



Challenging the State by Reproducing its Principles

The Demand for “Gorkhaland” between Regional Autonomy and the National Belonging

Contrary to assumptions about the dualist relationship between region and nation, I propose to understand both as simultaneously emerging. An analysis of the rhetoric of the “Gorkhaland” movement that demands a separate union state in India to be carved out of West Bengal demonstrates that although the movement challenges the distribution of power over territory, it does so by using a “pan-Indian grammar,” to borrow Baruah’s terminology. This is reflected in imaginative geographies that endow the demanded territory with meaning and render it an ethno-scape, while at the same time presenting it as a viable part of an imagined Indian nation. The Gorkhas attempt to bridge the gap between the “national” and the “regional” and challenge dominant identity ascriptions. In doing so, they stress their multiple belongings and affiliations. In this process the Indian nation is produced at various levels of society.

KEYWORDS: Ethno-regionalism—imaginative geographies—nationalism—scale—internal othering—India

IT IS A warm evening in May 2012. I am having dinner together with my host family which lives on one of the large tea plantations in Darjeeling in the foothills of the Indian Himalaya. Every so often we discuss politics and the demand for a separate union state of “Gorkhaland” that the Nepali-speaking population of the three hill subdivisions of Darjeeling district has raised toward the West Bengal state and the Indian central government. “As soon as we leave Darjeeling people treat us like foreigners. They do not know where Darjeeling is and that it is a part of India. Instead we are stigmatized as people coming from Nepal. But we have been living here for generations—we are not Nepali citizens!” explains my host father. “We could be evicted at any time. There is no security for us here,” adds his wife. “Only a separate state will give us security. If people ask where we are from, we can say we are from ‘Gorkhaland.’ Then everybody will know that we are Indians.” I question them and ask how they could ever be forced out of Darjeeling as they possess Indian voters’ identity and ration cards—but they stress that only a separate state would guarantee them an Indian identity. We discuss these issues many times, and the longer I stay in Darjeeling the more often I am told the same thing by different persons of different backgrounds: “Only a separate state will give us an Indian identity.”

But what makes people believe that a separate state could provide them an Indian identity when they are already living *within* India, on Indian territory, possessing official identification documents? What general beliefs, values, and assumptions are reflected in such thinking? These questions also relate to broader concerns about the general relationship between demands for new states such as Gorkhaland and the Indian central state, or, in other words, between regionalism and the ideal of a pan-Indian identity and nationalism in India. These are the relationships that this article seeks to explore.

DEMANDS FOR NEW STATES AND INDIAN NATIONALISM

Demands for new states are not a recent phenomenon in India. Already in 1956 the States Reorganization Commission (SRC) suggested rearranging the administrative boundaries of states after independence to accommodate various demands for linguistically more homogenous states. Since then the number of states has doubled to twenty-eight, the last three (Chattisgarh, Jharkhand, Uttara-

khand) being created in the year 2000.¹ In July 2013 the Indian Government further announced it would give in to the long-standing demand of Telangana in Andhra Pradesh. Other demands for more autonomy were accommodated by granting local self-government through the Sixth Schedule or other forms of autonomous councils.² But despite this broad internal reorganization of India, in addition to Gorkhaland there are still about thirty demands for new states in various areas of the country, including “Vidharba” (in Maharashtra), “Bundelkhand” (in Uttar Pradesh and Madhya Pradesh), and “Bodoland” (in Assam), to name but a few.

Other studies often interpret the processes behind this internal remapping as reflecting tensions between a pan-Indian national ideal on the one hand and regionalist aspirations of groups seeking more autonomy, recognition of their cultures, and better prospects for development on the other (for example, CHADDA 2002; BHATTACHARYYA 2005; PRABHAKARA 2009). Recurrent discussions in this context include the question of whether regional demands challenge the integrity of the Indian state and could lead to a “Balkanization”—or the breaking into pieces—of India (SHAH 2010), elaborations on the advantages or disadvantages of smaller states (BECK et al. 2010), or India’s ability to deal with such demands within its federal set-up (BHATTACHARYYA 2005; SARANGI 2009). Often these authors describe the relations between nationalism and regional movements as oppositional and employ a dualistic vocabulary, separating and juxtaposing regionalism and nationalism as distinct processes regardless of whether they see the former as a threat or a possible merit to the broader project of nation-building. This inherent dualism becomes apparent in formulations such as “India... faces the problem of negotiating between segmented identities... and a pan-Indian nationalism. How is micro accommodated by macro?” (BEHERA 2007, 86), or “Mainstream Indian nationalism had continuously to grapple with regional nationalism” (BHATTACHARYYA 2005, 11). There is often an underlying assumption that regionalism poses a threat to the pan-Indian ideal if it is not “contained” (BEHERA 2007, 91; CHADDA 2002, 44), suggesting an *a priori* conflict between the national and not-yet-nationalized regional.

Although I certainly do not deny that tensions can (and most times do) emerge from demands for more autonomy posed by regionally based groups, I want to express caution in juxtaposing terms and categories of the “national” and “pan-Indian,” “central” and the “regional,” or the “micro” and “macro.” These dichotomies easily suggest that regionalism and pan-Indian nationalism are opposed to each other *a priori* instead of asking what role regionalist movements could possibly play for the *formation* of an Indian nationalism itself.

I want to challenge such dualisms by proposing a different way to approach the relations between regionalism and nationalism by understanding them to be mutually enforcing and dependent processes rather than as oppositional dynamics. I propose that ethno-regional movements seeking more autonomy—often described as challenging the Indian “nation”—do not necessarily oppose pan-Indian ideals but rather form *part* of their production and reproduction in multiple processes and at different levels of society. The movement for a new union state of Gorkhaland to

be carved out of Darjeeling district and its adjoining areas in northern West Bengal serves as a case study to underline my argument.

Analytically, I focus on narratives displayed in the form of imaginative geographies that are laden with references to ethno-symbolic resources and form an important strategy for movement legitimation and mobilization. The strategic construction of such imaginative geographies by movement leaders not only constructs an ethnic region that is to become a new union state but, at the same time, also reproduces the ideological principles of nationalism at multiple levels of society. Through a closer analysis of such arguments, I also want to contribute to an understanding of what “Indian nationalism” means for people in Darjeeling.

The article is structured as follows: first, I outline the ways in which scholars have attempted to challenge common assumptions reflecting a dualist thinking about nation and region. Thereafter I briefly outline the concept of imaginative geographies and its merits in an analysis of ethno-regionalist movements. In the empirical section I analyze the ways in which Gorkhaland is constructed within the broader frame of a nationalist ideology.

THE NATIONAL IN THE LOCAL: THINKING ABOUT ETHNO-REGIONALISM DIFFERENTLY

The research questions outlined demand some conceptual considerations on ethno-regionalism or subnationalism and their relations to nationalism, particularly in the Indian context. I will first introduce Anthony Smith’s approach to the emergence of national groups and demonstrate how far it is inherently spatial by relating it to geographical research on “regions” and “regional identities.” Finally, I introduce approaches that challenge the common dualist view on the relationships between the “regional” and the “national,” and propose a way of researching these relations in the context of statehood movements in India.

One convincing approach to the emergence of nationalism and nations was introduced by Anthony Smith, who defines nations as “a named human population sharing an historic territory, common myths and memories, a mass, public culture, a single economy and common rights and duties for all members” (SMITH 1996a, 359). In addition to modernist and materialist approaches (see for example GELLNER 1996) he stresses that ethnic ties and memories are indispensable for nations and nationalisms to emerge. Smith identified three bases or “deep resources” on which nationalisms can draw: collective memories of a rich ethno-history and a golden age, belief in ethnic election, and belonging to an ancestral homeland (SMITH 1996b). These resources form a repertoire for leaders to draw on to mobilize people to participate in nationalist movements (SMITH 1996b, 591). Narratives and myths reflecting collective memories are used especially to forge such connections between people and a territory. A particular territory or landscape is historicized as a place of an ethnic group’s origin, migration, settlement, or golden age, a place where the ancestors rest and one that provided the setting for events and experiences of that community (SMITH 1996b, 589).

Ethno-nationalism therefore always has a spatial base. These relations between ethno-nationalism and space are captured by the term "ethno-regionalism"; this links it to the process of "regionalization," which has been well researched in geography (AGNEW 1999; MACLEOD and JONES 2001; PAASI 2002; 1996). Regionalization refers to the manifold cultural, political, and economic processes through which regions come into being and which are reflected in collective social classifications, identifications, and practices. These processes include the production of hegemonic narratives of a specific regional entity and identity (PAASI 2002), such as narratives about a "golden age." WERLEN (1995) highlights the conflicts arising from contested regionalizations. He views regionalization as an "oppositional form of geography making," a territorially motivated argumentation or social movement on the subnational level challenging representatives at the national decision-making center (WERLEN 1995, 366). Regionalist movements demand a reordering of the political geographies of power expressed as a redrawing of administrative boundaries of control—as is evident with the ethno-regional movements in India.

But how do such ethno-regional or ethno-nationalist movements stand in the broader pan-Indian nationalist ideal? How can we avoid *a priori* dualist thinking of both ethno-regionalisms and (pan-Indian) nationalism? Research on the "social construction of scale" (AGNEW 1997; BRENNER 2001; MARSTON 2000; SMITH 1992) has dealt with and challenged common assumptions about our thinking of the world as divided into "local," "regional," "national," or "global" units and might offer helpful ways to reconceptualize the relations between these seemingly objective divisions. In this body of work, scale—rather than being a fixed and objective entity—is understood as being socially constructed, historically contingent, and dependent on social and political practices and struggles (PAASI 2004, 542). It is a way of framing conceptions of reality (MARSTON 2000, 221). The banal as well as scientific dualist understanding of the "national" and the "regional" is part of the process of "scaling." As Marston stresses, this scale-making is not only a rhetoric practice but also has consequences in real life. Among these is the production of boundaries that separate spatial units and arranges them into a hierarchical order (BRENNER 2001). Such boundary-making entails the organization of difference in a geographical way, including the "making of identities" (SMITH 1992; PAASI 2004). Such spatial positioning (*Verortung*; LOSSAU 2002) also takes place within nation-states and can be described as "internal Orientalism," a "discourse that operates within the boundaries of a state" and "involves the othering of a (relatively) weak region by a more powerful region (or regions) within a state" (JANSSON 2003, 296). Such processes of inclusion and exclusion involved in the making of identities can be understood and analyzed as resulting from the social production of scale (SMITH 1992). This underlines that the production of scale is inherently political (PAASI 2004).

Categories such as the "nation" or "ethnicity" can also be seen as "templates for representing and organizing social knowledge, frames for articulating social comparisons and explanations, and filters that govern what is noticed or unnoticed" (BRUBAKER 2009, 34). This "cognitive turn" in the study of ethnicity and nation-

alism builds on this approach and focuses on the processes by which such categories are employed and thereby reproduced in the everyday interactions, identifications, and representations of individuals (BRUBAKER 2009, 34). Nations and national identities are socially constituted in the manifold localized ways of performing national identity (THOMPSON 2001). Such an approach suggests that the “nation” is produced in the “local” and thereby denies an *a priori* division of the two.

This understanding is also reflected in AGNEW and BRUSA’s (1999) study on the regionalist Northern League in Italy. They highlight that people have political identities “in which a number of territorial and social dimensions intersect” (128). One can feel affiliated to his or her region without challenging the belonging to an imagined nation. In a similar way, Sanjib Baruah challenges an *a priori* dualism between region and nation in his research on Assamese subnationalism. He stresses that “subnational ‘imagined communities’... *coexist* with the pan-Indian national ‘imagined community’” (BARUAH 1997, 501, emphasis added), although they are occasionally in tension with this (BARUAH 1999, 5). By using the term “subnationalism”—referring “to a pattern of politicization and mobilization that meets some of the criteria of nationalism, but is not committed firmly to the idea of separate statehood [in the form of a separate nation-state]” (BARUAH 1999, 8)—instead of regionalism, Baruah points out that the set of ideas and the ideology of both nationalism and subnationalism are the same or at least similar, and that there is a “dialogical relationship” (BARUAH 1999, 5) between the two. He demonstrates how Assamese subnationalism is shaped by pan-Indian intellectual horizons (for example, the notion of linguistic states) that constitute a “pan-Indian grammar,” (BARUAH 1999, 7) which again informed Assamese subnational mobilization. He suggests that, to a certain degree, regionalist rhetoric is itself shaped and informed by what is considered “national.”

In his analysis of the emergence of nationalism in Bengal, KAVIRAJ (1992, 2) even goes a step further by highlighting that “nationalism must speak a traditional language of communities.” National identities, like regional identities, are constructs emerging over time. They are not “pre-mordial,” traditional phenomena but result from the *same processes* through which the Indian nation came into being in the context of modernization (KAVIRAJ 1992, 23).

These authors not only suggest that the national and regional identities and affiliations do not necessarily exclude each other but that they even share a similar “grammar” of existence. In the remainder of this article I want to focus on how this relationship can be understood from the view of a regionalist movement. In order to understand how this subnationalism relates to pan-Indian nationalism, it is necessary to analyze the ways this movement formulates and legitimates its demand for a new union state, whether its rhetoric reflects the ideas of an Indian nation, and what these ideas are. Radcliffe and Westwood have shown that an analysis of collective “imaginative geographies” is a helpful tool to understand the processes by which “national identities and nations are embedded in the material and imaginative spatialities of collective and individual subjects (RADCLIFFE and WESTWOOD 1996, 23). In their study on Latin American nationalism the authors analyze the

ways people think about the nation spatially and how their regional geographical imaginations are shaped by and in turn reshape and challenge what is considered as "national." Radcliffe defines imaginative geographies as "descriptions and discursive constructs around place which are made and remade within a particular cultural setting" (RADCLIFFE 1998, 275). Such imaginative geographies are not only expressions of a mental appropriation of space but also of the power to define and interpret the world (GREGORY 1995) and draw distinctions between the "own" and the "other" (LOSSAU 2002, 76). They can serve to legitimize the physical appropriation of space (GREGORY 1995, 463) and thereby attain a strategic character in the form of selective representations and descriptions of a claimed territory (REUBER 1999). In connection with ethno-symbolic resources, imaginative geographies become powerful tools to legitimize claims on territory and to mobilize people to take part in the struggle for self-determination (BISHOKARMA 2012). Such imaginative geographies link narratives and history to a particular space and endow it with meaning. Through this, they produce ethnic regions or *ethno-scapes* (SCHETTER and WEISSERT 2007) that proclaim the togetherness of a group of people with their territory. The question, then, is whether such ethno-regional imaginative geographies directly or indirectly relate to the imaginative geography of an Indian nation.

IMAGINING GORKHALAND, PRODUCING THE NATION:
FROM STATEHOOD TO REGIONAL AUTONOMY AND BACK

A stroll through the green hills and tea gardens of Darjeeling hardly evokes the violent and dynamic history that the place has witnessed and is still witnessing. Having successively been part of the former Kingdom of Sikkim, Bhutan, and the Gorkha Kingdom (present-day Nepal), in 1835 it was given as a Deed of Grant from Sikkim to the East India Company. After the Anglo-Bhutan war in 1866, the district was completed by adding today's Kalimpong subdivision and the Dooars area at the southern fringe of Bhutan. Although Darjeeling was added to the Bengal Presidency, it retained a special administrative status as an "excluded" and "scheduled" district and as a "backward tract" so that rules and regulations regarding landownership and taxes did not automatically apply until after the instruction of the governor. This was intended to safeguard the population—who were considered tribal—from exploitation by outsiders (SAMANTA 2000, 23). After independence, Darjeeling became part of West Bengal. Today West Bengal consists of three hill subdivisions, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, and Kurseong, that are dominated by a Nepali-speaking population, and the Siliguri subdivision in the plains. The Dooars—an area with a mixed population—are now part of Jalpaiguri district.

From 1835, the British colonialists started developing Darjeeling as a hill station. This process not only entailed the construction of roads and infrastructure but also the creation of tea estates. Yet, as Darjeeling was only sparsely inhabited, the British enticed numerous laborers from Nepal, promising them a better life outside the repressive Rana regime and a good income from working on the plantations, in road construction, or in the army (SAMANTA 2000). Although these Nepalese—

who soon became the majority in Darjeeling—belonged to different caste, ethnic, and language groups, Nepali became the lingua franca, and slowly an identity as being “Gorkha” emerged (SAMANTA 2000, 23; SUBBA 1992, 65). The first demands for autonomy were formulated as early as 1907 by the “hill people” stressing the geographical, racial, religious, linguistic, and cultural differences between themselves and other groups in Bengal (SAMANTA 2000, 232; SUBBA 1992, 76). In the following years various such demands were posed by different parties. One of these included the idea of “Gorkhasthan” to include the areas of Nepal, Darjeeling, and Sikkim, proposed by the Communist Party of India in 1947. Neither of these demands succeeded, and eventually in 1986, the peaceful struggle for autonomy turned violent under the banner of the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and its leader Subash Ghisingh who coined the term “Gorkhaland.”

Ghisingh based his rhetoric mainly on the perceived political insecurity of Indian Nepalis that reflects a perception of not being fully recognized Indian citizens but, rather, of being stigmatized as people coming from Nepal. He explained this and the need for Gorkhaland as follows:

It is by being known as West Bengal that... its people affirm their Indian identity which is different from the identity of the people of Bangladesh who also are Bengalis. We Indian Nepalis who have nothing to do with Nepal are constantly confused with “Nepalis,” that is, citizens of Nepal, a foreign country. But if there is Gorkhaland then our identity as Indians belonging to an Indian state... will be clear. If there is no Gorkhaland, we will continue to be identified as Nepalis, under the stigma of being citizens of a foreign country residing here out of courtesy.

(Subash Ghisingh in *Frontline* 1986 (August), cited in LAMA 1994, 52)

This view, which still sums up the main arguments of the Gorkhaland movement, was fueled by the violent evictions of Nepali-speaking groups from North-east India in the early 1980s. In his famous speeches that were distributed on audio cassettes to various places in Darjeeling and the adjoining Dooars, Ghisingh called attention to the Indian Nepalis’ political insecurity and the threat of expulsion and contrasted it with the vision of Gorkhaland and its provision of security.

The two-year-long violent agitation for the new state, where Ghisingh’s GNLF fought against members of the Communist Party of India-Marxist (CPI-M), backed by the central government’s forces, that opposed the demand for statehood, eventually ended in 1988 with an agreement to form the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC). Various landmarks and monuments testify to the violent civil war that left over twelve hundred people dead. The DGHC, functioning under the jurisdiction of the West Bengal state government, provided the Gorkhas some autonomy. Yet the council did not succeed in fulfilling the aspirations of the population; years of corruption and the violent oppression of oppositional voices (bolstered by the silent acceptance of the state government) caused a loss in public support for Ghisingh (BENEDIKTER 2009; CHAKRABARTY 2005; LACINA 2009). Finally, his idea to bring Darjeeling under the Sixth Schedule while presumably giving up the demand

for statehood and failing to support the candidacy of Prashant Tamang in the *Indian Idol* competition triggered a public rebellion against him.³

In October 2007, a new party, the Gorkha Liberation Front (GLF), was established. Led by Bimal Gurung, previously Ghisingh's right-hand man, the GLF started a new agitation for Gorkhaland, entailing various *bandhs* (general strikes), demonstrations, *pada-yatras* (foot marches) to the demanded territories, hunger strikes, and tax boycotts. Although the party stressed that its movement was democratic, Gandhian, and nonviolent, other Darjeeling-based Gorkha parties accused it of violently oppressing oppositional voices, including the forceful expulsion of former GNLF leaders, and murderers. In July 2011, the GLF signed a tripartite agreement with the newly elected state government under Trinamool Congress (TMC) leader Mamata Banerjee and the Central Government for another autonomous council, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) that was established in August 2012 and has now replaced the previous DGHC. Other Gorkha parties in Darjeeling strongly oppose this agreement and accuse the GLF of having sold out their demand for a separate state, although the GLF claims that the GTA is a step to statehood.

In the next section, I focus on the different imaginative geographies that are evoked to legitimize the Gorkhas' claim for a separate state, Gorkhaland. These imaginative geographies not only reflect their demand for separation from West Bengal by stressing their distinctiveness and original ownership of the land, but also the will to belong to the Indian nation.⁴ While such imaginations are mainly evoked by political leaders in official statements, speeches, and interviews, they are also reflected in statements of the residents, including tea garden dwellers and workers, in Darjeeling. This analysis is based on interviews with political leaders of different Darjeeling-based Gorkha parties⁵ and tea plantation workers that I conducted during field trips in 2011 and 2012. Further emphasis is taken from the official GLF-pamphlets "Why Gorkhaland?" (GLF 2009) and "The case for Gorkhaland" (GLF 2008), a report that was presented to the government.

Imaginations of Separation: Drawing Boundaries

In India the decision to create new states lies with the central government and is constitutionally anchored in Article 3 that allows for the creation of new states or changing the boundaries of existing ones. It is therefore necessary for the Gorkhas to convince the central government of their eligibility to self-rule. One way of legitimation is the evoking of imaginative geographies that connect narratives of ethnic election, a golden age, and a belief in a homeland (SMITH 1996a; 1996b) to the territory demanded, thus forging a regional identity among the Gorkhas and presenting them as a distinct ethnic group.

DARJEELING AS A DIFFERENT PLACE: BELIEF IN ETHNIC ELECTION

Stemming from the ideal of "chosenness," the belief in ethnic election is part of a nationalist doctrine that expresses a nation's authentic identity and its distinctive and original ethnic culture: "A nation must possess its individual-

ity, its peculiar history and destiny, and thereby reveal its unique contribution, its ‘irreplaceable culture values,’ to the world” (SMITH 1996c, 453). The leaders of the Gorkha parties in Darjeeling express this nationalist doctrine by evoking two imaginative geographies. They construct Darjeeling first as a “different place” and second as a “center of all Indian Gorkhas.” According to Alok Thulung, an affiliate of the GLF, stressing the differences with West Bengal is important in order to legitimize the Gorkhas’ demand for Gorkhaland. Differences are not only stressed with regard to culture and language (in Darjeeling, Nepali is the common language, while in Bengal, Bengali is spoken) but also to physical and topographical characteristics of the hilly terrain and climate that presumably make the Gorkhas a “distinct race” (THULUNG 2008).

Cultural differences were also expressed during the agitation for Gorkhaland where the GLF had directed people to wear typical Nepali attire, such as *chaubandi cholo*, *daura suruwal*, or *dhaka topis*,⁶ in Darjeeling to mark it as a place with an original ethnic culture. History is also mobilized to legitimize the demand for separation: the Gorkha leaders refer to Darjeeling’s historical status as an “excluded” and “scheduled district” to emphasize that it had never been an integral part of Bengal, and that the proposed area of Gorkhaland had never been possessed by any king of the “plains of Bengal.” Instead, it was incorporated from Sikkim and Bhutan through various treaties with foreign countries (GLF 2009, 415). H. B. Chettri, media spokesperson of the GLF, argues that “The government should recognize the fact that since the place is different, you need to be treated differently. It needs a different kind of administration” (interview, Kalimpong, February 2011). He thereby legitimates the demand for separation.

At the same time the Gorkhas try to draw a line between themselves and citizens of Nepal. Although they admit the many similarities regarding physical appearance and culture, they constantly emphasize that they are not from Nepal. For example, very often my interviewees in the tea gardens stressed that their Nepali and the Nepali spoken in Nepal were different from each other and that their society was more open and not as exclusive as Nepal’s, especially regarding the rigidity of the caste system.

A second imaginative geography, reflecting the belief in ethnic election, portrays Darjeeling as the “center of all Indian Gorkhas.” R. B. Rai (the president of CPRM) explains that Darjeeling was a “social, political, and symbolic center” for all Indian Gorkhas and therefore the main place of the movement to include the Nepali language in the Indian constitution (interview, Darjeeling, 2011). Furthermore, the population perceives Darjeeling as belonging to the Gorkhas simply because they are the majority there. The Lepchas, who are considered to be the indigenous population of Darjeeling, and the Bhutias are described as minority groups by the Gorkhas (GLF 2009, 16).

As a result of these imaginations of “Darjeeling as a different place,” and “Darjeeling as the center of all Gorkhas,” boundaries between Bengalis and Gorkhas are being drawn while the Gorkhas express their uniqueness. Darjeeling is described as a linguistically and culturally homogenous place—a criterion based on which the States Reorganization Commission in 1956 redrew the administrative boundaries

after Indian independence (GLF 2008, 23). In this context the GLF also refers to Nehru's standpoint and the Indian National Congress' suggestion of having a federation "allowing internal autonomy to its various homogenous constituent units" (Congress 1928, cited in GLF 2008, 23). The emphasis on individuality and difference is thereby linked to broader principles of the organization of space in India.

DARJEELING AS A ONCE WEALTHY PLACE:
SHARED MEMORIES OF A GOLDEN AGE

Smith's ethno-symbolic approach stresses the importance of the shared memories of the collective experiences of a group claiming a common origin and ancestry in the production of an ethnic identity (SMITH 1996b, 583). In particular, idealized memories of a golden age define a normative standard to formulate and evaluate the current position of a group. The ideal of a golden age further induces a sense of regeneration, of renewal, and restoration to a former glorious state contrasting with perceptions of inner decline and alienation. This "national rebirth" is closely linked to a sense of collective destiny: "The road that the community expects to take in each generation is inspired and shaped by its memories of former heroic ages" (SMITH 1996b, 584). Golden ages establish a link between the past and future of a community in a certain space.

The Gorkhas' argumentation for a separate state also indirectly reflects the belief in such a golden age. Darjeeling is imagined as a place of previous wealth that was lost. Wealth and development are associated with the colonial period, and the decline with the neglect of the West Bengal administration after independence. This is clear in the following statement of H. B. Chettri, (interviewed at Kalimpong, February 2011):

Whatever wealth the colony had created here during the regime—the British regime—nothing was added by Bengal or... by independent India. You look in terms of infrastructure, the water supply, whatever the British had planned for 3,000 people in Darjeeling town, is over 3 lakhs [300,000] now, but nothing was added. Look at the roads, it is getting worse, look at the institutions: all institutions worth its name were created by British. If you minus them... it is something like... English literature without Shakespeare.

The place that was first [in] catering to the needs of West Bengal has become impoverished due to the state's discriminative policies.

It was not only political leaders who associate wealth with the colonial time. Some tea plantation laborers also stressed that the only development that had ever taken place in Darjeeling had been during the colonial time whereas after independence the place was neglected and the wealth declined. One of my friends even suggested that the British should return to bring the place in order. Also part of this narrative of decline is the perceived threat posed by Bangladeshi migrants who are now the majority population in what were previously Nepali strongholds such as Siliguri and the Dooars. Gorkhaland is believed to be able to recreate Darjeeling

and revive its previous wealth, mainly in terms of development that is evaluated against the backdrop of an idealized British colonial time.⁷ This argument adds to the perception of difference—but in rather negative terms. The imagination of Darjeeling as a neglected place provides an explanation for poverty and decline that is contrasted with the redemptive idea of Gorkhaland. The only way to return the wealth would be the creation of a separate state and self-government according to the specific needs of the place, as H. B. Chettri noted in his interview:

So, once and for all if you want to resolve this [identity] crisis we will create a state. Create a state that will put it right. Then nobody will ask you: where are you from? And your developmental agendas are taken care of, you are there to rule yourself.

The imagination of Gorkhaland carries the promise of self-realization (see also SMITH 1996b), thereby attaining a strong mobilizing potential for the population and again stressing the need towards the central government of separation from West Bengal in order to become a thriving part of India.

DARJEELING AS THE PLACE OF THE ANCESTORS: THE TERRITORIALIZATION OF MEMORY

The territorialization of memory refers to a process whereby shared memories are attached to particular territories so that they become historic homelands and ethno-scapes (SMITH 1996c, 453). Territorial boundaries of nations derive their significance from the memories associated with them, and particular geographical areas provide the scene for historic events such as migrations or battles and function as the locus of settlement (SMITH 1996b, 589). Through this process, shared memories become national (SMITH 1996c, 453). Narratives make the landscape an indispensable element of a community's history so that specific spaces become an "ancestral homeland," thereby fostering territorial demands (SMITH 1996b, 589; 1996c, 454). In the rhetoric of the Gorkha parties, Darjeeling also has such a history of appropriation through its ancestors. According to H. B. Chettri in his interview at Kalimpong, "everything that Darjeeling is today is the blood and sweat of our ancestors; it is not some Banerjee or Chatterjee [Bengali names] who created Darjeeling."

By saying this H. B. Chettri draws not only a line between the Gorkhas and Bengalis but also a direct connection between body ("blood and sweat") and land. Further, Darjeeling is the place where the ancestors of today's Gorkhas once migrated from Nepal. Although people in Darjeeling today stress that they are genuine Indian citizens, the common experience of migration and the creation of a new society outside "home" can be regarded as a shared memory. Yet, to prove the Gorkhas' indigeneness, a leader of Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh stresses that they had not only migrated during the British colonial time but had already been dwelling there previously and were incorporated into British India "together with their land" (interview with Enos Das Pradhan, Kalimpong, February 2011).

Another shared memory is the violent agitation for statehood in 1986 and 1987. There is hardly a village in Darjeeling that did not experience fights and killings between the GNLF and the CPI-M, and by the roadside there are many monuments for the martyrs that died during that time, thus keeping their memories alive. Further, the violence in 1986 was a recurrent topic in interviews, and people remember the hardship and the fear during that dark chapter of their history. The memories are also kept alive on Martyrs' Day (27 July) where political parties organize meetings to pay tribute to those who died in the struggle for their own state. This territorialization of memory clearly underlines the Gorkhas' perceived "right" to the land as well as establishing a close link between people, their history, and place.

DARJEELING AS A "NATIONAL" ETHNO-SCAPE

In summary, by reference to the ethno-symbolic resources, the Gorkhas attempt to legitimize their demand for a new administrative boundary between Darjeeling and West Bengal, while at the same time drawing on deep resources to mobilize the population for an ethno-nationalist struggle. Imaginative geographies of Darjeeling connect the demanded territory to narratives and shared memories. Through this rhetoric, a "regional identity" (PAASI 2002) is created, a collective identification of people with their region. Darjeeling becomes a space of "Gorkhas," an "ethno-scape," (SMITH 1996c, 453), where self-realization is possible.

Yet, while such rhetoric easily evokes the picture of a group forging only an ethnic identity and regional belonging, a closer look reveals that this goes beyond simplistic regionalist propaganda. The aspiration for self-determination is itself formulated in the language of nationalism: the expression of uniqueness and individuality, the emotional evocation of a lost golden age, and the historical merger of people and place not only support the mobilization of the population and forge an ethno-national identity but also refer to principles that are explicitly formulated in Indian history and its constitution. In particular, the principle of linguistically and culturally homogenous states—which served as the major basis for India's reorganization in 1956—provides a reference point for the Gorkhas who portray Darjeeling as a different place with different people. The following illustrates this point: "In India, language has provided an obvious basis for the formation of separate states, because linguistic groups are also culturally distinct societies" (GLF 2008, 21).

Stressing differences between Darjeeling and the "rest" of West Bengal must be understood as an attempt to become recognized as an eligible, unique nation worthwhile of getting its own state, as uniqueness and ethnic election are the nationalist principles based on which other states were granted to other groups such as the Punjabis, the Tamils, or Maharathis.⁸ The presentation of Darjeeling as a different place is therefore not only part of the strategy to separate from Bengal but also a reflection of genuine criteria based on which Indian federalism rests. At the same time the Gorkha representatives refer to the leitmotif of "unity in diversity" (BGP 2011)—diversity is a part of belonging—and stress that uniqueness and individuality forge such diversity while demanding the right to self-determination

for a distinct group in a historically chosen place. The following section extends this argument by focusing on how Gorkhaland itself fits into the broader set-up of an imagined Indian nation and how the relations between the two are constructed in the rhetoric of Gorkha leaders and the broader public.

Imaginations of Belonging: Integrating into the National Mainstream

As already mentioned, the demand for Gorkhaland is not solely about divisions and the creation of ethno-scapes in order to stress the Gorkhas' uniqueness and right to territory. At the heart of the demand for Gorkhaland stands the promise of a better life for all Indian Gorkhas. This promise not only includes prospects for better employment, higher salaries, more educational facilities, and improved infrastructure but mainly the promise of a full recognition of the Gorkhas as genuine *Indian citizens* enjoying full rights and being secure from ethnic violence and expulsion. The aim of the Gorkhas is to convince the Indian government of their belonging. Also, this will to belong is expressed in imaginative geographies that aim at depicting Gorkhaland as a genuine building block and part of the Indian nation.

GORKHALAND AS PART OF INDIA:
RECOGNITION OF AN INDIAN IDENTITY

Gorkhaland-opposed associations, headed by Bengali and Adivasi groups mainly based in the Terai and Dooars, claim that the demand for Gorkhaland is secessionist and its true motive is the attempt to create a "Greater Nepal," thereby destroying Indian integrity and threatening her security. Contrary to this, the Gorkhas stress that their "politics of identity" is not "antithetical to the existence of pan-Indian nationalism and national integration.... Indian nationality... is a matter of privilege and proud possession, not a liability" (GLF 2008, 2).

This adherence to the Indian nation is also expressed by using the term "sub-nationalism" and an understanding of its simultaneous emergence with Indian nationalism:

The development of the Gorkha subnationalism coincides with the development of Indian nationalism. Though India was famously known as a great civilization, the making of the Indian nation was a modern phenomenon that developed since the last hundred and fifty years.... The rise of Indian nationalism was witnessed among the different regions and its people through their own language and culture. (GLF 2008, 3)

Indian nationalism is understood as emerging out of diversity, and the Gorkhas are presented as a "vibrant part of the country's diversity" (GLF 2008, 32). This suggests that the Gorkha leaders do not understand the relationship between regionalism and nationalism in oppositional terms but rather as being mutually supportive. R. B. Rai, the president of CPRM, underlined this conception by saying "We Nepalese are as un-Indian like Indians."

However, the Gorkhas' integration into the Indian Union, they claim, has not been successfully completed as the Gorkhas were often regarded as foreigners coming from Nepal:

The overwhelming support for Gorkhaland stems from the great irony that Indian Gorkhas, in spite of having been an integral part of the Indian union, are constantly being viewed as aliens. (GLF 2008, 20)

Patriotic Indian Gorkhas have always wanted to have a home within India. Theirs is an angst of belonging, not of separating. (GLF 2008, 29)

This has serious implications for their feelings of security as they fear eviction similar to that of the Lhotsampas of Bhutan or the Nepali-speaking Indians from parts of Northeast India in the 1980s. The fact that tea plantation dwellers do not possess any land certificates as their houses are built on government leasehold land underscores this insecurity. The claim of GNLFF-leader Subash Ghisingh that Darjeeling was a "no-man's-land" whose national status was not clear contributes to this general feeling of de-territorialization.

The Gorkha leaders propose that the only way out of this misery is to officially declare Darjeeling and its adjoining areas a separate union state with a constitutional guarantee. Only then, they believe, would other Indians recognize them as equally enjoying the full rights of citizenship. Geographical space and boundaries play a decisive role in this argumentation, as outlined in the following two statements:

Since it is geographical space that will ease the way out of this half-consummated national life for the Gorkhas, it is quite clear that a state of their own is now imperative for them to assert a full Indian identity—a state that roots them to India, a state that they can give as an address should someone in.... Delhi ask them where they come from, a state that tells everyone that an Indian Gorkha is not a migrant from a neighboring country but a landholder in India. (GLF 2008, 31)

[I]t is the delineation of geographical boundaries that gives a community—or a nation—an identity as a political entity. (GLF 2008, 30)

Additionally, Gorkhaland would also foster the participation of Gorkhas in Indian politics:

A separate state would provide them [the Indian Gorkhas] a political identity and a constitutionally documented institutional space for interest articulation and protection within the broader territorial boundary of India. (GLF 2008, 20)

This conviction about the identity-creating power of territory and boundaries not only reflects the general belief in a basic nation-state but also expresses the feeling that political participation in India can only be attained through the establishment of their own state; only a state would guarantee, as H. B. Chettri put it, a "direct link to the government." The separate state of Gorkhaland in this context becomes the guarantor for justice, participation, equality, and recognition.

GORKHALAND AS A FORTRESS: FOSTERING NATIONAL SECURITY

To support their genuine will to belong to the Indian nation, the Gorkha leaders also stress the Gorkhas' contribution to nation building, first during the independence struggle, and second through the defense of national security at the outer boundaries of India by sending "the best of their young men to guard the nation's frontiers" (GLF 2008, 33). The Indian Gorkhas are portrayed as patriots securing the "freedom of the country" (GLF 2008, 33). Gorkhaland as an "enclave of social soldiers and patriotic citizens" holds the promise to be a "fort" against foreign incursion in the geographically sensitive area of the so-called "Chicken's neck" (GLF 2008, 34), the small corridor connecting the Indian mainland with its conflict ridden northeast. This loyalty is also expressed in the way the GLF describes its movement as being "democratic," "nonviolent," and "Gandhian" (GLF 2009, 1), thereby reflecting respected principles of the Indian national movement. Additionally, all regional parties stress that their statehood demand was "constitutional," thereby referring to Article 3 of the Indian constitution that provides for the creation of new states. Darjeeling is evoked as a place of loyal Gorkhas obeying the rules and values of the Indian constitution. By saying this, the leaders not only connect the demand for Gorkhaland to the national security discourse but also to a SCR principle which holds that the creation of new states should endorse the "preservation and strengthening of the unity and security of India" (GLF 2009, 1).

REPRODUCING THE NATION

The above analysis has shown that the Gorkhas prove their belonging to the Indian nation by referring to national values, such as to the constitution and democracy, nation building, national security and integrity, and the principle of linguistic federal states. At the same time, the way in which the demand for Gorkhaland is formulated also reflects a specific socio-spatial imagination of the Indian nation-state itself, which can be summarized in the following four points: belief in the federalist set-up, belief in the principle of "unity in diversity," belief in togetherness of a nation and space (ethno-scape), and belief in boundaries and territorial units.

The principles of India's hierarchical administrative organization with its states and districts are not challenged in the Gorkhas' rhetoric; rather, the political leaders accept (and thereby reproduce) this scalar set-up. At the same time, however, they are challenging the ways in which relations between such hierarchically ordered levels are conceptualized and boundaries between such levels are drawn. This rhetoric is an attempt to contest a perceived "internal Orientalism" (JANSSON 2003, 296). The case of Gorkhaland clearly supports JOHNSON and COLEMEN's (2012) argument that regions are not passive objects in this process but that they contest and resist such "internal othering" by contending alternative discourses about themselves. Therefore they do not only criticize positions that see statehood movements as a threat to the Indian nation-state as such, but also challenge the spatial positioning (*Verortung*) (LOSSAU 2002) of their identities. In contrast, they stress their will to belong and to

integrate, attempting to reverse the dualistic perception of the national and the ethnically constituted regional, to create a picture where the regional state becomes part of the national and strengthens it. In other words, they want to bridge the boundaries that are drawn in the social and political production of scale. The Gorkhas promote an imagination of India that views the national not as distinct and contradicting their ethnic affiliations; rather, they assume that the granting of a state within the Indian union would give them their legitimate space and secure their acceptance in the Indian polity, helping them to integrate into the Indian "melting pot" (BGP 2011) and thereby contribute to India's unity. It is thus the creation of administrative boundaries and a separation from West Bengal that the Gorkhas believe would bring about their integration, providing them with a fully-fledged and recognized Indian identity. This belief is strongly reflected in the statements of Darjeeling's population—as the example at the beginning of this article demonstrates—who hardly ever question whether their own state would *really* bring about the envisaged changes.

This belief in the instrumentality of their own circumscribed space for the sake of becoming a recognized part of the nation expresses a strong belief in the symbolic power of space and territory in a federal set-up. The Indian space in this context resembles a container that is dissociated into separate units reflecting a unity between ethnicity and territory. This leads to an interesting reverse logic: the rhetoric through which the imagination of Gorkhaland is evoked only makes sense against the backdrop of the ideology of a territorial nation-state with boundaries. The very logic of the nation-state thereby mutually shapes and reshapes the Gorkhas' belief in an Indian identity through a state of their own.

CONCLUSION: THE REGIONAL PRODUCTION OF GORKHA-INDIAN NATIONALITY

This article started by critically questioning assumptions about the dualistic nature of regionalism and nationalism. Departing from questions that ask about the merits or risks of smaller states and regionalisms for the integrity of the Indian state, I looked at the ways that regional movements ideologically relate to ideas of nationalism. An analysis of the rhetoric applied to the movement for Gorkhaland indeed revealed the multiple references to a "pan-Indian grammar" (BARUAH 1999, 91). The political leaders of the Gorkha parties strategically formulate their demands in the ideological language of the (Indian) nation-state, reflecting its basic ideas and principles.

To summarize, these ideas and principles are as follows: first, the idea of territorially bounded ethno-scapes that express the unity of ethnicity and space (expressed by the reference to ethno-symbolic resources); second, the belief in Indian federalism and the fact that only their own state would guarantee participation and full recognition as Indians; third, adherence to the Indian constitution and principles of democracy and nonviolence; and finally the connection of the demand for Gorkhaland to the national security discourse. Through this the Gorkhas also reproduce the image of a scalar organization of the Indian nation,

but they challenge the qualitative understanding of the “national” and “regional” scales as being opposed to each other. Thereby, they also object to the perceived “internal othering” of their region as being outside of the Indian imagination (JOHNSON and COLEMAN 2012).

This shows that subnationalism or regionalism are not only *coexisting* with a pan-Indian ideal as claimed by BARUAH (1997, 498), but that they even *produce* and *reproduce* it by using the same “grammar” of its formulation. Regionalism, at least in the case of Gorkhaland, does not therefore necessarily stand in opposition to nationalism but can rather be understood as forming part of its existence. A closer look reveals that distinguishing criteria of Indian nationalism, which had been designed to accommodate regionalist aspirations from the very beginning (for example, by allowing for the creation of new states), are reflected in this rhetoric. Instead of distinguishing the micro from the macro, where the macro is expected to accommodate the micro, I suggest understanding both as simultaneous processes. Certainly the Gorkhas’ explicit *will to belong* adds an important component to these processes.

This production of the national is not yet confined to the circles of political leadership. In various discussions with the local population residing on tea plantations, the same belief in the unity of space and ethnic group and that only a separate state would guarantee security and a recognized Indian identity was expressed. The imagination of Gorkhaland carries not only a promise of development and self-government but also of national recognition, participation, and respect. These discourses are part of the local processes by which the image of the nation is being produced.

It is the symbolic dimension of space that matters. A separate state is not simply a piece of land, it is also a genuine, constitutionally recognized part of the nation guaranteeing equal rights and obligations as other states and groups in India presumably already have. A separate state is not only a way of separating from West Bengal; for the Gorkhas it is mainly a strategy for national integration, adding another colorful part in India’s mosaic of language-cultural federalism.

NOTES

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1. The criteria based on which new states were created has changed throughout Indian history. While in the beginning linguistic and cultural homogeneity were decisive factors, later on ethnic, economic, and environmental factors were taken into consideration (for a discussion, see BHATTACHARYA 2001 and SARANGI 2009).

2. The Sixth Schedule of the Indian Constitution provides rights to autonomous self-governance for tribal areas of Northeast India under the authority of the respective state government.

3. Originally from Darjeeling, Prashant Tamang’s candidature in the popular *Indian Idol* talent show in 2007 was not supported by Subash Ghisingh, furthering his alienation from

the population. Instead, Prashant was supported by Bimal Gurung who eventually utilized his popular support to establish a new party.

4. This dualist argumentation of criticizing the respective union state while appealing to the goodwill of the center was also used by the movement for Uttarakhand (see MAWDSLEY 1997)

5. These are the Communist Party of Revolutionary Marxists (CPRM), the All India Gorkha League (AIGL), and the national umbrella organization Indian Gorkha Council (Bharatiya Gorkha Parisangh, BGP).

6. *Chaubandi cholo* is a short coat twice folded on the front side worn by women. It is tied with four small ribbons and usually in the traditional colorful *dhaka* fabric. Some women wear it instead of the typical Sari blouse. Men wear the *daura suruwal*, the upper part consisting of a knee-long tunic which is, like the *chaubandi cholo*, tied with four ribbons. A kind of harem pants form the lower part. The *dhaka topi* is a hat in the colorful *dhaka* fabric only worn by men. The GLF allowed members of the Tibetan and Lepcha communities to wear their own traditional attire.

7. It is important to mention that in terms of working conditions on the tea plantation, the time of the British is not idealized at all; rather, elderly people stress the hardship they (and their parents) had to endure during that period.

8. It is a common among politicians and the general public to point to other communities in India that had "their own state," such as the "Tamils have Tamil Nadu, the Bengalis have Bengal, the Punjabis have Punjab," a phrase coined by Ghisingh in the 1980s (GHISINGH 1994, 22). This again is used to stress that the Gorkhas having their own state would avoid the confusion between citizens from Nepal and Nepali-speaking Indians.

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