

The Politics of Controlled Spaces: The Territorial Struggle and Spatial Contestation in Darjeeling

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Abstract: *The period post 1950s has witnessed a paradigm shift in terms of the meaning and definition of 'development' and the entire process therein. From the comprehension of the meaning of development solely as economic growth to the process of structural changes, liberalisation, neo-liberalisation and finally to human growth, sustainable development and inclusive growth have produced and created a theoretical premise for understanding both the nature of development as well as under-development. Thus, the socio-economic differences conceived as a result of such changes in the development framework and theory itself, emphasising on labour and capital, development and underdevelopment etc. have also induced spatial restructuring and re-establishment analogous to the concept of core and periphery, mainland and frontier zones, hills and plains etc. The spatial heterogeneities have therefore always been in existence whereby some areas have been able to climb the ladder of development taking advantage of their available resources, infrastructure and socio-economic opportunities while other areas have lagged behind and continue to occupy the lower end of the development ladder. The areas at the lower end of the developmental hierarchy are therefore those that occupy the positions among the peripheral regions and remain excluded from the core i.e. development itself. Thus, the concept of inclusion/exclusion is also heightened which further helps in demarcating the territoriality of the dominant group vis-a-vis the dominated group. Darjeeling Hills, therefore presents a similar story of remaining excluded from the rest of the state of Bengal in terms of its geography, language and culture etc. The designation of this strip of land as an excluded and partially excluded area right from the British period has stirred the region with contestations and counter-contestations.*

Keywords: Darjeeling Hills, identity, exclusion, development, Spatial Inequality.

Inclusive growth, the thrust of the XI and XII Five Year Plans has become the key themes in the development discourse across disciplines. Inclusion/Exclusion is neither arbitrary nor coincidental. Rather it involves an order of proclaimed reasons and thus can be described as a form of negative/positive discrimination that is constituted according to strict rules (Bohn, 2009). The term 'exclusion' has conceptual connections with the notion of marginalization, discrimination and deprivation (Kuri, 2009). The Indian sub-continent is strife with examples of regional imbalances wherein underdevelopment as a consequence of neglect leading to marginalization of the minority group by the dominant group has been seen as the primary cause. Often, this has become a rallying point around which secessionist and separatist movements are organized, which with course adopt political overtone.

Indian law continues to make distinction between subjects governed by customary law and subjects governed by general law, a distinction which is corresponding to the hills-plains binary of colonial wisdom (Baruah, 2008). What were once safeguards for the customary practices of hill tribes has morphed into a model of protective discrimination for ethnically defined groups (Baruah, 2008). The Hills and the Plains were clearly demarcated since the colonial rule in India. In order to come up with a solution to categorize the hill people external to the caste system but within the racial unity of India- the hills and plains became the master oppositional binary in the colonial solution to the problem (Baruah, 2008). People were classified as either belonging to the hills or the plains even though the classification was fundamentally at odds with local cultural dynamics and spatial practices (Baruah, 2008). One can thus easily trace the roots of differentiation or rather division of various segments of the population to the colonial times. The

colonial rule in India has very well impacted the present scenario where one can still witness the policies influenced by the history of the delusionary grandeur of the western rules and norms. Thus, it can be pointed out how the colonial rule transformed the antecedent pattern of social identification and shaped patterns of ethnic mobilization through the identification, labelling and differential treatment of ethnic groups (Brubaker, 2004). Therefore, colonialism had invented "three" others- the Savage, the Black and the Oriental (Oomen and Emeritus, n.d.).

The hill region of Darjeeling district is peripheral with respect to its geography, language and culture from the dominant Bengali core. This overarching difference together with political exclusion of the Darjeeling Hills has often turned into discontentment among the hill men. Such discontentment surrounded by complexities of ethnic problems has resulted into secessionist movements for demand for separation from the state of West Bengal. As Michael Banton states, ethnicity only becomes a political problem when "groups are crystallized in polarization because the political structure renders impossible the kind of bargaining that might otherwise modify the boundary between the communities" (Ronen, 1986). In addition Barry has rightly said that 'social exclusion is culturally defined, economically driven and politically motivated' (Preece, 2001). It only indicates that inclusion/exclusion have become the dominant social imaginary in the contemporary discourse. The natural differences like that of the physiography, climate as well as the socio-cultural, linguistic and historical differences makes the two regions markedly different entities. Thus, there is a well-defined break in the social space as well as physical expanse of the two regions. Such differences have over the years gradually led to 'othering' of one group by another. The neglect and

marginalization of the minority population by the dominant population group have resulted in feelings of animosity. This has often sparked and stimulated secessionist and separatist movements demanding a separate state of Gorkhaland. Therefore, the social, economic and political exclusion exercised by both the Centre and the State and its dominant group has led to a sense of alienation and non-affiliation among the minority population. In this context, the work of Foucault is extremely relevant where he has created a typology for exclusion wherein exclusion is understood as a) exclusion from the community, b) exclusion-confinement and c) conferment of a special status (Bohn, 2009). Darjeeling provides an excellent example on this basis. Firstly, the hill community as a whole remains excluded from the dominant group, which in this case is being referred to the Bengali population. As mentioned before, the people from the Hills are markedly different from the rest of Bengal in terms of ethnicity, language and physical appearance, food-habits, culture and tradition. The people of the state of West Bengal are called Bengalese while the case is not true with reference to the three hill sub-divisions of Darjeeling district, namely Kurseong, Kalimpong and Darjeeling Sadar which are also a part of the state. As Tanka B. Subba has written about how he used to be asked time and again by his Bengali counterparts in Siliguri of him belonging to Nepal and not India (Subba, 2008). Like Subba, all the people of Darjeeling hills are questioned and even accused of being a foreigner in India. Hence Fredrik Barth has argued that ethnicity is not a matter of shared traits or cultural commonalities but rather of practices of classification and categorization, including both self-classification and the classification of (and by) others (Barth, 2004). In this context, quoting Sura P. Rath, "Yet the most important manifestation of one's otherness in an alien culture is a question one encounters from time to time: 'where are you from?' not who or what are you?" (Subba, 2008). Therefore, Foucault's first typology for exclusion is appropriate in the case of Darjeeling. Similarly, the second typology of exclusion confinement is also apt because the hills of Darjeeling sits confined to the hill tracts. Despite being a part of the state of West Bengal, the hill community faces issues of identity. Thus, one can see a visible break in the social and physical continuum between the Hills of Darjeeling and the rest of Bengal. Taking advantage of these differences coupled with an inaccessible terrain the state of Bengal has been successful in confining this section of the population to a narrow strip of land constituting the three hill sub-divisions resulting in social exclusion of the population as well. Again quoting Barry, 'social exclusion is culturally defined, economically driven and politically motivated' (Preece, 2001). Last but not the least, the provision of an autonomous hill council-Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) and later the Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) brings to light the third criteria of conferring a special status to the excluded region. In this context of the usage of the term 'autonomous councils' by the Central Government, Sonntag explores the 'walling off' of others and hence 'walling in' of the liberal nation-state (Sonntag, 1999).

The statehood movements in India are generally a result of resistance and opposition of a group of people to a larger or more dominant group and a consequence of dissatisfaction

towards the political structure. The Gorkhaland Movement that has stirred the Darjeeling Hills time and again is one such movement where a separate state of Gorkhaland has been their only and ultimate demand. The lack of development in the Hills as a result of neglect and exploitation by the Bengal Government and the issue of identity faced by the population of this district has motivated and further aggravated the Gorkhaland Movement. The continuing hold of colonial knowledge is reflected in both the official policy discourse and the political imagination of local activists (Baruah, 2008). Thus, the territorial struggle is coupled by the struggle to have an independent political control over their region.

The problem of identity faced by the people of Darjeeling Hills is one of the primary reasons that have led to demands for a separate state. However this issue of identity cannot be understood in isolation. A need arises to locate it within the complex matrix of nation, space, territory, culture, race and history (Golay, 2006). The common thread amongst all the ruling authorities from colonial India to an independent nation is that the region of Darjeeling was always considered to be treated differently- economically, socially and politically. Moraji Desai, the former prime Minister of India, made a public statement in 1979 rejecting the idea of including the Nepali language in the Eighth Schedule because he considered Nepali to be a 'foreign language' (Dasgupta, 1999). 'This intolerance of difference has given rise to politics of identity and community...for power and resources thus asserting their identity and community' (Kong, 2001). Thus, it can be said that the years' long conditions of forced deprivation have quite frequently been reflected in the movements for demands of political and ethnic independence. This lack of potential development in the hills has many a times been connected to the concept of internal colonialism. D. S. Bomjan has called this the 'neo-colonial' rule of Bengal (Bomjan, 2008). Gonzalez Casanova has explained 'internal colonialism to correspond to a structure of social relations based on domination and exploitation of culturally heterogeneous, distinct groups' (Chaloult, and Chaloult, 1979). The potential of development and the amount of development in the Hills of Darjeeling hang on an unequal balance. In addition, the ethnic difference further makes the matter worse. The native voice is often lost in the cacophony of metropolitan and mainstream voices (Golay, 2006). Hence, Darjeeling forms an excellent case of what may be called 'controlled fashion of distancing through supervision' (Bohn, 2009). Like the British, even the state of Bengal takes pride in Darjeeling but not its people. This can be related to the context of the Himalayas wherein 'the biodiversity, water resources, glaciers, picturesque landscape, religious places of the Himalayas are indispensable to the development and sustainability of India but not the hill people' (Lama, 2012).

The geography of the region in terms of its location has also played a very important role in the ongoing contestations. There is a feasibility of the Darjeeling Hills to become a separate state, separated from West Bengal, wherein it would be the only state in the country to have four international borders viz. with Bangladesh, Bhutan, Nepal and China (Lama, 2008). Thus, the strategic importance of the region has in other words heightened the degree of

contestation which has converted the Queen of Hills into one of the major conflict zones of India. In addition, the close affinity with the country of Nepal both physically, culturally and linguistically increases the pressure on the region. According to the first Prime Minister of India, the physical boundary is perceived as the furthest extension of a strategic political interest by parties on both sides of it (Walcott, 2010). Similar to Susan M. Walcott's writing, the region of Darjeeling presents itself as spaces controlled by nation-states whose boundaries demonstrate demarcations of power contestations and the politics of identity that seek to preserve distinctiveness. She goes on to write that the areas of greatest potential political instability also encompass areas of rare and fragile cultural and ecological preserves (Walcott, 2010).

In conclusion, it can be said that the debate on the physiographic difference, the ethnic difference and the linguistic difference between the Hills of Darjeeling and West Bengal along with the question of a separate state and identity continues. Thus, borrowing from Viva Ona Bartkus, economic inequality may be seen as factor solidifying the Gorkhaland demand. She says- "...discontent with its current circumstances within the existing state is necessary to motivate this identifiable unit to demand change.....Often the distinct community is bound together by common claims or perceptions of discrimination, neglect, exploitation or repression, in economic, political, cultural, linguistic, or religious terms" (McHenry, 2007). Colonialism not only created a hierarchy of knowledge but also a hierarchy of human beings in which the 'Gorkha' was assigned the role of supplicant, first to the white man and then later to the inheritors of colonial knowledge (Golay, 2006). The strong blend of physical, political, social, cultural and linguistic factors have shaped and reshaped this contested zone. Hence, the physical discontinuity of the Hills with the rest of Bengal, the culture of political hegemony and the over-arching socio-cultural differences along with the colonial and post-colonial discourse are responsible for the ongoing scenario (struggle for identity, lack of development, statehood movement, political instability) in Darjeeling Hills. Furthermore, it is important for the State as well as the Central Governments and the people at large to look into the matter or else similar to Sanjib Baruah's hypothesis, the conflicts may never get resolved but their (Darjeeling Hills and its people) story could just cease to be important (Baruah, 2008).

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