed, or oppressed by rapacious moneylenders, many were already in the habit of moving eastwards into *Mugalan* (India, lit. land of Mughals, or land of opportunity) (Hutt 1998). Villagers travelled in groups, pooling resources and getting loans from headmen or wealthier individuals, often compelled to leave by landlord oppression. Hutt quotes Lainsingh Bagdel's novel *Muluk Bahira* that wraps its migrant protagonist in tattered clothes, carrying a *khukri* (Nepali machete), a bamboo mat, and a blanket—much more than others owned. "What a miserable state they were in, those arrivals from *pahar* (mountains). Although there was no *kipat* (communal) land in Mugulan, one could earn enough to feed one's stomach... You didn't have to go to *Bhot* (Tibet) for salt, you didn't have to suffer" (Hutt 1998: 203). Moving from territory that bore the colloquial term *pahar* (mountain), these mobile groups bore the appellation of *pahari* (mountain person), a term denoting geographic origin, ecological mooring, and an affirming culture of rustic simplicity.

From the 1850s, Campbell's labor mobilization received further impetus with the successful introduction of a tea plantation enterprise (Fielder 1868; Campbell 1873). Captain Hathorn, a soldier-turned-planter, wrote that during his regiment's visit in 1853, the mountains around Darjeeling were covered with primeval forest. Nine years

later, “fire and axe have swept away the tree and creeper to make way for tea” (Hathorn 1863: 13). Unlike the contemporaneous Assam tea enterprise where planter pressure resulted in the legislative creation of a penal and indentured system for workers from other parts of India, Darjeeling’s incorporation into mobile Himalayan circuits made such legislation unnecessary. By the 1860s, over 5000 acres of tea plantation land already covered the region. Grown from China seedlings and sold primarily to British consumers, Darjeeling was acquiring a reputation for “pretty and flavorful teas” (A Planter 1888: 8). By the 1870s, guidebooks recommended that “all who visit Darjeeling should pay a visit to a Tea Garden, it is interesting not only from seeing the tea in all its stages, but also for the study it affords of the picturesque hill men and women” (Avery 1878: 58). Of these hill-people, the majority were eastern Nepal migrants. During the 1890s, of the roughly 160,000 Nepalis in the Darjeeling area, about half were born in Nepal (Christison 1895-1896). The 175 estates in the region employed about 70,000 people to produce ten million pounds worth of tea: men, women, and children cleared forest and undertook growing, picking, harvesting, and processing tasks on European-owned tea plantations and factories.

In the later years of Campbell’s career, contemporaries eulogized his Darjeeling administrator role as one where he singlehandedly induced neighboring tribes to settle in the territory and service it (Anon. 1857). But such praise for Campbell’s labor policies rings hollow when we trace the aggressive reactions from his municipal successors in response to the hill-station’s increased visibility of subaltern and non-white bodies. The 1860s construction of a new road to the European sanatorium so convalescents could avoid the native marketplace and the 1883 enactment of a law to control porter wages, underline the tension between colonialism’s practice of spatial and legislative forms of racial and class control and the ever-escalating desire for compliant laboring bodies—particularly with regard to the specific needs of a high-altitude settlement.

### Labor, Mobility, and Livelihoods

This section explores various livelihood options and the degree of social and economic mobility that those offered for Darjeeling’s subaltern inhabitants, especially those who managed to fit into the ethnically differentiated occupations that the colonial labor market created. Hill-station households of convalescents, officials, missionaries, hotels, and schools demanded a wide variety of domestic labor to service their needs. These included cooks, butlers, grooms, nursemaids, guards, butlers, and guards, water-carriers,

and sweepers. Located on the edge of the urban settlement, Darjeeling’s plantations and military cantonments were important employment hubs, but also acted as key determinants of labor choice—or its lack.

Darjeeling’s first guidebook pessimistically warned its European readers that servants were scarce and expensive, as they had to be procured from the plains. Employers paid higher wages than Calcutta in order to compensate for difficult terrain and chilly weather, but plains servants were seen as ill equipped to deal with hill-station life (Anon. 1845: 11). Matters changed in a few years, when there were enough men and women from Himalayan lands who sought out every variety of laboring and service work (Hathorn 1863: 56; Avery 1878: 37; Campbell 1873). A popular local proverb became *chiya ko bot maa paisa falchha* (‘money grows on tea bushes’) (Golay 2006). This reveals the significant pull factor that tea plantations exerted for the mobile peasantry of eastern Nepal, but once they reached Darjeeling, they discovered other opportunities also existed in households and cantonments.

Guidebooks extolled Nepali labor as the best group for diligence, cleanliness, and housekeeping virtues, with the Lepcha a close second. However, domestic employers increasingly had to compete not only with tea plantations, but also with the army when it came to retaining the former. Between 1886 -1904, no less than 27,428 Gurkha soldiers were recruited from the Darjeeling region into the British Indian army. While the first official Gurkha recruiting station was established at Gorakhpur (United Provinces) in 1886, unofficial recruitment from Nepal started decades earlier (Des Chene 1991). As migration from Eastern Nepal into the Darjeeling region increased, a second recruiting station began at the Jalapahar cantonment in 1890. This displeased planters who submitted several protest petitions through the Indian Tea Association (Dozey 1922: 199). In 1895, at the Society of Arts meeting in London, a visiting planter publicly lamented the exodus of tea workers into the army. Retired Lieutenant-Governor Sir Steuart Colvin Bayley defended the government, explaining that military manpower requirements had top priority, but that army recruiters were instructed to reject plantation applicants (Christison 1895-1896; Bayley 1895-1896). In reality, it was almost impossible for army recruiters to ensure that a new soldier had not deserted a plantation job.

We need to consider carefully the constant trade-off between material, social, and cultural aspirations to understand why Nepali males might aspire to military openings in preference to plantation and domestic jobs. Reading against the grain the official archive that portrays Nepali

tea workers as volatile individuals who invariably deserted if a better opportunity arose, we see that despite the proverbial extolling of tea work as a path to riches, the plantation's retentive potential was limited by its scanty promotion opportunities, limited to a few foremen and overseer jobs. While a senior major-domo in a colonial household enjoyed a better wage than a soldier, army employment was virtually permanent, with the prospect of a land grant and a cash pension (Bruce 1934: 32). These were long-term accouterments of familial security that domestic servants or plantation employees seldom enjoyed.

It is important to note that many of these laboring avenues were limited by gender, race, and ethnicity. Firstly, the majority applied only to men. If we parse the constant praise from planters of Nepali women as loyal workers much less likely to desert than their men, we see that women's supposed faithfulness was largely due to a gendered lack of choice, given the immobility of childcare and female exclusion from higher domestic jobs and military employment. Secondly, the racial and ethnic preferences that colonial employers attached to different occupational categories were designed to exclude certain groups and privilege others. For instance, British army rules reserved Gurkha employment for those men from Nepal's mountain villages whom ethnography deemed to possess martial and peasant descent, i.e., Magars, Gurungs, Limbus, and Rais. These were the groups framed by the categories that Brian Hodgson introduced into British ethnographic discourse, honed over subsequent army manuals (Hodgson 1847/1880; Vansittart 1906; Morris 1933; Gibbs 1946). Their racialized recruitment logic excluded the local offspring of Gurkha soldiers, known as 'line boys', on grounds of their Indian upbringing that supposedly diluted martial familial descent. Lepcha were excluded on the grounds of lacking Nepal descent, and Newar for their Buddhist faith. However, the ground realities of recruitment often diverged from what manuals proclaimed. In practice, enterprising Himalayan men who aspired to Gurkha employment often learnt to simulate the status of new arrivals and the ethnic and ecological identities that imperial ethnology saw as essential to a martial character. Happily for these aspirants, British army recruiters were heavily reliant on the physiognomy, oral testimony, and documents of these men who applied to become soldiers, and the local translators in the field who interceded for them.<sup>11</sup>

In the Darjeeling region, as in other hill-station economies, precipitous terrain rendered porters and load-carriers vital to hill-station and mountain life. Even after road and rail took over long-distance transport, everything from grain to firewood to a piano required human conveyance over

shorter distances. Porters, sedan bearers, seasonal road builders, water-carriers, pony and mule operators, and construction workers earned lower wages than domestic and plantation labor (Hathorn 1863: 56; Avery 1878: 37). Usually, outdoor and porter tasks went to plains 'coolie' and Himalayan newcomers who immediately needed a wage to survive. Even there, possibilities for mobility for select individuals existed, as shown in the career of Gopal Singh Pradhan who moved with family members from Bhatgaon to the border village of Fikkal, and then worked as a laborer at the Lebong racecourse. He rose through the ranks to become a petty labor contractor. His son Bhim Bahadur continued in that family avocation to become a first-class contractor handling jobs over Rs 50,000, whose prominence earned him the prestigious imperial title of Rai Bahadur (Kushal and Laval Pradhan 2012). However, the most striking example of manual work as a path to mobility for an entire group arose only a few decades later, when a combination of ecological and racial logic impelled Euro-American mountaineers to seek out Sherpa migrants, such as Tenzing Norgay, as ideal subjects for high-altitude mountain porter—better-paid and riskier work than the usual types of hill-station and expedition labor.

At mid-century, when the botanical explorer Joseph Hooker visited Darjeeling, his plant-collecting expeditions anticipated the town's future as a node for Himalayan knowledge-assimilation and attendant requirements for labor. Hooker turned to his hosts, Campbell and Hodgson, for assistance on whom to hire for his collecting expeditions. By this time, Campbell had managed to negotiate with notables such as the Kazi of Bhadaong, Chebu Lama, Tsiwang Rinzing Laden La, and Bir Singh Chaudhuri to barter revenue collection rights and land grants in exchange for them to dispatch Lepcha, Bhutia, and Mech subjects to labor around Darjeeling. Campbell tapped his access to those subjects and annexed his control over them (define 'it') to Hodgson's ethnographic knowledge, in order to meet the botanist's laboring needs.

For nearby forays around Darjeeling, they advised Hooker to employ Lepcha men as plant collectors, based on their deep knowledge of forests and commons. Hooker was happy with this advice, praising "this merry troupe... ever foremost in the forest or on the bleak mountain, and ever ready to help, to carry, to cook" (Hooker 1854: 123). Given this praise it is jarring to realize that those subalterns whose botanical lore served to advance Hooker's metropolitan career remained nameless in his writings, as did the Lepcha treasurer who enumerated his expedition expenses in "a fine, clear hand" (Sprigg 1998: 5). The following year, when Hooker received royal permission

to explore uncharted parts of Nepal, Campbell advised against employing Lepcha or plains laborers who would not withstand the terrain and long journey. Nor could he enlist “runaway” Nepal laborers to return to their country (Hooker 1854:124). Instead, Campbell negotiated with a “Sirdar or headman” of the vicinity to hire “Bhotan coolies”, each to carry a heavy eighty pound load of food provisions (Hooker 1854: 125).

In Nepal and Indian usage, the name *Bhot* referred to Tibet as well as to adjoining Himalayan lands such as Bhutan. The names of *Bhootea*, *Bhotiya*, *Bhutia*, or *Bhotia* denoted a broad swathe of Tibetan-dialect speakers who inhabited Himalayan Buddhist borderlands (Brown 1987). They originated as cross-cultural traders whose activities were a response to eco-systematic complementarity where nomads engaged in petty trade with sedentary neighbors (van Spengen 2000). These groups combined transhumance herding of yak and sheep with cultivation of barley, buckwheat, and potatoes around seasonal settlements. On winter circulatory circuits, the Bhutia bartered wool, hides, butter, iron, and salt for grain and sugar at *haat* (markets) from Assam to Bhutan to Kashmir (English 1985). From the 1840s, they began circulating around the Darjeeling region. As Hooker experienced, Bhutia readiness to travel far, willingness to carry heavy loads, and modest wage demands made them favored subjects for expedition work. The other side of this ethnic typecasting was that Bhutia laborers found it harder to move up from load bearing and porter work in contrast to their Nepali peers whose growing reputation for cleanliness and tractability in domestic laboring positions often privileged their move into better-paid plantation and military openings.

From the late-nineteenth century, with Nepal and Tibet closed to most Euro-Americans, Darjeeling became the embarkation point for Himalayan scientific and Alpine-style mountaineering expeditions. Aside from scientific exploration, Alpine mountaineering enthusiasts such as Arthur Kellas and General the Hon. Charles Bruce popularized Himalayan peaks as new summits for mankind to conquer (Hansen 2014). This led to a rising demand for mountain guides and high-altitude porters. European elite climbers initially imported Swiss and Italian mountain guides, but the latter lacked in local knowledge what they offered in climbing prowess (Hansen 1999). General Bruce, who took pride in transforming fresh recruits into model soldiers, sought to hone Gurkha manliness by training them in imperial sports, particularly in his own passion: mountaineering (Bruce 1934). Hardy and disciplined as his Gurkha men were, he felt that most of them possessed little aptitude for the higher reaches where climbing expeditions required skilled mountain porters, a newly specialized

Himalayan laboring niche. By trial and error the British discovered the rightful inhabitants for this specialized niche to be the Sherpa inhabitants of high-altitude Nepal, once they received a “general education” in mountaineering methods (Kellas 1917; Bruce 1934: 288).

From the time of the 1921 Everest attempt, it became an axiom in Darjeeling’s porter recruiting quarters that mountaineers would choose Sherpa men for well paid, skilled, and risky expedition jobs. Sherpa women and other Himalayan laboring groups such as Tamang and Bhutia were hired as auxiliaries at lower wages (Ortner 1999; Neale 2002). Just as the colonial British claimed the authentic Gurkha man as Asia’s essential martial ‘native’ whom they successfully harnessed to the military yoke of empire, they proclaimed the mobile Sherpa male as the ideal high-altitude laborer whose sturdy back would easily bear Euro-American mountain derring-do. This discovery transformed the lives and destinies of many Sherpa laborers who had moved to Darjeeling in order to earn a better livelihood than their harsh homeland allowed.

The Sherpa were originally migrants from eastern Tibet into Nepal. They settled in the fifteenth century in the Solu-Khumbu region where they grew barley, buckwheat, and pastured yaks at heights of 11,000 to 12,500 feet (Opitz 1974; Ortner 1999). By the time Tenzing Norgay was born in 1914, home-grown staples of *tsampa* (roasted flour) and the newly introduced potato crop provided a frugal but reliable basis for a Sherpa subsistence economy, eked out with brick tea seasoned with salt and morsels of yak butter, and the small amounts of dried yak meat that ordinary households afforded (Norgay 1955: 8-12). Through his childhood, Tenzing watched Sherpa adults carry salt and wool loads as seasonal supplements to scanty agrarian incomes, as far as the fabled cities of Lhasa and Darjeeling. Most striking were the tales he heard of *chilingna* (white) men and how he could earn good money if he accompanied them to the mountains that reached the sky (Norgay 1955: 12-14). At age eighteen, he followed this path to Darjeeling, travelling over a week from his village with twelve other youngsters, carrying only an old blanket (Norgay 1955:17). He recollected, “You do not run across the wild country of eastern Nepal. You creep up and down, out and about, over steep ridges, through jungle valleys, across rushing rivers, on trails that you can hardly see” (Norgay 1955: 17).

When he reached Darjeeling, Tenzing learnt the hard way that Sherpa status was conditional on public performance. Eking out a menial livelihood in the Bhutia Busti neighborhood, he exchanged his village rags for Nepali-style clothes bestowed by a milkman employer. To avoid ridicule, he cut off his Sherpa-styled braid. But those borrowed Nepali

clothes gave Tenzing a non-Sherpa appearance that caused his rejection when he appeared before the Himalayan Club to be recruited as a porter for the 1933 Everest expedition. “This was all right for Darjeeling, but bad with the expedition, for they thought I was a Nepali, and they wanted only Sherpas” (Norgay 1955: 21). He returned to a life of circulating wage work, travelling back to Solu-Khumbu to carry salt to Tibet and working to restore the St Paul’s School chapel while in Darjeeling. Before he successfully applied for a portering job with Eric Shipton’s 1935 Everest expedition, Tenzing made sure that he looked like a Sherpa (Norgay 1955: 20-24).

Getting hired was only the first obstacle. Many Sherpa hired by expeditions were killed or disabled, but climbing porter jobs paid better than standard load bearing. Tenzing explained, “the wages on the expedition were 12 *annas* a day, which would be raised to one rupee a day for every day above snowline; so if I went, I would make more money than I ever did before” (Norgay 1955: 24). Despite the risks and hardship, Sherpa laborers strategically deployed their bodies to service the white men who climbed for sport the mountains that provided them livelihoods. They hoped to earn enough to buy a pony or shop to earn a safer livelihood from the Darjeeling tourist economy, eventually to move back home as prosperous owners of fields and yaks and to patronize the new-style Sherpa monasteries that laboring and trading tithes were transforming into celibate hubs of Tibetan Buddhist high religion (Ortner 1989). As their Darjeeling existence unfolded, Tenzing and his peers gradually moved away from the Solu-Khumbu quotidian habits. For instance, Darjeeling Sherpa households increasingly adopted Indian-style black tea with sugar as a primary beverage, with Tibetan-style butter tea reserved for ceremonial usage. Similarly, the Sherpa dialect gradually became confined to the older generation as the Gurkhali idiom, re-named as Nepali, became their preferred public language, and for their children and grandchildren, effectively the language of school and home.

### Mobile Citizens and Local Cosmopolitanism

This section explores how the mobile trajectories of individuals and groups who entered colonial Darjeeling became instrumental in its re/production as a vibrant Himalayan entrepôt that provided new, transcultural, and cosmopolitan possibilities. To understand the diverse histories that produced Darjeeling as a social space, the article reaches beyond conventional archives to access oral and family histories from local inhabitants that illuminate how mobile individuals and groups moved into new livelihood practices, how they negotiated new sources of authority

and legitimacy, and how the hill-station and its hinterlands were shaped by the modernistic and hybrid cultures they created.

Once Darjeeling acquired a firm footing for basic transport, housing, and culinary infrastructure, it was successful in luring entrepreneurial and commerce-minded newcomers from near and far. With some exceptions, the majority of Europeans and Bengalis who inhabited Darjeeling did so as genteel visitors who departed upon retirement, or split their time with allegiance to another home. Northern and Western India migrants historically experienced Darjeeling as male sojourners in laboring and trading occupations, whose womenfolk and young children continued to reside in their homelands. By contrast, mobile newcomers from the Himalayan territories of Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, and Tibet usually comprised groups of men and women, often accompanied by children. The majority began as laborers or peddlers, moved into plantation, domestic, cantonment, mission, and mountain jobs, and created multi-generational households that called the region home, even as they usually retained affective, devotional, cultural, and kinship ties to their places of origin.

From the 1840s, enticed by relatively high hill-station wages, craftsmen arrived at Darjeeling from Sikkim, as did sawyers, carpenters, and masons from Calcutta, Rungpore, Patna, Tirhoot, and Monghyr (Anon. 1845: 11). After several false starts by Captain Lloyd at starting a market, the Chowk market began operations in 1840, with *bania* (North Indian trading caste) merchants, cloth-sellers, and a sweetmeat man as its first vendors (*The Friend of India* January 2, 1840). Gradually, a circulating population of traders, peddlers, artisans, and monks across Northern, Eastern, and Western India, Nepal, and Tibet included Darjeeling in their itineraries, and many decided to settle there. In the case of long-distance trades, the town’s size allowed it to generate only a small portion of demand. But Darjeeling acquired vital importance as a clearing-house for imports and exports between Himalayan lands, British India’s port-cities, and trans-oceanic markets. Its commercial fortunes, and those of nearby Kalimpong, prospered at the expense of the historic cities of Kathmandu and Lhasa whose Nepal and Tibet regimes, hopeful of restricting British influence, limited cross-border activity and effectively discouraged commercial expansion. Filling that gap, Marwari, Tibetan, Sikkimese, Nepali, Kashmiri, and Chinese traders set up offices in Darjeeling-Kalimpong to export Himalayan commodities such as salt, wool, tea, cinchona, and yak tails across a range of regional and global circuits, and import a wide range of consumer goods, from food-stuffs to garments to Rolex watches to cars, catering to



modestly placed and wealthy customers across the Eastern Himalayas.

A Marwari family history describes how around 1845, Jethmull and Bhojraj, employees of the mighty Jagat Seth trading house at Dinajpur, encountered H.H. Pell, a British hotel manager who painted a rosy picture of hill-station commerce. Inspired by him, they journeyed to Darjeeling and established an independent trading house at the Chowk, with subsidiary marts in smaller villages such as Panihatti and Pankhabari (Sukhani 2009).<sup>12</sup> A few years later, Jethmull and Bhojraj prospered sufficiently to start one of Darjeeling's first banks. Another young trader, Habeebullah Mullick, during the 1880s, journeyed to the Jalapahar cantonment from a distant Kashmir village to sell to soldiers the woollen puttees (bandage-style leggings) that they wore as part of their uniform, made in an Amritsar factory. After a decade of petty sales, Mullick acquired enough capital for a shop at the Chowk that sold Kashmiri artifacts. His grandson continued the enterprise but moved up into the prestigious Chowrasta market, previously the preserve of European retailers. Only in that third generation did the family's womenfolk move to Darjeeling (Mullick 2012).

Such ground-level oral and family histories of the locality reveal far more complicated mobile trajectories than the simple push scenarios that long dominated migration scholarship. They bear out the anthropologist T.K. Subba's warning not to assume that all Himalayan migrations were impelled by economic hardship (Subba 2001). Family stories speak of ancestors spurred on by success tales of mobile kin or village brethren, of individuals attracted as much by Darjeeling's prosperity as deterred by restrictive home conditions. At the turn of the twentieth century, a trading couple from Kathmandu, Gobind Das and Durga Devi, moved into Darjeeling, attracted by the prospect of selling Newar artisanal crafts. The family's fortunes took an upward turn when their self-taught photographer son, Thakur Das, abandoned the by now over-subscribed curio business to start the Das Studio in 1928. Acquiring a coveted dealership from the German AGFA Company allowed Thakur Das's studio to compete with better-capitalized British rivals, join the burgeoning field of mountain photography, and acquire a prominent place on the European-dominated Mackenzie Road (Das Pradhan: 2012).

Such mobile individuals often experienced Darjeeling as an important point in a wider regional circuit across the Eastern Himalayas. Local markets, cantonments, schools, and mission stations often became as important as roads and plantations in their role as acculturation and liveli-

hood hubs. Gompu Tsering, originally from Tibet's Thingri, made an itinerant living providing domestic services to soldiers at the Ghoom and Jor Bungalow cantonments. He was illiterate but crucially learnt to speak English. That, and the kitchen skills he learned during his cantonment years, allowed him to start a flourishing food business at Kalimpong, Gompu's bakery, whose bread and cakes became popular with European missionaries, soldiers, officials, as well as prosperous Himalayan households (Gompu 2012; Hishey 2012).

The Eastern Himalayan mission of the Scottish Presbyterians was central to the career of another Newar migrant, Gangaprasad Pradhan, who moved from Chainpur to Darjeeling, finding work as a tea laborer. By 1876 he had become a Nepali translator for the Church of Scotland missionary William Macfarlane (Reports of the Darjeeling Mission, Letter to Supporters 22 February 1876: iii). Gangaprasad rapidly rose to become a catechist-teacher. Later, he was ordained as the region's first native pastor. He was a pioneer of the Eastern Himalayas' Nepali print public through his management of the Church of Scotland's Eastern Himalaya Mission's Gorkha Press, its Gorkha Kagat newspaper, and in the Nepali books he published on Christian themes (P.R. Pradhan 2012).

Another enterprising Newar migrant who contributed to the Darjeeling region becoming an important hub for Nepali print culture was Bhagyamani Pradhan. At the age of twelve, he ran away from his village in Nepal to join compatriots in Banaras, where he sold books from door to door. After some years, he moved to Kalimpong to run a bookshop and eventually a printing press, whose products became central to the emerging vernacular public of the region. His eldest son Parasmani, who became a teacher at Darjeeling's Government High School, made it his life's mission to create a modern print infrastructure for Nepali through the publication of primers, dictionaries, and periodicals, thus challenging its pejorative treatment as a 'coolie' patois (Udayamani Pradhan 2012). Pensioned military retirees who settled down in and around Darjeeling instead of returning to Nepal, joined forces with these youthful culture-brokers as producers and consumers of a burgeoning Nepali public in India (Chalmers 2003).

A vastly different entrepreneurial lifestyle characterized the members of the Darjeeling Planter's Club that became a notorious venue for uproarious gambling and drinking weekends as well as annual Hogmanay celebrations (Fletcher 1955) for the region's white population. Tea planters included renegade English soldiers, elephant hunters, public school alumni, former German missionar-

ies, and younger sons of Scottish gentry. A major attraction of this colonial occupation was that tea planters enjoyed sporting lifestyles and virtual autocracy on their estates and served as everyday personifications of state authority—far removed from the middling careers and lifestyles that was their lot back home. A less visible manifestation of planter hegemony occurred in the domain of the intimate, via the illicit unions that many planters initiated with Lepcha and Nepali laboring women; accommodating local wives and mixed-race offspring in *basti* (village) households on the outskirts of Darjeeling. Thanks to efforts by reformers such as the missionary John Graham, many of those children received British-style schooling and upbringing at institutions such as the St Andrew's Colonial Homes that aimed toward sending them to overseas lives in British settler colonies where they would enjoy white racial status, away from their 'native' mothers and British fathers.

Apart from British officials, their families, and sundry Euro-American visitors, a growing number of long-time sojourners and summer vacationers to Darjeeling were Bengalis of the well-to-do *bhadralok* (gentry) and professional classes. Darjeeling's connections to Calcutta deepened with its adoption as Bengal's summer capital after 1864 and the establishment of a direct rail-line in 1881. Anglicized Indians such as Bengali Brahmo families were eager to emulate British contemporaries who viewed a hill-station hiatus as a modernistic and essential marker of wellbeing and leisure (Devee 1921). In Darjeeling, non-European visitors with the right pedigree and pocketbook—such as the Bonnerji and Majumdar families—could rent charming guest properties that Bengal landed magnates such as the Maharajas of Burdwan and Cooch Behar had built (Majumdar 2003: 91-93). Other Bengalis who resided at Darjeeling included the followers of the modernistic Brahmo church employed at the post office, railways, and Public Works departments who in 1879 established their own temple (Dall 1879). In order to school their offspring on Brahmo lines, in 1908, the reformer Hemlata Sarkar obtained funding from the Maharanis of Cooch Behar and Mayurbhanj to start the Maharani Girls' School (Majumdar 2003).

In 1880, a Brahmo resident of Darjeeling, Hurry Mohun Sannial, a Public Works overseer, wrote an enthusiastic account titled *Darjeelinger Itihas* (History of Darjeeling) in 1880. He endorsed the hill-station as "a typical English borough" where his educated countrymen might feel at home (Sannial 1880: 5). Lauding Darjeeling's rapid development as a healthy space, Sannial claimed that "exposure to cultured young men from Bengal" would greatly benefit its "mountain folk" whether "lazy Lepcha" "barbaric Bhutia" or "industrious Nepali" (Sannial 1880: 21; 62; 67). Sannial

clearly hoped to attract an erudite readership since starting with his title, he emphasized his book's historical and ethnographic credentials, citing well-known names such as the administrator-ethnographer W.W. Hunter, and the Tibet traveller, Sarat Chandra Das, a Darjeeling resident. Published in a privately printed edition, this Bangla work was rapidly overtaken by the English-language guidebooks for Darjeeling visitors that commercial publishers such as Calcutta's W.H. Newman published every year. But the sentiments that infused Sannial's possessive portrayal of Darjeeling as a space for Bengali colonization and rejuvenation endured in Bengali public culture and among its *bhadralok* (gentry) visitors. At such a hill-station, mountain people seemed to exist to titillate the senses, and to facilitate plains elites' restorative sojourns. The neo-Hindu reformer Swami Vivekanand wrote to Mrs. Bull, an American disciple, from Rosebank where he was a guest of its wealthy owner, Maharaja Bijoy Chand Mahtab of Burdwan: "Yesterday the view of the snows was simply superb, and it is the most picturesque city in the world; there is such a mass of color everywhere, especially in the dress of the Lepchas and Bhutias and the Paharees" (Vivekanand 1898). For the biographer of the prominent Bengal politician Chittaranjan Das who lived out his last days in Darjeeling, the 'hill folk' appeared in his account only as mute rickshaw pullers, or as silent, grieving crowds at the leader's death procession (Ray 1927: 224-225). In quasi-Orientalist manner, the majority of Bengal's elite were oblivious of the complex social formations and cosmopolitan cultures being constituted around and by Himalayan Darjeeling.

During the hill-station's early decades, Darjeeling's first administrator, Archibald Campbell, gradually established close ties with Himalayan notables such as Tsiwang Rinzing Laden La whose ancestors collected taxes for the Sikkim king, and founded the Observatory Hill monastery (Rhodes 2006: 5-7). The monastery was left in ruins in 1815 by a Nepal raid, but was rebuilt in 1867 in the Bhutia Busti neighborhood. At Bhutia Busti, Sherpa, Bhutia, and Nepali newcomers lived in the midst of notables such as Nashpati Sardar and Tsiwang Rinzing Laden La, who spoke in their idiom and offered laboring compatriots employment in their capacity as labor contractors (Tenzing 1955; Hishey 2012). Thanks to colonial state patronage, such contractors acquired land grants, revenue offices, and considerable wealth. They retained their Buddhist faith but adopted British leisure pursuits such as patronage of horse racing and educating their children in Anglo-Indian public schools. Such a colorful local personage as Nashpati Sardar became publicly memorialized through the Lebung race trophy named after him, and the Buddhist shrine that he endowed on the route to Observatory Hill, The Laden La

clan, in turn, were memorialized through the monastery built by their munificence, as well as by the road that the local municipality named after their most illustrious member. In and beyond Darjeeling, this clan formed an important power hub whose connections proved invaluable to imperial networks of espionage, especially as the Great Game expanded into Tibet.

The Laden La clan played a key role in facilitating the activities of the Bhutia Boarding School. This was established at Darjeeling in 1874, ostensibly to provide an education in surveying and English for elite Tibetan-speaking boys and covertly, to incorporate them into imperial surveillance networks (Waller 1988: 193). The school's headmaster Sarat Chandra Das was an important protagonist in the espionage missions that penetrated in disguise into Tibet (Das 1893; Das/Rockville 1970). His indispensable interlocutor on those missions was the school's Tibetan teacher Ugyen Gyatso, a Nyingmapa Buddhist monk from Sikkim. Ugyen Gyatso became part of the Laden La clan when he married Tsiwang Rinzing's daughter, Ani Choki and settled at Bhutia Busti. Ugyen's brother, Kunlay Gyatso, a Bhutia School alumnus, also undertook secret missions into Tibet under his nom-de-plume Rinzing Namgyal (Rhodes 2006). Later, he undertook another important role in the new colonial economy as mountain guide and labor foreman for Douglas Freshfield's expedition to climb Kanchenjunga.

The life and career of this local clan's best-known member, Sonam Wangfel Laden La, epitomizes the new transcultural possibilities for Himalayan residents of colonial Darjeeling, whose multi-linguistic skills and clout proved crucial to British strategic ambitions on this frontier. The son of Ging monastery's chief lama, he was adopted by his aunt Ani Choki into her Bhutia Busti home and educated in Darjeeling. Sonam's hybrid training in Tibetan monastic and Western knowledge—as much as his clan connections—helped him become the Chief Composer of the Government Press at the tender age of twenty, working on a massive Tibetan dictionary and other translation projects. Afterwards, he became an officer of the Imperial Police Service in 1899, the first Himalayan native to achieve such a high rank. But he spent much of his career in the domain that became his forte: secret intelligence gathering on Tibet (Rhodes 2006). Sonam Laden La's honorific *Sardar* (headman) title denotes his crucial role as Darjeeling's key imperial interlocutor who smoothed the way for important visitors who needed porters, horses, mules, interpreters, or simply some local color. He became the personage in demand for every town committee from wartime fund-raising to monastery renovations. He was equally a patron of Buddhist religious activities and a prominent connoisseur of Lebond racing who owned several champion racehorses.

For such Himalayan individuals and families, the social and economic capital they garnered through mobile careers allowed them to self-identify as cosmopolitan Darjeeling citizens: consumers of Western literature, music, and décor, bilingual speakers of Nepali and English, consumers of tea, momo, cakes, and noodles. Sonam Laden La's daughter and grandson went on to run the elegant Windamere Hotel, whose Christmas-time wood fires and West End entertainments successfully marketed Darjeeling as a seasonal destination for global seekers of imperial nostalgia and mythic Himalayan hospitality. The Rev. Gangaprasad Pradhan's descendants served at educational and Christian institutions in the Darjeeling-Kalimpong region such as the Turnbull and Scottish Mission schools. Das Studios continued to flourish as a prominent landmark on the Chowrasta Square, a multi-generational family enterprise whose members retained close kin and marital ties to Newar families of Kathmandu and interacted with the global Nepali diaspora even as they prized the cosmopolitan ingredients of their Darjeeling upbringing. Tenzing's descendants have scattered far and wide as climbers and entrepreneurs, but the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute he headed, the Toongsong Basti neighborhood, and the Bhutia Basti monastery remained Sherpa community hubs. At Darjeeling and Kalimpong, Parasmani Pradhan's grandchildren kept alive his printing press, although much of their oeuvre became English rather than Nepali publications. While recent generations continue to identify as Darjeeling natives, increasingly those who possess the social and cultural capital to do so join the mobile and transnational Nepali, Tibetan, and South Asian diasporas that have spread throughout the world.

## Conclusion

Darjeeling entered the annals of empire due to the purported British discovery of a salubrious mountain site that might refresh white bodies from the privations of the Indian plains. An unintended consequence of this colonial experiment was the emergence of a mountain urban locality that served as a hub for Himalayan circulation of goods, people, and ideas, and eventually generated important varieties of vernacular cosmopolitanism. This article explores how trans-regional and trans-national groups previously separated by geographic and temporal disjuncture became active agents in the social production of this space and its transcultural milieu. It argues that this process of spatial production catalyzed dynamic and varied forms of economic, cultural, and social entrepreneurship as well as the self-fashioning of modernistic and cosmopolitan identities. The rigid ascriptions of ethnic and occupational categories in the official archive are challenged by

histories of and from the locality that reveal how ethnic and racialized categories such as Lepcha, Bhutia, Gurkha, and others shifted and blurred depending on lived practices and material realities. Nonetheless, given the centrality of ethnic and raced categories to the state's ethnographic type-casting and employment practices, compliance—or at least the appearance thereof—became critical to local livelihood strategies as circulating people and mobile groups strategically fashioned their individual and collective identities to fit the possibilities for urban modernity that this space held out to them. Colonial Darjeeling's mobile people became citizens of a uniquely cosmopolitan urban space, even as cultural beliefs, religious, and kinship ties perpetuated ties with networks and diasporas linked to their lands of origin. However, we need to spare a thought for the many other subaltern subjects who have disappeared into the silences of history. First-generation migrants such as Gangaprasad Pradhan and Tenzing Norgay who started as laborers ascended the social and economic ladder successfully, but many peers who were unable to access specialized laboring niches or literate occupations did not. Historians can only speculate about their stories and destinies.

Over the decades of political turmoil that periodically characterized late-twentieth-century developments in this Eastern Himalayan region, when counted as Nepali, Tibetan, Marwari, Bengali, Gorkha or as just Indian, many inhabitants crucially positioned themselves as people of the 'hills', as Darjeeling people, or as Indian Nepali. Others failed to do so, were prevented from doing so, or even withdrew from doing so. The complex reasons for those shifts lie outside the bounds of this article, but a fresh perspective on recent identity fissures, as well as possibilities for a renewal of Darjeeling's cosmopolitan and trans-national synergies, may well hinge on further exploration of this space as a Himalayan crossroads and its overlooked transcultural histories of circulation, mobility, and connections.

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## Endnotes

1. The historiography on imperial hill-stations is extensive: its highlights range from colonial writers such as Hyde Clarke (1868; 1881), geographers such as J.E. Spencer and W.L. Thomas (1948), Anthony King (1975), Judith Kenny (1995) and Aditi Chatterji (2003), historians such as Pamela Kanwar (1989; 1990), Dane Kennedy (1996), Queeny Pradhan (2007), Eric Jennings (2011), and Nandini Bhattacharya (2012; 2013).
2. <http://collections.vam.ac.uk/item/O76256/drawing-frederick-william-alexander/>; Drawing, European invalids on road to Darjeeling, by F. W. A. De Fabeck, pencil, ink and scratchwork on black-grained paper, India, ca. 1860-1890
3. Foreign Department Proceedings; Consultations of 5 Feb. 1840, 91-92; 9 Nov. 1840, 91-92; 24 May 1841, 59-62; and 4 Oct. 1841, 118-120, National Archives of India, New Delhi (hereafter NAI).
4. Foreign Department Proceedings; Consultations of 18 Sept. 1839, 167-168, NAI.
5. Bengal Public Works Department, Despatches of 1855, 427, India Office Records, British Library, London (hereafter BL).
6. Fort William Proceedings, Consultations of 1 May 1839, 99; India Office Records, BL.
7. Foreign Department Proceedings; Consultations of 1 June 1840, 82-83; and Oct. 1842, 148-151, NAI.

8. Foreign Department Proceedings; Consultations of 8 Nov. 1850, 137-142; 6 Dec 1850, 140-141; 17 Jan 1851, 155-156, NAI.

9. Several of Campbell's essays were published in London journals after his retirement, after being delivered as addresses to forums such as the Society of Arts and the Ethnological Society (1869; 1873). Hodgson's ethnological writings on the Himalayas and other ethnological topics were initially published from Calcutta under the auspices of the Asiatic Society's Journal and subsequently in book form from Calcutta and London respectively (1847; 1880).

10. See Papers of the Commerce and Industry Department, Emigration. Sept 1911. No 3. Part B. Report of the Duars Committee, 1910. See also Foreign and Political Department. External. 1929. File no 44-x. Recruitment of Rejected Gurkha Recruits of the Fighting Classes, NAI.

11. I was told of several individuals from Lepcha and Newar families who adopted surnames of Thapa or Rai when they joined Gurkha regiments.

12. www.bijoysukhani.blogspot.ca: 2009. The author, Bijoy Sukhani, writes that the family history is based upon notes inherited from his father, Rai Bahadur Lakshmi Narayan Sukhani, who died in 1964.

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