

**THEATRE AND PUBLIC SPHERE IN DARJEELING:  
STAGING GORKHA IDENTITY POLITICS**

*Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of the Requirement for the  
Degree of Master of Philosophy in Mass Communication*

By  
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**SIKKIM UNIVERSITY**

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21<sup>st</sup> July, 2014

DECLARATION

I, **Privat Giri**, hereby declare that the subject matter of this thesis is the record of word done by me, that the contents of this thesis did not form basis of the award of any previous degree to me or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else, and that the thesis has not been submitted by me for any research degree in any other university/institute.

This is being submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements of the degree of **Master of Philosophy in the Department of Mass Communication, School of Professional Studies.**

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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled “**Theatre and Public Sphere in Darjeeling: Staging Gorkha Identity Politics**” submitted to **Sikkim University** in partial fulfilment of the requirement for the degree of **Master of Philosophy in Mass Communication** embodies the results of *bona fide* research carried out by **Mr. Privat Giri** under our guidance and supervision. No part of the dissertation has been submitted for any other degree, diploma, associate-ship, or fellowship.

All the assistance and help received during the course of the investigation have been duly acknowledged by him.

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Dedicated to my,  
*Grandfather, Late Purna Bahadur Giri,*  
*Grandmother, Late Pampa Giri &*  
*Sweet little daughter Vidhi.*

# CONTENTS

*Acknowledgements*

## **CHAPTER I INTRODUCTION**

## **CHAPTER II HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

*Tradition of History Writing*  
*Process of Consolidation*  
*The Mysterious Case of Transfer*  
*On the Question of Aboriginality*  
*British Curiosity towards Darjeeling*  
*Population Movement from Nepal*  
*Establishment of Formal Education*  
*Struggle for Separation*

## **CHAPTER III NEPALI PUBLIC SPHERE IN COLONIAL DARJEELING**

*Adoption of Nepali Language*  
*Expansion of Means of Knowledge and Learning*  
*Transformation in Organisation of Symbolic Power*

## **CHAPTER IV NEPALI THEATRE IN DARJEELING: THE CONSTRUCTION AND REPRESENTATION OF NEPALI IDENTITY**

*Origin and Development*  
*Construction of Nepali Identity*  
*Representation of Nepali Identity*

- Search for Homeland
- Fading Memories and Emerging Ideas of Home
- Self-introspection and Quest for Recognition

## **CHAPTER V CONCLUSION**

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*CHAPTER I*

**INTRODUCTION**

## CHAPTER I

### INTRODUCTION

The historiography on theatre bears adequate testimony of theatre being one of the principal institutions of public sphere throughout the world. People have been using theatre as a medium or forum to highlight, discuss and promote issues of larger interest to public or society. In *Natyasastra*, the ancient world's most significant and comprehensive surviving manual of dramaturgy, Bharata attributes to Brahma the creation of an educational purpose for theatre:

“This [natya] teaches duty to those who go against duty, love to those who are eager for its fulfillment and chastises those who are ill-bred or unruly, promotes self-restraint in those who are undisciplined, gives courage to cowards, energy to heroic persons, enlightens men of poor intellect and gives wisdom to the learned. It will [also] give relief to unlucky persons who are afflicted with sorrow and grief or [over] work, and will be conducive to observance of duty as well as to fame, long life, intellect and general good and will educate people. There is no wise maxim, no learning, no art or craft, no device, no action that is not found in the drama.” (Cited in Farley, 1973)

Brahma, through *Natyasastra*, not only envisaged imparting education to the people but simultaneously purported shaping a sense of common identity of unified India in the Indian mind called *Bharatavarsha*, as one nation and one people bound by a common geography, religion, and culture ; well before such a pan-Indian nation state ever existed (Solomon 2004: 204). It advises playwrights that the action of “all plays



which have celestial heroes” should be set in *Bharatavarsha*, “because the entire land here is charming, sweet smelling and of golden colour (Ibid).” Similar ideal concept of nation persisted even in medieval India ruled substantially by the Muslim kings. The proponents of Hindu religious movement, like Bhakti, celebrated *Bharatavarsha* by staging plays on Hinduism among the common people throughout the length and breadth of India (Farley 1973).

Wilmer argues that during the historical development of the nation-state in Europe, theatre as a form of cultural expression was very instrumental in helping to construct notions of national identity. He calls attention to the writing of Schiller who after the French Revolution went so far as to argue that the theatre could help not only to establish national values but also to create a new German nation (Wilmer 2002: 2). “If a single characteristic predominated in all of our plays; if all of our poets were in accord and were to form a firm alliance to work for this end; if their work were governed by strict selection; if they were to devote their paintbrushes to national subjects; in a word, if we were to see the establishment of a national theatre: then we would become a nation.” (Ungar 1959 cited in Wilmer 2002: 2) Likewise, Habermas (1989) in his, “*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere: An Inquiry into a Category of Bourgeois Society*” , too outlines how bourgeois public sphere of the nineteenth century Europe efficaciously employed theatre to disseminate ideologies of liberal democracy and welfare state among the Europeans

Modern theatre that emerged under European influence in the Indian cities of Calcutta and Bombay during the second half of the nineteenth century was equally enthusiastic in propagating themes of nationalistic and patriotic fervour during India’s

independence movement. The earliest noteworthy drama on such a theme was *Nildarpana* written by Dinabandhu Mitra in 1860. The play was produced by the newly formed National Theatre of Calcutta in 1872 and was particularly meant to symbolize Indian nationalism (Farley 1973). Encouraged by *Nildarpana*, more works were produced by the Indian writers and producers to propagate independence.

These arguments suggest that theatre during various times have been very instrumental in helping to construct the notion of identity. If theatre has been so important in devising commonality or common identity among people, how theatre constructs and represents those identities becomes one obvious area of concern and interest. This dissertation is an attempt to study Nepali theatre in Darjeeling. The study follows three broad lines of enquiry. But before discussing these enquiries, it is useful to bear in mind that the Gorkhas/ Nepalis<sup>1</sup> are the total sum of over nineteen endogamous groups who practiced different religions and spoke different languages (Subba 1992: 68). Before the political boundaries of Nepal and Sikkim were actually drawn, these hills formed a contiguous area where these endogamous groups moved about freely (Pradhan 1991:7). The formation of composite Nepali identity as one ethnic group is a historical process that began soon after the ascendancy of Gorkha kingdom (situated presently at Western Nepal) over these hills by Prithivinarayana Shah and his successors who established the kingdom of Nepal. The expansionist policy of Gorkha kings halted and the boundary of Nepal and Sikkim was fixed only after the intervention by the British through a treaty signed at Segoulie in 1816. The treaty ensued cession of Darjeeling Hills<sup>2</sup> (excluding Kalimpong region) by the

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<sup>1</sup> From now the word Gorkha and Nepali would be used interchangeably.

Kingdom of Nepal to Sikkim; the territory which was later ceded to British during 1835<sup>3</sup>. Thereafter these various tribes spread across the boundaries of Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim were gradually known as Gorkhas or Nepalis and started speaking the language which during different phases of history was referred as *Khas-kura, Parbate or Parbattiya, Gorkhali and Nepali*.

In spite of the fact that Prithivinarayana Shah and his successors were successful in consolidating the otherwise dispersed and unorganized area, they failed in culturally amalgamating these varied and ethnically diverse tribes. Two major factors contributed to this process. First, the Ranas who ruled Nepal after the Shahs made little effort to promote patriotism and loyalty among the people of Nepal towards the state as they felt threatened by it (Bista 1991: 21). National pride and sentiment were diluted and essentially centred on very narrow and limited areas of their locale and own kin groups (Ibid: 21). Second, the various tribes of Nepal hardly got an opportunity to interact with one another because of the spatial organisation of Nepal on the basis of ethnicity. It was only with the formation of Darjeeling that these tribes who basically came here searching for secure and stable livelihood opportunities got an opportunity to live together, particularly in tea gardens, therefore opening new prospects for assimilation. Unlike in Nepal, Darjeeling acknowledged the value of formal education and professional qualification over birth and ethnic or caste origins. Darjeeling sufficed as the appropriate space where the process of acculturation

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<sup>2</sup> Darjeeling Hills is basically used to refer the three sub-divisions of the district of Darjeeling, namely, Darjeeling Sardar, Kalimpong sub-division and Kurseong sub-division. From here Darjeeling Hills and Darjeeling would be used interchangeably.

<sup>3</sup> Details on the process of consolidation of the district of Darjeeling are dealt extensively in Chapter II.

materialised leading to gradual concretization of a composite Nepali identity as one ethnic group towards the beginning of the of twentieth century.

The churning of Nepali identity however needs to be examined against the backdrop of the emergent Nepali public sphere of Darjeeling of the early twentieth century. The period witnessed the growth of various institutions of public sphere therefore bringing new opportunities for interaction and enabling the construction and dissemination of the new version of Nepali culture. Theatre was one of the foundations on which the process of institutionalisation of the Nepali public sphere rested (Chalmers 2006:124). Accepting Chalmers contention that theatre was the foremost institution of Nepali public sphere, it becomes imperative to comprehend the nature of Nepali public sphere itself. Therefore, as the first major line of inquiry, the present study analyzes the various historical processes contributing to the development of the early Nepali public sphere of Darjeeling. While tracing the roots of the emergence of public sphere in Darjeeling Hills, the study attempts to establish the fact that the Nepali public sphere emerged within the context of the gradual transformation in the social organisation of *symbolic power*<sup>4</sup> beginning from the last decades of nineteenth century.

The study centres around two significant changes leading the transformation. First is the gradual adoption of Nepali language as the language of the public sphere in Darjeeling Hills. The process of acculturation and assimilation that materialised in Darjeeling accounted for the gradual adoption of Nepali language as the *lingua franca*

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<sup>4</sup> The term 'symbolic power' is borrowed from Thompson (1993: 31-32), who defines the term as "the capacity to use symbolic forms- understood generally as any expression which conveys information or symbolic content- to intervene in and influence the course of actions and events".

enabling the creation of communicative space among various tribes of the hills of Darjeeling. Though people spoke their own respective languages or dialects at home, learning and speaking Nepali language became extremely essential for every individual while interacting outside their private spheres.

The adoption of Nepali language was paralleled by a second shift: the gradual expansion of Western liberal education that was essentially secular. It brought about mainly by the growth of formal education in Darjeeling Hills and the subsequent development of Nepali literature. The exponential growth of educational institutions particularly in the rural areas of Darjeeling during the last decades of the nineteenth century gradually transformed the balance between the private and public culture. The new emergent educated and conscious youths became increasingly aware of the prevailing social conditions. The Nepalis who were previously bounded within their respective private spheres slowly started becoming curious regarding matters concerning their community and consequently felt the need to create a space where such issues could be highlighted and discussed.

Also towards the last decades of the nineteenth century, Benares gradually emerged as an important centre for the publishing and literary sphere of the Nepalis. Organised along capitalist lines, commercial publishing enterprises of Benares that initially reproduced the popular genres of Indian classical languages which were in oral or manuscript form soon began exploring other potential markets. Under such circumstances many other languages like Bhojpuri, Bengali, Marathi, Nepali and others which had a rich oral tradition found their way in print collections. A number of printing presses that specialised in Nepali books were established and Nepali

journals started getting published from Benares. The development of these avenues opened new opportunities where symbolic forms could be reproduced and diffused among the Nepalis on a scale which had not existed before. The emerging Nepali literary sphere immensely contributed to the knowledge and learning system of the Nepalis of Darjeeling. Whereas the growth of formal education back at home taught the otherwise illiterate Nepalis of Darjeeling the art of reading and writing, the subsequent development of Nepali literary writings at Benares and its diffusion to Darjeeling made them aware regarding the dominant narratives and discourses concerning their community.

The most important ingredient that accompanied the transmission of Nepali publishing from Benares was the symbolic forms engraved within their tradition. Symbolic forms which came from Benares, however, underwent a colossal transformation in Darjeeling. The subject of *jati* (community) and *bhasa* (language) itself was subject to rigorous evaluation. The educated Nepalis of Darjeeling first identified the need to redefine the concept of Nepali *jati* and *bhasa* as essential elements for unifying their own self-identity as an inclusive community.

The above developments gave rise to new forms of interaction and new kinds of social relationships in which information and the advanced symbolic content could be exchanged among individuals. It became possible for more and more individuals to acquire information and symbolic content both through face-to-face and mediated forms of interaction. The transformation in the social organisation of symbolic power enabled the construction of a new type of Nepali community and along with it the emergence of the Nepali public sphere in colonial Darjeeling. Another significant

development moulding the emergent Nepali public sphere was the outgrowth of public activities and the building of public institutions in Darjeeling during the last decades of the nineteenth century. Although these activities and institutions did not appear from the initiative of the Nepalis of Darjeeling and nor did the Nepalis directly participate in it, however, they gradually became familiar with institutions of modern associational life and began emulating and experimenting them within their own community.

One such emulation and experimentation is manifest in the origins of theatre of Darjeeling. Inspired by Hindi, Urdu and English plays that were frequently staged, Dhanbir Mukhia pioneered the Gorkha National Theatrical Company and staged *Atalbahadur* in 1909. Theatre was one of the foremost institutions of the Nepali public sphere; a public sphere whose concern revolved around enabling the construction of a modern Nepali community by propagating the discourses of self improvement, social progress and reform. Therefore, the study as second line of inquiry examines how theatre as the foremost institution of Nepali public sphere helped in constructing the Nepali identity in Darjeeling when Nepali identity itself was in the formative stage.

And finally, the study analyses the representational dimension of Nepali theatre of Darjeeling. Through the lens of theatre, the study attempts to understand the transforming nature of discourse on Nepali identity in Darjeeling hills. The study shall divide Nepali theatre into two paradigms viz. dominant paradigm and alternative paradigm. Dominant paradigm basically refers to that tradition of Nepali theatre that represented the identity of Nepalis of Darjeeling in relation to Nepal. On the other

hand, the alternative paradigm rejects the above premise of the dominant frame and develops an alternative way to foreground the identity of Nepalis of Darjeeling. Beginning from mid-1970s, the alternative paradigm drew new symbolic forms and increasingly asserted the Indian identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling and represented it in complete alienation from Nepal.

Four plays have been selected through purposive sampling. The plays have been selected in such a fashion as to assess and touch upon the various stages of transition from the dominant to the alternative. The study also showcases the various factors leading the transition. All the plays will be put through rigorous frame analysis. Frames are conceptual tools which media practitioners and individuals rely on to convey, interpret and evaluate information of the social world and essentially involve selection and salience. To frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation for the item described. It defines problems, diagnose causes, make moral judgements and suggest remedies<sup>5</sup>.

In a given society, there may be many frames with which a particular subject is apprehended and there is no mechanism to detect them all. However, by studying available communication text using framing and reasoning devices, we may deconstruct some of them. The present study by analysing the plays on Nepali identity of Darjeeling is likewise an attempt to deconstruct some of them. Framing Devices will critically analyse various aspects of the plays including metaphors- application of

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<sup>5</sup> The methodology on framing analysis here is taken from Van Gorp 2007.



name or descriptions to something to which it is not literally applicable, exemplars-model or typical instance, descriptions and arguments. Reasoning devices on the other hand will examine within the play the explicit and implicit statements that deal with justifications, causes and causes in a temporal order. Functions of reasoning devices are promotion of a particular problem, definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation and treatment recommendation.

It becomes imperative for us to have a basic historical knowledge about the place on which the study is based on. Therefore, let the dissertation begin with the brief historical background of Darjeeling.

*CHAPTER II*

**HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

## CHAPTER II

### **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND**

#### **Tradition of History Writing**

The scores of writings on the history of Darjeeling are primarily locked up in competing discourses in which scholars have been making painstaking effort to establish the aboriginality of one community over the other. This is happening particularly in the wake of the ongoing movement for separation from West Bengal and demand for separate statehood of Gorkhaland within the Indian Union raised by the Gorkha community in the district of Darjeeling. As a result of which those who are antagonistic to statehood demand are drawing from the writings of early British historians and administrators to establish one community, particularly the Lepchas, as original settlers or autochthons and labelling the others mainly the Nepalis as migrants so to delegitimize the claim for the Gorkha homeland itself. Simultaneously, a concerted effort is also being made to alienate the Lepchas and similar other endogamous groups of the hill community from the larger Nepali identity by promising the former special privileges in the form of granting scheduled tribe status and constituting separate development boards on ethnic lines. On the other hand, those scholars supporting the demand for statehood are also engaged in the similar exercise but in the contrary direction. Citing medieval history from Sikkim and Nepal, they also have been making similar effort to ascertain that even the Gorkhas/Nepalis, mainly the Mangar and the Limbu communities, are indigenous to the region. The reality is that Darjeeling has no history of its own prior to 1835<sup>6</sup>. The immediate

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history written after 1835 was basically 'managerial history' written with the sole imperative to manage and administer. History of Darjeeling prior to its annexation<sup>7</sup> has to be deciphered mainly from the history of Sikkim and Nepal. Another difficulty we encounter while accessing the history of Darjeeling is that the district came into being through the process of consolidation by British which extended for about three decades from 1835.

### Process of Consolidation

As Dozey writes, "Prior to the year 1816 the whole territory known as British Sikkim belonged to Nepal, which had won it by conquest from the Sikkimese. Owing to the disagreement over the frontier policy of the Gurkhas, war was declared towards the close of 1813 by the British, and two campaigns followed in the second of which they were defeated by General Ochterlony. By a treaty signed at Segoulie at the end of 1816 the Nepalese ceded the 4000 square miles of territory referred to the above, which in turn by the treaty signed at Titalya on February 10<sup>th</sup>, 1817, was handed over to the Raja of Sikkim with the apparent object of hedging in Nepal with the kingdom of an ally, and preventing all possibility of further aggrandisement by the Gurkhas" (Dozey 1922: 2).

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<sup>6</sup> This was the year when a strip of hill territory, 24 miles long and about 5 to 6 miles wide, stretching from the northern frontier of the district to Pankabarie in the plains, which in its trend included the villages of Darjeeling and Kurseong, "as a mark of friendship" for the Governor-General Lord William Bentinck. See: Dozey, E, 1922, *A Concise History of the Darjeeling District since 1835*, Jetsun Publishing House, Calcutta.

<sup>7</sup> I prefer to use the term 'annexation' here for reasons which shall be explicated in the coming pages of this section.

When Darjeeling was later ceded to British 'out of friendship' through the 'deed of grant' in 1835, the Raja of Sikkim did not hand over the entire territory acquired by the British from Nepalese. Dozey writes, "This transfer was successfully accomplished on February 1<sup>st</sup>, 1835, through the personal influence and efforts of Lt. General Llyod with Sikkimputti, the aged Rajah, who handed over a strip of hill territory, 24 miles long and about 5 to 6 miles wide, stretching from the northern frontier of the district to Pankabarie in the plains, which in its trend included the villages of Darjeeling and Kurseong, 'as a mark of friendship for the Governor-General (Lord William Bentinck) for the establishment of a Sanatorium for the invalid servants of the East India Company'. In return the Raja received an allowance of Rs 3000/-, which was subsequently raised to Rs 6000/- per annum. This exchange, however, considered at that time from the financial point of view was entirely in the favour of the giver as the revenue derived from the hill never exceeded Rs 20/- the year" (Ibid:3).

The district of Darjeeling finally consolidated and took its present form after the annexation by the British of the present Siliguri subdivision and Kalimpong subdivision in 1850 and 1865 respectively. Siliguri subdivision was annexed as a retaliatory measure for imprisoning Campbell and Hooker by Namgyal Dewan, brother-in-law of the then Raja of Sikkim (Subba 1992:36, Dash 1947: 34, Dozey 1922:5), and the Kalimpong subdivision was annexed following the war between the British and Bhutan in 1864 and attached with the district in 1866 (Subba 1992: 36, Dozey 1922: 7).

The Kalimpong subdivision was also historically the territory of Sikkim but was occupied from the Raja of Sikkim by the Bhutanese in 1706. The Bhutanese incursion took place during the reign of the third Chogyal, Chagdor Namgyal around 1700-1706. The young Chogyal had to flee to Tibet after an invasion was plotted by his half-sister Pande Wangmo who saw herself as the legitimate ruler as she was the eldest (Namgyal and Doma 1908:25, Risley 1894:12). Chagdor Namgyal was later restored through the intervention of Tibet and though the Bhutanese regime withdrew from Sikkim, they retained their position at Damsang, up to the hill of Tegong-la, which forms the current Kalimpong sub-division of the Darjeeling district (Pradhan 1991:75). Dooars was also a part of Sikkim conquered by Bhutan in 1706 and annexed to the British India in 1865. "Till as late as 1874 Darjeeling was a 'Non-Regulated Area', from 1874 to 1919 it was a 'Scheduled District' and from 1919 to 1935 a 'Backward Tract'. Finally from 1935 till the independence of India, it was a "partially excluded area" under the Government of India Act of 1935" (Subba 1992: 36).

### **The Mysterious Case of Transfer**

The case of transfer of Darjeeling to the British India is very mystifying in nature. T.B Subba, in his *'Ethnicity, State and Development: The Case Study of Gorkhaland Movement'*, has aptly showcased the conundrum concerning the "deed of grant". According to Subba, Major Llyod who was actually negotiating with the Raja of Sikkim regarding the transfer of Darjeeling obtained the same through the 'deed of grant' dated February 1, 1835. However, the first written request for the accession of Darjeeling was made by Llyod on February 19, 1835. Therefore, Subba questions how could Llyod obtain a deed dated February 1, 1835 when a formal request was

made by him for the first time only on February 19, 1835? He further argues that the Raja did not ever intend to part with Darjeeling. What Raja had granted was no more than a house-building licence under hopes that the British would give Dabgram in exchange of Darjeeling, capture Rummo Pradhan and some Lepcha chiefs and hand them over to the Raja, and extend Sikkim's western boundary. Since, it was impossible on the part of the British for various reasons to comply with Raja's request and Raja was unwilling to give Darjeeling without having his request made, the Council sent an order to Llyod on June 15, 1835 directing him to abstain from urging any further negotiation. Surprisingly, Llyod on October 31, 1835 writes back saying that he had acquired the grant of Darjeeling exactly as he desired and that it was in his possession (Subba 1992: 35-36).

### **On the Question of Aboriginality**

As stated earlier, there has been a long tradition of stereotyping the Gorkha/Nepali community as migrants and the Lepchas as autochthons. This contention is largely made basing population figures of the district of Darjeeling over the decades (The population of Darjeeling is said to be 100 souls (Lepchas) at the time of acquisition which increased to 249,117 during the 1991 Census). Defending the above contention that the increase in population is not completely due to the influx of people, Katwal (2014: 94) posits some interesting counter-arguments in his article titled "*A History of the Darjeeling Region: Revisited through the Lens of the Gorkhaland Movement*". First, he contends that Lloyd, Campbell and other British officers had the means to scan and survey the entire area covered with dense forests, ridges and wild rivers. The early recorded figure of a "100 souls" has now been established to represent only the

population of the present observatory hill in Darjeeling town and not the whole district. Secondly, he argues that the exact figures of the natives like the Lepchas, Limbus, Magars and other hill tribes could not be accurately assessed due to their nomadic ways of life as well as their settlements in the higher altitudes of Darjeeling and Western Sikkim. Finally, he brings forth the practice in rural areas where visits by government officials were invariably perceived as higher taxes, forced labour, enslavement or conscription into the army, and entire villages would be simply deserted. 'It has also to be remembered that the Darjeeling was partly ruled by Bhutan and partly by Nepal for some time in its history. The people coming from such conquering countries cannot be termed as immigrants' (Subba 1992:38).

Simultaneously, the West Bengal administration from time to time has been pursuing the politics of "divide and rule" to weaken the solidarity of hill community by the means of de-alienating various Tibeto-Burman tribes from the larger Nepali/Gorkha fold. This policy of 'de-alienation and fragmentation' is invariably directed to inhibit the aspirations and demands of the hill community, particularly the desire for a separate statehood. As Subba (1992: 95-96) opines, to invalidate the claim for recognition of Nepali language as the official language for the district of Darjeeling during early 1960's, the West Bengal Government under the Chief Ministership of Bidhan Chandra Roy tactfully reduced the number of Nepali speakers in the Darjeeling District from 67 per cent in the 1941 census to 19 percent in the 1951 Census. This was done by the way of classifying the hill population according to the titles of the people hold and not according to who speaks what language and purportedly de-alienating the various Tibeto-Burman tribes like the Limbus, Rais,



Gurungs, Magars, Sherpas and others from the Nepali speaking fold barring the fact that these groups rarely communicate in any language other than 'Nepali' (Ibid).

Though the above facts and concerns highlighted by Katwal and Subba cannot be simply brushed aside especially while disputing the hegemonic and chauvinist policy of the West Bengal Government towards the people of Darjeeling, however, foremost while comprehending the question of aboriginality and issue of migration is the need to honestly assess and acknowledge the evolution and nature of Gorkha/Nepali identity itself which has been dealt in details in coming chapters. For now, the study would like to put forth one important fact. The Gorkhas/ Nepalis are the total sum of over nineteen endogamous groups who practice different religions and speak different languages. Before the political boundaries of Nepal and Sikkim were actually drawn, these hills formed a contiguous area where these endogamous groups moved about freely. With the advent of Darjeeling, which provided for secure and stable livelihood opportunities, these very people started coming and settling permanently in the region and over the years considering various social, economic and political factors got assimilated within the fold of composite Gorkha/Nepali identity. "Nepalis" as one ethnic group only emerged towards the beginning of the twentieth century.

### **British Curiosity towards Darjeeling**

The British interest and curiosity towards Darjeeling may be explicated through various reasons. As evident from the Gazetteers of Bengal and from the writings of early British administrators, Darjeeling was acquired on account of its cool climate for building a sanatorium for ailing servants of the British (Dash 1947:37-38, Dozey: 3). However, there are equally other pertinent factors out of which particularly one

needs mention here. 'One of the major reasons emanated from the geo-political importance and strategic location of Darjeeling which shared four international borders, namely, China, Bhutan, Nepal and India. Throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the British policy towards Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan was guided by their interest in the overland trade with Tibet and Central Asia and the accompanying urgency for safeguarding the northern border of India against Tibet and China' (Dasgupta 1999). Therefore, bringing Darjeeling under control would well serve their purpose for the above.

### **Population Movement from Nepal**

The British acquisition of the hills of Darjeeling led to rapid urbanization and industrialization of the region. Requirement of hard labour for the same successively encouraged the initial wave of population movement from Nepal to Darjeeling. The movement of people increased steadily since 1852 after tea gardens were opened as commercial ventures in the district of Darjeeling. A large number of people started coming, especially east Nepal, to work as tea garden labourers and started settling in the region. However, population movement based on the tea industry in Darjeeling could materialize only between 1852 and the end of nineteenth century primarily because the Darjeeling tea industry declined throughout the twentieth century <sup>8</sup>(Hutt 1997: 112).

The prospect for the people of Nepal to come and settle in Darjeeling widened after the annexation by the British in 1865 of the present Kalimpong subdivision, a fertile land located eastward of the river Tista. Unlike the region west of Tista, the British

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<sup>8</sup> Out of 177 tea gardens in Darjeeling which were established by 1891, less than a third of the gardens were in production during mid-1980s.

emphasised in developing agriculture instead of tea plantations as economic mainstay of the region. Sarkar (2010) furnishes two major considerations that might have led the British to adopt such a policy favouring agriculture and not tea plantations in the region. First is the late entry of Kalimpong region in the British territory. By the time Kalimpong was annexed in 1865, tea plantations on the other side of the river Tista had exposed fully the business potential, if not it reached its optimal level of growth. This perhaps made the tea planters less interested to promote the industry any further. Second was the poor state of communication infrastructure in Kalimpong during those times. The natural barrier between Kalimpong and the rest of the district was provided by the river Tista itself. Except for a few suspension bridges, there were no other arrangements available until 1933 when the first concrete bridge, known as Anderson Bridge, was constructed which linked Kalimpong with the mainland of the district and also with the outside world. Because the proficiency of the people of Nepal in settled cultivation was well recognised throughout eastern Himalayan belt, promoting their settlement would well avail the British to maximise the income of the government from the agricultural sector mainly in forms of revenues.

Another major factor contributing population movement was the opening of Gorkha recruitment centre at Darjeeling in the year 1902 attracting large number of Rais and Limbus from eastern Nepal. The defeat of the Gorkha soldiers under Amar Singh Thapa led to the discovery of Gorkhas as the 'martial race' by the British (Golay 2006). The 'bravery' of the Gorkha soldiers clearly manifested during the confrontation compelled the British to keep the Gorkhas under their continuous supervision, ensuing British to raise three battalions of Gorkha regiments as early as 1815 (Ibid.). As the Nepali rulers in Kathmandu did not openly favour the recruitment

of Gorkha soldiers in Indian Army from within Nepal, Darjeeling served as an important recruiting centre for later Gorkha regiments. Though those men who came to Darjeeling to enlist themselves did not permanently emigrate, there was a marked tendency for them to settle in India after leaving military service (Hutt 1997: 113). It has been noted that only about one third of the 11,000 Gurkhas discharged from the British Indian Army after the First World War chose to return to Nepal (Ibid: 113)

The relentless support and encouragement by the British, nevertheless, cannot be solely attributed for the movement of people from Nepal to Darjeeling. There are other equally significant push factors without whose mention the understanding on migratory history of Darjeeling would be incomplete. The majority of people who came to Darjeeling are from eastern part of Nepal. Population movement from eastern Nepal ensued as a response to encroachment of ancestral lands of the indigenous people (mostly Rais and Limbus) by the Parbitaya cultivators who were encouraged to migrate from West by the Gorkha rulers after the Gorkhas conquered the region (Ibid: 111). It has been estimated that between 12 and 15 per cent of the total Kiranti population came from eastern Nepal to Darjeeling between 1840 and 1860 (Ibid.: 111, c.f., Pradhan 1991:192). In addition, during the reign of the Ranas (1847-1950), practice of *chakari*<sup>9</sup> and the culture of *afno manchhe* (one's own people) were widespread in Nepal (Bista 1991). This system largely encouraged problem of inclusion and exclusion as certain group members gain particular privileges (Ibid: 4-5). The Ranas who held absolute power exploited the resources of the country for their benefit. Anyone with the concern for the society at large and the future of the

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<sup>9</sup> The origin of *chakari* (sycophancy) lies in the religious ritual practices of obeisance, which was extended to the governing classes and then to all in certain positions of power in Nepal.

country were singled out, punished, jailed and executed on pretext of treason.( Ibid 1991: 26-27). Therefore, people wanting to escape such hierarchic and hegemonic rule of the Ranas must have found Darjeeling a suitable place to live in.

### **Establishment of Formal Education**

Besides promoting industrialization and urbanisation, developing basic infrastructure and exploring the agriculture potential of the region, the British dominion exposed the people of Darjeeling to one the most valued constituent of modern society viz. modern and formal education system. This was due to determine the course of the history of Darjeeling and mould the character of the hill society itself in coming decades. 'The early efforts to uplift the population both mentally and spiritually were made by the Catholic Order and the Christian Missionaries during 1840s Rev. Mr. Start, a private missionary, and Mother Teresa Mons devoted their life in this direction with a result a convent was fully established in 1846. Other persons of prominence in this field are the chief being the Rev. Mr. Neible, who composed Lepcha primers, and the Rev. Mr. Macfarlane, who made Hindi as a *lingua franca* and prepared text book in it' (Dozey 1922: 103). Towards the end of the nineteenth century, 95 primary schools had been established with 2731 boys and 466 girls, in the whole district (Katwal 2014: 95).

The growth of these educational institutions served as one of the fundamental premise on which modern public sphere in Darjeeling evolved. A fair number of conscious and educated youths cultivated by these educational institutions freely participated in this new emergent public sphere. In the process the people here became increasingly aware of their prevailing social conditions. They realized that a process of double

colonisation had been established in which the British were the first masters followed by the Bengalis (Chakraborty 2000:259). The majority of people from the hills were engaged as tea garden labourers or engaged in other menial jobs, the Bengalis being educationally advanced occupied the white collar jobs in the lower and middle echelons of the British administration and the trade on the other side was totally controlled by the Marwaris and Biharis (Ibid 2000:257-58). Such practice of resource distribution established a deep-seated realisation among the new emergent educated class of hill community the existence of the dominant 'significant others' and the burgeoning desire to relinquish themselves from existing state of subservience. One of the main reasons why the demand for separation from West Bengal emanated during the first decade of twentieth century must be ascertained within the above context. It came as one of the means to assert the existence of the hill community in the political and economic sphere of British India.

### **Struggle for Separation**

No history of Darjeeling would be complete without touching upon the century old struggle of people of Darjeeling for separation from West Bengal. Indeed, the history of Darjeeling from the beginning of the twentieth century has become synonymous with the history of struggle for separation. The first ever demand for "separate administrative set-up" for the district of Darjeeling surfaced in the year 1907. It was placed by the "leaders of the Hill people" representing the Lepchas, Bhutias and Nepalis.

One of the fundamental causes behind such a demand to have arisen, as said in the previous section, was the increasing realisation among the hill people regarding their

state of subservience in the existing social order. Transformation of conscience brought about by exposure to modern education and various other factors and years of interaction among the three hill communities and the plainsmen helped the former understand their prevailing social conditions. Separation from Bengal and 'self-rule', therefore, seemed only the viable solution for the people of Darjeeling. Another important cause was the influence of anti-partition wave (1905-1911) in Bengal. The movement for reunification of Bengal basically turned out to be a large scale movement to reorganize the provinces based on language in the eastern region of India. The movement for a separate province-formation emerged in Hindi-speaking and later Oriya-speaking parts of Bengal presidency. Darjeeling then was a 'Scheduled District' partially attached with Bengal presidency mainly for administrative purpose and the people of Darjeeling shared nothing in common with the Bengali brethren in terms of history, language and culture. This might also have prompted the leaders of Hill people to the demand for 'separate administrative set-up' for the district of Darjeeling.

Similar demands for "creation of a separate unit" were made again in 1919 and 1929. "The 'unit' demanded was to comprise the district of Darjeeling and the Dooars areas of Jalpaiguri district of Bengal. The memorialists also suggested to the government to consider the creation of a "North East Frontier Province (NEFP)" consisting of the district of Darjeeling, Dooars, Assam and Arunachal Pradesh. The grounds which this demand was based on were geographical, racial, historical, religious and linguistic. For the NEFP in particular they had given three additional grounds: health considerations, educational development and defence interests of the country" (Subba 1992: 77-78)

Along with the demand for creation of 'separate administrative unit', there was also a parallel demand being made during the second and third decades of the twentieth century for the approval of Nepali language as a medium of instruction in the schools of Darjeeling. The origin of this movement may be traced during mid-1920s when the petition signed by Parasmani Pradhan and other few students requesting Calcutta University to recognize Nepali language for study and examination purposes in Darjeeling Hills was rejected. 'The petition was submitted to the Vice-Chancellor of Calcutta University who had come on an observation tour. Upon hearing this, a Bengali man, a lawyer and a former student in the same high school who accompanied the vice chancellor remarked that the Nepali language was the language spoken by coolies and *kawadis* (those who make a living by scavenging miscellaneous stuff) in Darjeeling and had not yet attained the status of a language appropriate for such recognition' (Onta-1996: 42).

'The insult felt by Parasmani and his friends prompted them to engage vigorously on behalf of the Nepali language. They used the pages of the weekly published from Banaras, *Gorkhali*, to fight their cause and requested that the headmaster of the Durbar High School in Kathmandu, Sarada Prasad Mukherji, to contact Calcutta University on their behalf. As a result of these efforts, on 24 July 1918, the Calcutta gazette announced that the Nepali language had been approved for study and examination purposes in matric (10th grade), Intermediate and Bachelors in Art' (Ibid: 42-43). 'The demand for introduction of Nepali language as a medium of instruction was more systematically articulated after the establishment of Nepali Sahitya Sammelan in 1924. The recommendation for the Nepali language was made



in 1927 by the Griffith Committee instituted by Bengal Government (Subba 1992: 93).

The movement for introduction of Nepali language as a medium of instruction was subtly worsening the healthy relation among the major three hill communities, Lepchas, Bhutias and the Nepalis. This demand was opposed by Laden La and Dr Yensingh Lepcha, two most influential leaders of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities respectively (Ibid 1991:81). Laden La was one of the main signatories of the “representatives of the Darjeeling District” who submitted a memorandum demanding “creation of separate unit” to the Chief Secretary on November 8, 1917. The relationship further worsened when the Nepali dominated Hillmen’s Association addressed only of the “problems of Gorkhas” in its demand for an “independent administrative unit” made in 1934. In order to bridge the widening gap between the hill communities, Laden La called a mass meeting in Darjeeling and formed the Hill People’s Social Union in 1934.

Unfortunately, even the Hill People’s Social Union could not yield any convincing result and was replaced by All India Nepali, Bhutia and Lepcha Association(AINBLA) constituted in the year 1943 under the initiative of Dambar Singh Gurung. This association was renamed as All India Gorkha League the same year with the fundamental objective to fight against the pathetic condition of Gorkhas spread all over India. The League came up with the demand for *Uttarkhand* in the year 1949. The demand is said to be widely popular and was discussed and supported throughout the hills (Hutt 1997: 129, Subba 1992: 89). Though held by most of the scholars as infeasible and impractical, the demand for Gorkhasthan, an independent

nation comprising of the present day Nepal, Darjeeling District and Sikkim, was also raised by Communist Party of India in 1947.

The demand for a separate statehood incorporating the district of Darjeeling and Dooars was made in a more systematic manner after the formation of Pranta Parishad, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), and Swantra Manch during 1980s. The GNLF led *Gorkhaland Movement* beginning on May 1986, however, turned extremely violent and took hundreds of lives. The violence occurred mainly between the cadres of GNLF and CPI (M) and between the GNLF and security forces. The agitation ended with the dropping of the demand for separate state and creation of an autonomous body, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, on July 1988. The creation of DGHC and “citizen notification”<sup>10</sup> were the two major achievements of the movement (Hutt 1997:131). But the demand for Gorkhaland again resurfaced in 2007 with the Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha unleashing the fresh statehood movement on Gandhian principles. This time the movement remained largely peaceful and the same ceased after the formation of Gorkhaland Territorial Administration in 2011. The signing of the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and have halted the present movement, however, the GJMM has not completely dropped the demand so far.

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<sup>10</sup> Citizen notification underlined the rights of “certain classes of persons commonly known as the Gorkhas” to citizenship by the virtue of (a) domicile in India as of 26 January 1950, (b) ordinary residence for the minimum of five years before that date, (c) birth in India, and (d) birth of either parent in India (Subba 1992: 269-270, cited in Hutt 1997:131).

*CHAPTER III*

**NEPALI PUBLIC SPHERE IN COLONIAL DARJEELING**

### CHAPTER III

## **NEPALI PUBLIC SPHERE IN COLONIAL DARJEELING**

The term 'public sphere' in general refers to the realm of our social life in which something approaching public opinion can be formed (Habermas 1964). Habermas was one of the first scholars to historicize the emergence of 'public' as a category in political life. He regards the eighteenth century European bourgeois public sphere 'as the realm of social life, outside the state and economy, where citizens behave as a public body when they confer in an unrestricted fashion- that is, with the guarantee of freedom of assembly and association and the freedom to express and publish their opinions- about matters of general interest' (Habermas 1964). This kind of communication requires specific means for transmitting information and influencing those who receive it. Such activities were carried through various media of public sphere particularly the press and other institutions like coffee houses, literary societies, voluntary organisations and theatre (Habermas 1989). The growth of these institutions fostered a critical and rational bourgeois public who increasingly influenced the socio-political decision making process in Europe. According to Habermas, 'the European society of the high middle ages possessed a type of representative public sphere characterised by public representation of power by the feudal authorities. Public sphere as a unique and distinct realm came into being with the national and territorial states' (Habermas 1989: 5-14). One of the primary goals of this bourgeois public sphere that rose during the late eighteenth century was to make political and administrative decisions transparent (Hohendahl and Russian 1964). Their claims to power vis-à-vis public authority were directed not the concentration of

power but rather on the very principle on which the existing power was based (Habermas 1964). 'It was only with the establishment of the bourgeois constitutional state was the intellectual press relieved of the pressure of its convictions. Since then public sphere and its institutions in Europe has been able to abandon its polemical position and take advantage of the earning possibilities of commercial undertaking' (Ibid).

A glimpse at the basic literature on public sphere of India will allow us to comfortably understand the dominant theme underlying the discourse. Indian scholarship on public sphere have particularly emphasised in discarding the European influences in the development of critical reasoning public in India. In an attempt to trace the non-European roots of public sphere of India, Amartya Sen (2005: 7) brings forward the activities of early Indian Buddhists whose commitment, whom he considers, have produced some of the earliest open general meetings in the world – the so-called 'Buddhist councils'. The first of the four principal councils was held in Rajagriha shortly after Gautama Buddha's death; the second about a century later in Vaisali; and the last occurred in Kashmir in the second century CE, but the third- the largest and the best known of these councils- occurred under the patronage of Emperor Ashoka in the third century BCE, in the then capital of India, Pataliputra (Ibid.:7). He argues that these councils which drew delegates from different places and different school of thoughts were not only concerned with resolving differences in religious principles and practices, but they evidently also addressed the demands of social and civic duties, and furthermore helped, in a general way, to consolidate and promote the tradition of open discussion on contentious issues.

Christopher Bayly takes the similar position in proposing that public opinion—the weight of reasoned debate—was not the preserve of modern or western politics. Bayly suggests that the north Indian *ecumene*<sup>11</sup> of the nineteenth-century which functioned as a critical reasoning public, with the literati or official using poetry, satire, letter-writing, placarding, festivals, and religious congregations to exercise a degree of critical surveillance on the activities of the state was closer in spirit to the groupings of philosophers, urban notables, and officials in the world of late antiquity—the Christian- Greek *ecumene*—than it was to Habermas’s modern public. He argues that the friable and ambiguous authority within the Indian conceptual systems encompassed by religious principles and despotic kingship led the learned and respectable ‘middling sort’ to take it upon themselves to maintain a constant, critical vigilance over the doings of the state and society. (Bayly 1996)

In contrast, Sanjay Joshi, however, sees colonialism providing the circumstances for the public sphere to come into being. Referring to an instance in Lucknow when seven major *awqaf* (Muslim trusts) set up by the erstwhile rulers of Awadh were taken over state in 1868 on the grounds that these were ‘public’ bequests and needed the protection of the state, Joshi argues that the colonial state promoted the notions of ‘public welfare’ and the language of ‘public-ness’ to further their own interests (Joshi 2001).

The study of Nepali public sphere in colonial Darjeeling in this chapter is neither an attempt to sketch its structural transformation nor would it exclusively deal with its

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<sup>11</sup> Christopher Bayly use the word *ecumene* to describe the form of cultural and political debate which was typical of north India before the emergence of the newspaper and public association.

varied influences. It is simply an effort to analyze the various historical processes contributing to the development of the early Nepali public sphere of colonial Darjeeling. While tracing the roots of the emergence of public sphere in Darjeeling Hills, the chapter attempts to establish that the Nepali public sphere here emerged within the context of the gradual transformation in the social organisation of *symbolic power* beginning from the last decades of nineteenth century. The term 'symbolic power' is borrowed from Thompson (1993: 31-32), who defines the term as "the capacity to use symbolic forms- understood generally as any expression which conveys information or symbolic content- to intervene in and influence the course of actions and events". There are two significant changes leading to the shift. First is the gradual adoption of Nepali language as the *lingua franca* of the Darjeeling Hills. And second is the continuing expansion of various means of knowledge and learning.

### **Adoption of Nepali Language**

Wright (2008: 23) rightly says, "If people do not communicate, or could not communicate because they were linguistically incomprehensible, a public sphere cannot be said to exist". Similarly, Montgomery (1995:251) also argues that: "Language informs the way we think, the way we experience, and the way we interact with each other...It is the basis of community and systematic knowledge about language and practical awareness of how it works is fundamental to the process of building mature communities."

The gradual adoption of Nepali language among the linguistically and ethnically diverse tribes of the eastern Himalayan region became the basis for the building of composite Nepali identity and culture throughout Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim, the

historical process that began soon after the ascendancy of Gorkha kingdom (situated presently at Western Nepal) under the leadership of Prithivinarayana Shah and his successors. The Gorkhas/Nepalis are the total sum of over nineteen endogamous groups who practiced different religions and spoke different languages (Subba 1992: 68). Before the political boundaries of Nepal and Sikkim were actually drawn, these hills formed a contiguous area embracing a number of small principalities (Pradhan 1991:3). The language which is today known as “Nepali” was formerly referred as *Khaskura* primarily because the language was spoken in the great kingdom or empire of the Khasas which was established by the 12th Century and included Western Nepal, parts of Uttar Pradesh in India and parts of south-west Tibet (Pradhan 1994). The Khas Empire was later disintegrated and number of petty principalities arose on its ruins. One of these principalities was called “Gorkha”. It was from here Prithivinarayana Shah and later his successors began their conquest popularly known as “Gorkha Conquest” beginning from 1778 and consolidated the territory what is today known as Nepal. The expansionist policy of the Gorkha kings stopped and the boundary between Nepal and Sikkim was fixed only after the intervention by the British through a treaty signed at Segoulie in 1816. The treaty ensued in the cession of Darjeeling Hills (excluding Kalimpong region) by Nepal to Sikkim; the territory which was later ceded to British during 1835. Although, the Khasa speech was spoken in Gorkha, the ascendancy of Gorkha kingdom gave prominence to Gorkha over *Khaskura* as name of the language. These various tribes spread across the boundaries of Nepal, Darjeeling and Sikkim over the years were gradually identified as Gorkhas or Nepalis and the language which they spoke was interchangeably called as *Khas-kura*, *Parbate* or *Parbattiya*, *Gorkhali* and *Nepali*. The ambiguity on the name of the language may be the reason why when Calcutta University recognized Nepali



language for study and examination purposes in Darjeeling Hills in 1918, the language was enlisted as "*Nepali Pahadiya or Khaskura*". It was the Nepali Sahitya Sammelan which convinced the government of Bengal to issue a notice on 30 July 1926 saying that in its usage the name "*Nepali Pahadiya or Khaskura*" would be replaced with just "Nepali" (Onta 1996: 53).

In spite of the fact that Prithivinarayana Shah and his successors were successful in consolidating the otherwise dispersed and unorganized area, they failed in culturally amalgamating these varied and ethnically diverse tribes. Two major reasons contributed to this process. First, the Ranas who ruled Nepal after Shahs made little effort to promote patriotism and loyalty among the people of Nepal towards the state as they felt threatened by it (Bista 1991:21). National pride and sentiment were diluted and essentially centred on very narrow and limited areas of their locale and own kin groups (Ibid: 21). Second, the various tribes of Nepal hardly got an opportunity to interact with one another because of the spatial organisation of Nepal on the basis of ethnicity. It was only with the formation of Darjeeling that these tribes who basically came here searching for secure and stable livelihood opportunities got an opportunity to live together, particularly in tea gardens, therefore opening new prospects for assimilation. In addition, there was a collapse of social hierarchies as the basis of honour. Unlike in Nepal, Darjeeling acknowledged the value of formal education and professional qualification over birth and ethnic or caste origins. Darjeeling sufficed as the appropriate space where the process of acculturation materialised leading to gradual concretization of a composite Gorkha/Nepali identity as one ethnic group towards the later decades of the nineteenth century. The process of acculturation and assimilation that materialised also accounted for the gradual

adoption of Nepali language as the *lingua franca* enabling the creation of common communicative space among various tribes of the hills of Darjeeling. Though people spoke their own respective languages or dialects at home, learning and speaking Nepali language became extremely essential for every individual while interacting outside their private spheres. In the process, Darjeeling witnessed a rapid standardization and development of Nepali language and Nepali language spoken by the people of Darjeeling immensely varied from the one spoken in Nepal because the former immensely incorporated words from multiple dialects of other hill tribes (Pradhan 1994).

### **Expansion of Means of Knowledge and Learning**

The adoption of Nepali language was paralleled by a second shift: the gradual expansion of modern means of knowledge and learning that were essentially secular. It was brought about mainly by the growth of formal education in Darjeeling Hills and the subsequent development of Nepali literature.

Education is very crucial to our understanding of the public sphere because it imparts the institutional framework for the rational and critical discourse that comprises the public sphere. The fundamental criterion for admission into the eighteenth century bourgeois public sphere, according to Habermas, was education (Habermas 1989: 85). The logic behind such formulation is evident considering that no sensible discussion can take place without the knowledge among the participants regarding the prevailing conditions of their society.

The early effort towards education came from the initiatives of the German Moravian missionaries. Rev. William Start using his private means opened the first school for the Lepchas in Darjeeling as early as 1841(O' Malley, 1907:50). Another person of prominence in this field was Rev. Mr. Neible who composed the Lepcha primers (Dozey 1922:103). Though the chief objective of these missionaries was the conversion of the Lepchas (Dewan1991: 81), they sowed the seeds for the future educational activities in the region. The official enterprise in the field of education commenced with the establishment of Darjeeling School on 20<sup>th</sup> September, 1956. This came as part of the new educational policy prescribed for India by the Wood's Despatch 1854 which pressed the responsibility of education of the common people of India upon the British Government (Ibid: 83). The establishment of school at Darjeeling was particularly intended to educate the children of the native inhabitants. The languages studied by the students in the school were English, Urdu and Hindi (Ibid: 85).

This initial official experiment of imparting education to the native children through Darjeeling School, however, did not fructify because of the very poor enrolment of the students. After fourteen or fifteen years of its establishment, the number of students receiving instructions at the school was only 36, a really dismaying figure in a district which had, according to 1871 census, 12,116 boys and 9,913 girls under the age of twelve (Ibid: 87). However, slow progress of education was a phenomenon experienced then by the entire British India and this concern was the main reason why the British Government constituted Indian Education Commission which submitted its report on 1882. The Darjeeling School was later split into Bhutia Boarding School for the Bhutias and the Lepchas and the Darjeeling Zilla School for Bengalis and

Hindustanis. The chief objective behind establishing the Bhutia Boarding School was to train the Bhutia and Lepcha students who would survey and explore the Trans-Himalayan regions (Das 1969: 15). The Darjeeling Zilla School on the other hand fulfilled the educational needs of the other inhabitants of the region.

The real transformation in the field of education in Darjeeling Hills materialised only during the beginning of last three decades of the nineteenth century after the coming of Rev. William Macfarlane, a Scottish Missionary. Soon after he reached Darjeeling on June 1870, Macfarlane opened a Normal School, “ a training schools for teachers that he had thought to be of foremost need before anything else to set himself to his gigantic task of spreading elementary education among the vast illiterate masses of this hill region” (Dewan 1991: 109). He also convinced the government to provide scholarships for the students during their course and fixed upon Hindi as the medium of instruction and prepared some text books on it (Ibid: 107). The body of trained tutors which came out of the Normal School at Darjeeling and Kalimpong<sup>12</sup> promptly engaged themselves in spreading elementary education in the nook and corners of the hills of Darjeeling. By the close of the nineteenth century the Lower and the Upper primary schools were scattered all over the mountainside (Ibid: 145). These schools not only laid the foundation of primary education but concurrently helped fructify the official initiatives of the British for higher education in Darjeeling hills as they fetched a much needed students for the Darjeeling Government High School<sup>13</sup> established in 1891. Towards the end of the nineteenth century 95 primary schools

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<sup>12</sup> The Normal School at Darjeeling was later transferred to Kalimpong in 1886 for the same purpose.

<sup>13</sup> Darjeeling Government High School was raised after merging the Bhutia Boarding School and Darjeeling Zilla School.

and a Government High School had been established which catered to the educational needs of the people of Darjeeling (O' Malley 1907).

The growth of these educational institutions gradually transformed the balance between the private and public culture of the native people of the Darjeeling Hills. The new emergent educated and conscious youths became increasingly aware of the prevailing social conditions. The Nepalis who were previously bounded within their respective private spheres slowly started becoming inquisitive regarding matters concerning their community and consequently felt the need to create a space where such issues could be highlighted and deliberated upon.

Subsequently, the period also witnessed the rapid development of Nepali literature within the Nepalis, particularly in India. The technical basis for this was the introduction of print in India during the later decades of the eighteenth century. After an early start in Calcutta, print and publishing came to North India around 1830, when litho presses were established in the cities of Lucknow, Kanpur and Benares. Orsini (2004: 116) writes, "As a famed site of education and learning, a large commercial and manufacturing centre, Hindu pilgrimage destination of national importance and the site of the early British experiments in education, Benares seemed to have all the prerequisites to become a centre for publishing, with its large population of teachers, students, merchants and pilgrimage, i.e. of many potential writers and readers." Initially purely functional to the educational and religious needs of the city's resident, the publishing market of Benares increasingly got commercialised towards 1880s (Ibid 116). Their success and continued survival generally depended on their capacity to reproduce and sell printed materials in a profitable way- that is, it depended on their

capacity effectively to commodify symbolic forms. Therefore, commercial printing in Benares after reproducing the popular genres of Indian classical languages which were in oral or manuscript form began exploring other potential markets. Under such circumstances many other languages like Bhojpuri, Bengali, Marathi, Nepali and others which had a rich oral tradition found their way in print collections. Benares essentially became the centre for the publishing and literary sphere of the Nepalis towards the last decades of the nineteenth century: it was here that Bhanubhakta's Nepalese *Ramayana* was published in 1884 by Ramkrishna Varma (Ibid: 121). The origins of the progress of Nepali literature can be traced from this period. Bhanubhakta's *Ramayana* is considered as the landmark publication in the history of Nepali literature because it unfolded a new arena for a number of Nepali students, mostly Brahmans who came from Nepal to Benares to pursue Sanskrit education in Sanskrit *pathshalas*, who increasingly became curious regarding the state of their own language. One of such figure of eminence is Motiram Bhatta who after being inspired by the works of Bhanubhakta started participating in and organizing discussions on the Nepali language with other Nepali residents and students of Benares (Onta 1996: 55). Gradually a number of printing presses that specialised in Nepali books were established in Benares of which the prominent ones were Bharat Jiwan Press, Hitchintak Press, Bansidhar Misra's Gauri Press and Sakhi Vinayak's Gurkhi Press (Orsini 2004 :136). In addition, scores of literary writings found space in Nepali journals that were published from Benares right from the early years of the twentieth century. Journals like *Upanyastarangini*, *Sundhari*, *Madhavi*, *Chandra* and *Gorkhai* were published from Benares during the first two decades of the twentieth century. The development of these avenues opened new opportunities where symbolic forms could be reproduced and diffused among Nepalis on a scale which had not existed

before. The emerging Nepali literary sphere of Benares immensely contributed to the knowledge and learning system of the Nepalis of Darjeeling. Whereas the growth of formal education back at home taught the otherwise illiterate Nepalis of Darjeeling the art of reading and writing, the succeeding development of Nepali literary writings at Benares and its transmission to Darjeeling made them aware regarding the dominant narratives and discourses concerning their community.

### **Transformation in Organisation of Symbolic Power**

The assessment of the steady transmission of Nepali publishing from Benares to Darjeeling is really important while conceptualising the growth of early Nepali public sphere of Darjeeling. The transmission led to the gradual shift in the centre of gravity of the Nepali community which brought about a fundamental transformation in the social organisation of symbolic power in India. Darjeeling slowly became the new base of symbolic power. The technologies of cultural production which were limited to Benares during the nineteenth century began appearing in Darjeeling at the start of the twentieth century. The first ever Nepali play staged, *Atalbahadur*, was produced by Dhanbir Mukhia under the aegis of Gorkha National Theatrical Party in 1909 in Darjeeling. This play was written by Pahalman Singh Swar and was published from Benares in 1906. The Gorkha National Theatrical Party was immediately followed by the institution of several other social and cultural organisations during early decades of twentieth century. These organisations like the Children's Amusement Association (1909), Himalayan Amusement Association (1913), Gorkha Library (1913) Nepali Sahitya' Sammelan (1924) and Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan (1932) demonstrated in its own way the public face of a nascent Nepaliness.

The most important ingredient that accompanied the transmission of Nepali publishing from Benares was the symbolic forms engraved within their tradition. In the first two decades of the twentieth century a discourse of self-improvement, designed broadly around the two themes of general education and the progress of the "Gorkha language" was generated from Benares by a small group of Nepalis (Onta 1996:36). The influence of these cultural discourses on motivating the educated Nepalis of Darjeeling who towards the second decade of twentieth century made it their cultural project to institutionalise Nepali language in the education system cannot be disregarded. These educated Nepalis of Darjeeling were not only familiar with the Banaras-based literary activities but also utilised the resources there to fight for their cause<sup>14</sup>. Symbolic forms which came from Benares, however, underwent a colossal transformation in Darjeeling. The subject of *jati* and *bhasa* itself was subject to rigorous introspection. In the meeting that was called with the intention of establishing the *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan*, Hari Prasad Pradhan, a lawyer who chaired the occasion stated:

"We have thought that the name of this *sammelan* should be '*Nepali Sahitya Sammelan*' because the word 'Nepali' has a broad meaning. This word designates all the *jatis* of Nepal such as Magar, Gurung, Kirati, Newar, Limbu etc. and also states that these *jatis* and others are part of a single great Nepali nation. Some people might suspect that this organization is trying to uplift the language spoken by the *Gorkhalis* but it is not necessary to think that way because Nepali has become the lingua franca of the hills. People who live here might speak different languages but there is no one who does not understand Nepali....Also it does not suit for any *jati* to claim that this language is only their language" (Onta 1996: 54 c.f. K. Pradhan 1982).

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<sup>14</sup> For example, Parasmani Pradhan used the pages of the weekly produced from Banaras, *Gorkhali*, to fight for the cause of institutionalisation of Nepali language in the education system. See: Onta 1996.



The educated Nepalis of Darjeeling first identified the need to redefine the concept of Nepali *jati* and *bhasa* an essential element of a unifying their own self-identity as an inclusive community. Such need arose because, unlike Benares, Darjeeling's Nepali community was far more ethnically diverse and contained a large number of non-Brahman conscious and educated populace. The *Nepali Sahitya Sammelan* soon after its formation were engaged in projects that inculcated self-consciousness and promoted self improvement of the Nepali *jati*.

The above developments gave rise to new forms of interaction and new kinds of social relationships in which information and the refined symbolic content could be exchanged between individuals. It became possible for more and more individuals to acquire information and symbolic content both through face-to-face and mediated forms of interaction. The transformation in the social organisation of symbolic power enabled the construction of a new type of Nepali community and along with it the emergence of the Nepali public sphere in colonial Darjeeling.

However there are other significant developments whose implicit contribution in moulding the emergent Nepali public sphere needs mention. The last decades of the nineteenth century saw the outgrowth of public activities and the building of public institutions in Darjeeling. Nupendra Narayan Hindu Public Hall was established in Darjeeling by the association of Hindu Bengalis as early as 1873 (Pradhan 1982: 81). Jnandil Das, a Joshmani saint, made Darjeeling the centre of his crusade for the Joshmani Movement<sup>15</sup> which rapidly spread throughout Darjeeling and embraced all

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<sup>15</sup> The Joshmani Movement was founded by Shashidhar towards the latter half of the eighteenth century. It was a religious movement indigenous movement to the Nepali society. The movement protested against the prevalence of the caste system, against superstition, and against animal sacrifice.

the tribes of the region (Rai1994). He completed his major work *Udaylahari* containing one hundred and nine stanzas while in Darjeeling in 1877 (Ibid.). This work of Jnandil Das, contends Rai, as one of the foremost makers of the Indian Nepali nation. Similarly, various Hindu religious and social organisations like Arya Samaj, Brahma Samaj and Ramkrishma Mission also arrived in Darjeeling during the last decades of the twentieth century (Pradhan 1982: 81). Although these activities and institutions did not appear from the initiative of the Nepalis of Darjeeling and nor did the Nepalis directly participate in it, however, they gradually became familiar with institutions of modern associational life and began emulating and experimenting them within their own community

One such emulation and experimentation is manifest in the origins of theatre of Darjeeling. , Inspired by Hindi, Urdu and English that were frequently performed, Dhanbir Mukhia pioneered the Gorkha National Theatrical Company and staged *Atalbahadur* in 1909. Theatre was one of the foundations on which the process of institutionalisation of the Nepalese public sphere rested (Chalmers 2006: 124). Nepali theatre was the foremost institution of modern associational life and emerged during times when the Nepali identity itself was in the formative stage. Therefore, in the next chapter the present study would follow two broad lines of inquiry. First, the study would examine the role of theatre in helping to construct the notion of Nepali identity in Darjeeling. Second, the study analyses the representational dimension of Nepali theatre of Darjeeling. Through the lens of theatre, the study attempts to understand the transforming nature of Nepali identity in Darjeeling hills.

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See: Rai, Indra Bahadur, 1994, Indian Nepali Nationalism and Nepali Poetry, *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol XXIX, No 1.

*CHAPTER IV*

**NEPALI THEATRE IN DARJEELING: THE  
CONSTRUCTION AND REPRESENTATION OF NEPALI  
IDENTITY**

## CHAPTER IV

# NEPALI THEATRE IN DARJEELING: THE CONSTRUCTION AND REPRESENTATION OF NEPALI IDENTITY

### **Origin and Development**

Theatre was one of the foundations on which the process of institutionalisation of the Nepali public sphere rested; a public sphere whose concern revolved around enabling the construction of a modern Nepali community by propagating the discourses of self improvement, social progress and reform. The first ever Nepali play staged in Darjeeling was, *Atalbahadur*, produced by Dhanbir Mukhia under the aegis of Gorkha National Theatrical Party in 1909. This was the period when different theatres of Calcutta and other English, Hindi and Urdu plays was passing through its most creative phase. These theatres already had their presence in Darjeeling and it might not be wrong to assume that they were instrumental in inspiring a number of energetic youths of Darjeeling like Dhanbir Mukhia and others who also wanted their works to be presented in Nepali.

The most authoritative work on the history of theatre has been by two eminent litterateurs in Darjeeling – Dr. Kumar Pradhan's (1982) *Pahilo Pahar* and *History of Nepali Literature* and Dr. Indra Bahadur Rai's (1984) *Darjeelingma Nepali Natakko Ardh Shatabdi*. The assessment of the origins of Nepali theatre in this section will rely upon these two works and other works, namely, Ramlal Adhikari (1977) and Kiran Thakuri (2008). Kumar Pradhan (1982) gives a detailed account on the plays that

were staged in Darjeeling prior to the inception of Nepali theatre. The first ever play staged in Darjeeling was *Euripides Alcestris*, a Greek play, which was performed at the dining hall of Saint Paul's School in 1902. Saint Paul's became the first school in India to stage this play in its original Greek language. English plays too were staged at town hall of Darjeeling. According to Pradhan, *The Girl of Cage* and *Either down Quilt* were staged here on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1904 and 10<sup>th</sup> October 1905 respectively. The students of Dison Girls schools also staged *Pygmalion and Galatea* at their auditorium on 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> September 1906. Besides, the tea garden managers, ICS Officers, other officers of the town and the English elite also occasionally made and played theatres. In addition, Hindi and Urdu plays were frequently performed. Urdu plays like *Shiri Fariyad*, *Tashwira Rahamat*, *Gulru Jarina* were acted during the early decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Bombay Theatre staged lots of Urdu plays at the Gorkha library in Kurseong.

*Atalbahadur* was written by Pahalman Singh Swar, a self-exiled from Nepal, and was published from Benares in 1906. Dhanbir Mukhia got a copy of play at Gorkha library and with the help of Hastalal Giri and Hari Singh Thapa staged it at Nupendra Hindu Public Hall in Darjeeling in 1909. *Atalbahadur*, although, was highly inspired by Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, scholars agree that the play primarily targeted the Rana regime of Nepal and contained anti- Rana stance. For the very reason the play was never allowed to enter Nepal. Soon after *Atalbahadur*, a number of aspiring youths started producing Nepali plays. Hastalal Giri's *Kanjusko dhan* was staged in 1910. In 1911, James Don staged plays like *Vijay Basanta*, *Cindrella*, *Indrasabha*, and *Aladdin*. Likewise, *Rukmani Haran*, *Rajkana* and *Abu Hussain* were produced by Dhanbir Mukhia, Hastalal Giri and James Don respectively in 1913. These early initiatives

guided the further development of Nepali theatre and by the end the twentieth century Darjeeling raised numerous such playwrights who increasingly employed theatre as a means of taking social messages to the wider audience.

The origin and development of theatre has been a subject of detailed analysis in the works of the authors mentioned above. Therefore, the study does not intend to reproduce the same thing here again. However, there are two important observations which need to be outlined here. First, most of the plays written and staged during the first forty years of Nepali Drama in Darjeeling were either translations or adaptations from Hindi or Bengali or plays of other languages. This is not to deny the existence of some of the original plays written during this era, for example, Suryabikram Gyawali's *Shyami Kamari*. The original Nepali plays progressively appeared only after 1940s. The most prominent playwrights of the era after 1940s were Mohan Thapa, Man Bahadur Mukhia, Balkrishna Sam, Kiran Thakuri and Nanda Hankhim and others. Second, notwithstanding the above facts, Nepali theatre right from its inception has provided an institutional space for the development of the modern Nepali identity.

### **Construction of Nepali Identity**

Benedict Anderson argues that one variant of the vernacular becomes the 'print language' and acquires fixity and predominance over the others, which in turn becomes sub-standards (Anderson 1983 c.f. Orsini 2004: 104). As the language of the schools and of the press, the standard vernacular becomes the necessary qualification for access to the public sphere, and medium of communication for a community that transcends close geographical boundaries (Ibid: 104). If one turns to Darjeeling, the

scenario is fairly similar. However, Nepali language in spite of becoming the language of the print could not turn out to be a popular medium of communication for the hill community particularly during the early decades of the twentieth century. It was merely because large sections of the hill populace during this period were still illiterate. The print media could only appeal to the small educated section of the hill people.

The most important institution which emerged as a popular medium of communication and could garner a proletarian base was theatre. In comparison with print, theatre was able to expand rather quickly. One important factor contributed for the rapid expansion of theatre. Unlike print communication, communication through theatre demanded little and no educational qualification from the producers and audience respectively. The argument can be substantiated by looking at educational background of Dhanbir Mukhia who pioneered Nepali theatre in Darjeeling. Mukhia could not even complete the high school studies because of the early demise of his parents when he was thirteen years old (Rai 1984:3). Further, the form of social interaction in Darjeeling prior to the availability of print materials primarily took place exclusively with the context of face -to-face situations. Mediated interaction by the media of print (which became increasingly available towards the last decades of twentieth century), despite of the fact that it had the capacity to transmit information or symbolic content to an indefinite range of potential recipients who are remote in time and space, could not suffice because to participate in such interaction an individual required the ability to read or write- which were largely the reserve of few educated people of Darjeeling. On the other hand, to participate in theatre, even though it is also one form of mediated interaction, did not require such skills.

Thus, Nepali theatre functioned as a vehicle that carried information and symbolic content from the educated class to large section of illiterate hill people. That is why the prominent faces of the early Nepali public sphere, like, Parasmani Pradhan and Suryabikram Gyawali, were actively engaged in theatre. Nepali theatre was able to create a certain kind of social situation in which large numbers of people were linked together in the process of communication and symbolic exchange. A situation which brought people together and helped them to make sense of common identity of unified Nepali ethnic group.

### **Representation of Nepali Identity**

This section will examine the representational dimension of Nepali theatre of Darjeeling. Through the lens of theatre, the study aims to understand how the notion of Nepali identity is changing over the years. Four plays viz. *Ani Dewrali Runcha* (And the Hill-top Cries), *Aagoko Jhilkaharu* (Sparks of Fire), *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* (And the Chameleon Cries) and *Durga Malla* have been selected through purposive sampling. The plays have been selected in such a fashion as to assess and touch upon the various stages of transition of the discourse on Nepali identity of Darjeeling. The study also showcases the various factors leading the transition. All the plays excluding one are based on Darjeeling. One play is based on Nepal. The said play had been primarily chosen simply to maintain continuity with the other remaining plays analysed. The aspect of Nepali life highlighted by the said play gives an important dimension to the study on the transformation of the notion of Nepali identity in India.



### *Search for a New Home*

The acquisition of the hills of Darjeeling by the British opened new avenues of employment opportunities for the people of the surrounding areas. Rapid infrastructural development and opening of tea gardens towards the early 1850s pulled a large number of people to Darjeeling; especially from east Nepal. Some people came here on their will and some out of compulsion. The play *Ani Dewrali Runcha*, written and staged by Man Bahadur Mukhia in Darjeeling in 1972, beautifully dramatizes one such narrative of the early migratory history from Nepal.

The play recounts how a poor peasant Randhoj and his family were forced out from a small village in Nepal. Randhoj lived along with his two unmarried daughters, Juna and Maiya. Problem started when Randhoj decides to marry off her younger daughter Maiya with Bahadur from the nearby village notwithstanding the fact that Maiya had an affair with another man named Samsher. Given the poor financial condition, Randhoj for the purpose of marriage was compelled to borrow Rs 600 from Churanath, a moneylender. In return, Randhoj signs a written agreement according to which he is suppose to give away all his possessions to Churanath if he fails to repay the debt with interest within the stipulated time. Randhoj knew that it will be really difficult for him to pay back the debt. Little relief came to him only after Amber promised to help Randhoj in repaying the money. Amber was Juna's boyfriend and had a good relationship with Randhoj. On the day of marriage, Maiya elopes with his boyfriend Samsher and goes to Darjeeling taking with them all the jewelleries bought for the marriage. Under such circumstances, to protect his honour at the village, Randhoj emphatically convinces his elder daughter Juna to marry Samsher. Samsher was the far cousin of Amber. This marriage happens without the knowledge of

Amber who, the day after the marriage, goes to his maternal home promising Randhoj that he would return back to repay the debt .

On the day before the date for repayment of loan, Amber decides to return back. On the way to his village he visits Samsheer's house only to realise that it was not Maiya but his girlfriend Juna who got married with Samsheer that day. After knowing the bitter truth, Amber right away proceeds towards his village. However, Juna falls sick soon after Amber's leaving. When a local counsellor was called upon, Samsheer comes to know that Juna is four month pregnant. The news was rather shocking because it had only been two months that Juna and Samsheer were married. Chaturman, who was present at the scene, tells Samsheer about the relationship between Juna and Amber and incites him to take revenge for this wrong. Chaturman is Amber's uncle and also the assistant of Churanath, the moneylender. Frustrated Samsheer takes out his *Khukuri* (traditional Nepali knife) and runs behind Amber who had just left. Amber and Samsheer meet in the middle of the jungle and gets engaged in a deadly confrontation; a confrontation which takes the life of Samsheer. Amber flees that very night. Next morning, Randhoj, who since many days was waiting for Amber's arrival, sees Juna coming in a miserable condition. She was forced out by her in-laws. Through Juna he comes to know about everything that happened on the fateful night. The day happens to be the day for the repayment of the loan. Churanath and Chaturman arrive at the scene and ask for money. Since, Randhoj could not pay it, as per the agreement, all the possessions of Randhoj are confiscated.

The play ends as follows:

“Juna : Where will we go now?  
Randhoj : Like the other poor people who are chased away by these rich people, we will also go to Munglang<sup>16</sup>.” (Mukhia 1973:94) (Translation mine)

The author as the closing remark contends that a manner in which a mother weeps when she is separated from her child, the hill top cries for Randhoj and Juna. He argues that the story of lakhs of Nepalis who have settled outside Nepal begins like this. However, the perspective on movement of people depicted by the story should not be generalised. As already discussed in the chapter two, this is only one among the diverse range of factors leading to population movement from Nepal to Darjeeling.

### *Fading Memories and Emerging Ideas of Home*

*Location: Somewhere in Darjeeling*

*Year : 1849*

*Context : Seeing the hills breaking apart at site of road construction.*

“Rashadhoj: The way these hills are breaking apart, every memories of our life are also breaking apart.

Makare: You are right Uncle! These days the love towards our homeland is gradually fading away.” (Thapa 1975) (Translation mine)

Rashadhoj and Makare begin talking about their memories back home when Chandrabir enters. Seeing Rashadhoj and Makare, Chandrabir stops for a while and

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<sup>16</sup> Darjeeling was also referred as Munglang by the people of Nepal.

starts chatting with the duo. Chandrabir was on his way to call *Sudayni* (local counsellor) to aid Bhujel's wife who is about to give birth to a new child. Before they finish their conversation and Chandrabir could go ahead, they come to know that Bhujel's wife gave birth to a baby girl. Hearing this:

“Chandrabir: The new voice of our new generation has started. Had she been born in her own motherland, her destiny would have been different. Nevertheless, you have to make this place as your motherland.

Makare: Sorry for interrupting Uncle! The place where she is born is indeed her motherland. We came here along with the land. This land was treacherously taken away from us by the British.

Rashadhoj: You are of course right. But do you think that our new generation after understanding their ancestor's history will be able to return back our land?” You know our hands have grown old by breaking these hills apart. (Ibid) (Translation mine)

The above lines are taken from the first scene of Mohan Thapa's play *Aagoko Jhilkaharu* (Sparks of Fire) written and staged first at the hall of *Gorkha Dukha Niwarak Sammelan* in Darjeeling in 1976, four years after *Ani Dewrali Runcha* was staged. Reading *Aagoko Jhilkaharu* after *Ani Dewrali Runcha*, one would straightaway feel that the later is the continuation of the former. Whereas *Ani Dewrali Runcha* narrates how people were forced out of Nepal to Darjeeling, *Aagoko Jhilkaharu* details the status of these people in Darjeeling. Rashadhoj, Chandrabir and Makare and their families like Randhoj and her daughter had come from Nepal just few years back. However, the said two plays starkly deviate on the understanding of

the self. When Manbahadur Mukhia highlights the fate of the hill-top who weeps remembering lakhs of Nepalis who had settled in India, he is indeed attempting to sustain if not nourish the fading memories of Nepal among the Nepalis of Darjeeling. He wanted to remind them about the lessening of love towards their motherland. On the contrary, Mohan Thapa's *Aagoko Jhilkaharu* though considers the Mukhia's surmise; however does not intent to stimulate these feelings. He rather seeks to provide a new dimension to the identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling. His effort is apparent in the following stanzas of the play:

Chandrabir: The new voice of our new generation has started. Had she born in her own motherland, her destiny could have been different. Nevertheless, you have to make this place as your motherland.

Makare: Sorry for interrupting Uncle! The place where she is born is indeed her motherland. We came here along with the land. This land was treacherously taken away from us by the British.

Rashadhoj: You are of course right. But do you think that our new generation after understanding their ancestor's history will be able to return back our land?" You know our hands have grown old by breaking these hills apart.

In the above stanzas, Chandrabir shoulders the new born baby the responsibility to make Darjeeling as her motherland. For him the original motherland is Nepal. In response, when Makare contends that they came there along with the land; the land which he allege was treacherously taken away by the British, he wanted to draw attention to the fact that Darjeeling hills was part of Nepal and hence the motherland of Bhujel's new born daughter. By establishing Darjeeling as the motherland of the

Nepalis, he was trying to counter the popular misconception or misrecognition that the Nepalis of Darjeeling are not the *bhumiputra* ('sons of the soil') and therefore migrants. This alleged misrecognition as we comprehend from Thapa's play was there within the Nepali community as well as among the other communities of Darjeeling.

Readers may wonder how the said concept of 'misrecognition' can exist as early as 1849 when people were just starting to come to Darjeeling. Here, I want to bring in one significant point. In a given society, there may be many frames with which a particular subject is comprehended and there is no mechanism to detect them all. However, by studying available communication text through framing analysis, we may deconstruct some of them. The present study by analysing the plays reflecting upon the identity of Nepalis is likewise attempting to deconstruct some of its frames. But the readers need to be reminded that the perspective or frame we deconstruct or derive is of the period when the play was written. For example, if a play was written in 1950 but staged in 2000, then the deconstructed frame will be of 1950 and not 2000. Therefore, the notions of "fading memories of Nepal" and "misrecognition" deconstructed from the plays analysed above should be regarded as the frames of the period when the play was written and not of the period the story is referring to.

### *Fading Memories of Nepal*

As part of my field study, I was interviewing a group of eminent Nepali litterateurs at Devkota Sangh in Siliguri. When we just started talking about Manbahadur Mukhia's *Ani Dewrali Runcha*, one of the speakers outrightly suggested me not to consider the play citing reason that the play portrays the relationship of the Nepalis of Darjeeling with Nepal. From here we can comprehend the status of the *frame* that colligates the

identity of Nepalis of Darjeeling with Nepal. Like the fading memories of Nepal among the Nepalis of Darjeeling, this frame of reference- what I shall call the *dominant frame*, has gradually faded away. Yet, merely looking at the title of some of the plays staged during 1950s to mid 1970s, one may regard the said frame as the common frame during the above period. Some of the plays of this era were Dharmaraj Thapa's *Bhulayko Chaina* (Still not Forgotten) staged in 1953, Mohan Thapa's *Nawlo Desh* (New Country), *Videsh Kina* (Why Abroad), *Seema* (Border) and *Bhulayko Bato* (The Forgotten Road) staged during 1954, 1958, 1962 and 1964 respectively and Man Bahadur Mukhia's *Ani Dewrali Runcha* (And the Hill-top Cries) and *Pheri Itihas Dohorincha* (History Repeats Again) staged in 1972 and 1974 respectively<sup>17</sup>.

An important conjecture may be drawn from the above data. As stated earlier, associating the Nepalis of Darjeeling with Nepal might have been the popular frame employed by the theatre practitioners to depict Nepali identity of Darjeeling between 1950s and mid 1970s- I shall call this phase as the *dominant paradigm* of Nepali theatre. But, starting from mid 70s, an *alternative paradigm* slowly began emerging. This rejected the very premise of the former and developed alternative ways to foreground the identity of Nepalis of Darjeeling.

### *Battling Misrecognition*

The shift from the dominant to the alternative has to be read within the historical context. As Charles Taylor in his *Politics of Recognition* argues, "...our identity is partly shaped by recognition or its absence, often by the *misrecognition* of others... *misrecognition* shows not just a lack of due respect. It can inflict a grievous wound,

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<sup>17</sup> Most of the plays mentioned above were never published and despite the arduous effort by the author their manuscripts could not be deciphered.

saddling its victims with a crippling self-hatred.” The non-recognition of Nepalis of India as Indians has largely shaped the identity of Indian Nepalis; the identity suffered a heavy setback from 1960s when sizeable numbers of Nepalis were expelled from various parts of India. In the course of *bhumiputra* (‘sons of the soil’) movements, 8000 Nepalis were expelled from Mizoram in 1967, 2000 from Manipur in 1980, between 13000 and 17000 from Meghalaya in 1980-86 , and thousands fled Assam after 1979 (Hutt 1997: 124). Nepalis were also expelled in large numbers from Burma during the 1960’s (Ibid.). These events inflicted a grievous wound among the Nepalis all over India. The Nepalis of Darjeeling although were not subjected to such a predicament primarily because unlike their counterparts in the above places they were in majority in Darjeeling, however, Darjeeling became the focal point for resistance. The crisis manifested itself through a series of civil conflicts within Darjeeling and gradually the Nepalis here began asserting their Indian identity in the form of a separate state of Gorkhaland during 1980s.

The dominant frame no longer appealed to the people under these changed social situation. It was indeed conceived as threatening the existence of the Nepalis of Darjeeling too because it rather reinforced the claim on which the Nepali expulsion was being legitimised elsewhere. These circumstances called for a need to seek an alternative way to foreground Nepali identity of Darjeeling. This led to the passing of the dominant paradigm and the alternative paradigm of Nepali theatre slowly emerged towards the mid-1970s. The early trace of the alternative paradigm is found in Mohan Thapa’s play *Aagoko Jhilkaharu*. Hither, it is important to know that Mohan Thapa himself was also the most influential playwright of the dominant paradigm.



The alternative paradigm in its effort to assert the Indian identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling in particular and the Nepalis of India at large began drawing new symbolic forms abandoning the old. It framed and represented the identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling in complete alienation with Nepal. The alternative paradigm by early to mid 1980s became the dominant frame of reference and after the Gorkhaland movement of 1986 has completely replaced the earlier dominant paradigm.

### ***Self-introspection and Quest for Recognition***

The expulsion of thousands of Nepalis from India between 1960s and 1980s made two things apparent. It ensued in the quest for recognition among the Nepalis of India who increasingly began asserting their Indian identity. But more importantly, the Nepalis set about self-introspecting themselves. They slowly started making sense of their own identity and in the process came out with problems, causes and solutions concerning the plight of their community. C.K. Shestra's play *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* (And the Chameleon Cries) written and staged throughout the length and breadth of Darjeeling between 1980 and 1986 aptly dramatizes the said process of self-introspection.

*Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* opens with a scene where Indra Bahadur and his wife Fulmaya have been excitedly waiting for their sons. Their sons were coming home after a long time. Four sons enter the stage one after the other. First enters their eldest son Birkha Bahadur followed by Chandra Bahadur, Saila and Kancha. Indra Bahadur's excitement soon turns into extreme disappointment after meeting his sons. He feels that his eldest son Birkha Bahadur had become like a plainsman. Birkha Bahadur has been working in Bihar for the past many years and his plainsman outlook

is depicted by symbols like wearing *dhoti*, speaking Nepali in Bihari accent, chewing tobacco etc. Similar was the case with his other sons. Chandra Bahadur, who has been staying in Kolkata, enters home speaking Bengali with a fish and *rasogullas* (sweets) in his hands and a camera hung from his neck. Saila enters wearing hip-hop dress with a guitar. Kancha however lives at home and is a politician.

Indra Bahadur's height of disappointment attains the breaking point when his sons completely misidentify the four portraits hung at the wall of his living room. Birkha Bahadur identifies the portrait of Laxmi Prasad Devkota as Ishwar Chandra Vidhyasagar. Chandra Bahadur who stays at Kolkata identifies Lekhnath Poudal as Rabindranath Tagore. Similarly, Saila identifies Balkrishna Sam as Shakespeare and asks his father, showing the portrait of Bhanubhakta, who the man with a funny cap is.

The play *Ani Bhaleyungro Runcha* circuitously establishes that the present agony of the Gorkha *jati* is due to lack of, respect, concern and love among younger generations towards their *jati*, language and culture. It equally blames the political leaders for not standing for the cause of the Gorkha *jati* and instead working for their own interest. The play maintains that though it is very beneficial to gain knowledge of various other languages and cultures, one should not disregard his own. At the end, the playwright asks all the Gorkha sons to pledge that no matter where they go, they will uphold the identity of their *jati* and always come forward for its well being.

Locating the play within the historical context, 1980s marked the surfacing of Gorkhaland demand in a more organised manner after the formation of various

political parties viz. Pranta Parishad, Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) and Swantra Manch. The movement was getting stronger and strategies for success were being worked out. The playwright himself was an active member of Pranta Parishad; a political party which was very vocal in reviving the Gorkhaland demand during the early 80s. The success of the Gorkhaland movement like any social movements was also determined by the kind of support base it could garner. Popular support base was something which was lacking during the previous movements for statehood in Darjeeling and the political leaders were fully aware of it. Under such context, C.K. Shestra's *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* can be basically regarded as an endeavour to mobilize support from all the sections of Nepali community living in different parts of India. The fact that the play was staged in various parts of the North-eastern states<sup>18</sup> also substantiates this assumption. By highlighting the exasperating state of the Gorkha *jati*, language and culture, the play indeed sought to invigorate the feelings of *jatitva* (community feeling) among the Indian Nepalis.

The following is the scene that follows after Birkha Bahadur comes home, interacts with Indra Bahadur and Fulmaya in the living room and proceeds towards the kitchen to see his sister.

Indra Bahadur	: Our elder son has completely turned into a plainsman.
Fulmaya	: After staying in Bihar for so many years, if not a plainsman then will he look like a Chinese? I insisted you not to send him but it was your decision. Now face the consequences.

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<sup>18</sup> C.K. Shestra, interviewed by the author, Siliguri, 15 February 2014.

Indra Bahadur

: What could I have done? How could I see my young sons staying unemployed for their entire life? And you know very well *that our sons, in our own place don't get any employment opportunities*. (Emphasis mine) At least now he is doing something in his life.

When we contrast *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* with *Aagoko Jhilkaharu*, the former varies on a number of significant aspects. First, unlike *Aagoko Jhilkaharu*, *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* attests no uncertainty on the question of whether Darjeeling is the home of the Nepalis or not. This is apparent from the above lines of Indra Bahadur who avers: "...our sons, in our own place don't get any employment opportunities". Second, *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* completely offers a new dimension to the understanding on migration. Unlike the previous two plays which talks about of Nepalis coming to Darjeeling, this play rather prefers to speak about movement of Nepalis from Darjeeling to outside. Thirdly, the play draws new symbolic forms when defining the identity of the Nepalis of Darjeeling. It highlights the poor status of Nepali *jati*, language and culture, blames economic stagnation coupled with apathy among Nepalis towards their *jati*, language and culture for the same, brings in revered cultural icons to determine the nature, value, quality, ability, extent, or significance of Gorkha *jati* and requests assurance from the younger generations to uphold its identity and integrity.

Whether or not *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* staged between 1980 and 1986 was successful in inculcating the values to *jatitva* among the younger generations is a

matter that is subject to open discussion or debate, however, the feeling of *jatitva* manifested itself overtly in the form of Gorkhaland movement in 1986. Although the agitation ended with the creation of an autonomous body, Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council, on July 1988, there was a widespread belief among the people that the political identity of the Nepalis of India has not been secured yet. This supposition has to be read within the perspective of the history of state reorganisation in India. Post-independent India demarcated the state on the basis of language. For example, Punjab was created for the Punjabis, Nagaland for Nagas, Tamil Nadu for Tamils, etc. Such tradition led to a legacy in India where an identity of an individual is sought on the basis of the state he/she belongs. Under such circumstances, every Nepali in India is believed to have come from the neighbouring Nepal notwithstanding the fact that there are lakhs of Nepalis in India who are of Indian origin. This is the primary reason why the Nepalis of India prefers to identify themselves as Gorkhas and not Nepalis for a simple reason to differentiate themselves from the Nepalis of Nepal.

One such play that beautifully showcases the quest for recognition among the Indian Nepalis after Gorkhaland movement of 80s is Kiran Thakuri's *Durga Malla*. But before we discuss about the play let us briefly know who Durga Malla was. The following account on Durga Malla is taken from Ramesh Khati article "*A Glimpse at the Life of Veer Shaheed Major Durga Malla*" published in Gorkhatimes on August 24, 2009.

Durga Malla was born on 1 July 1913 at village called Doiwala in Dehradun district of Uttaranchal. He was the son of Ganga Ram Malla who was a Jamadar (now called Naib-Subedar) of Gorkha Rifles. The Dandi March of Mahatma Gandhi in 1930 to

violate 'salt rule' started generating patriotic sentiments in the heart of Durga Malla, motivating him to take part in the freedom struggle. At the time of the *Satyagraha* movement, Durga Malla was only a student of ninth class, but he was actively engaged in anti-British activities in his locality. He used to enter the Gorkha battalion area in the night with some of his friends to paste posters of freedom struggle. Durga Malla initially got recruited at the Gorkha Rifles but joined the Indian National Army soon after its formation in 1942. Initially, he was given the responsibility to mobilize volunteers for the Indian National Army from different Gorkha battalions. Later, by virtue of his patriotic feelings, his sense of duty towards his country and his valour earned his promotion to the rank of Major. On 27 March 1944, when Durga Malla was on a mission to collect information of the enemy camps, he was captured by the soldiers of enemy side at Ukhrul in Manipur near Kohima. After his arrest, he was kept in the prison at Red Fort, New Delhi as a prisoner of war. On 15th August 1944, the great patriot was taken to Delhi Central Jail from the Red Fort and hanged until death on 25th August 1944.

The play *Durga Malla* tells the story of Durga Malla's friend Bajey<sup>19</sup>, an old man, who stayed at a small village in Darjeeling since his retirement from the Gorkha Rifles. He was with Durga Malla at the Gorkha Rifles until Durga Malla left the Rifles to join the Indian National Army in 1944. Bajey always carried a radio set with him; a radio set that was given to him by Durga Malla. He often reiterated that Durga Malla got that radio as a gift from Netaji Subash Chandra Bose and when he received it from Durga Malla, Durga Malla said that one day good news for all the Gorkhas of

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<sup>19</sup> Bajey loosely means an old man. His name has not been referred throughout the play. Therefore, I would be calling him as Bajey itself.

India will come from that radio. Since then Bajey have been keeping the radio securely with an expectation that good news will finally come. Bajey had a son, daughter-in-law and a grandson but they lived outside Darjeeling leaving Bajey alone in a miserable condition. They did not stay with Bajey because they believed that Bajey was suffering from tuberculosis and feared that they will also carry the disease if they lived with him. Bajey, on the other hand felt proud for it because he held that the disease was something that he had inherited from Durga Malla. His daughter-in-law indeed asserted that the whole Darjeeling is suffering from tuberculosis. That is why she wanted to take her husband and son away from Darjeeling to America permanently. However, her dreams could come true only after Bajey hands over his huge land to them. For this reason, his son and daughter-in-law used to occasionally visit him. They actually wanted to fly to America with the money which they expected to get after selling the land. But Bajey knew their cruel intension and therefore always refused to transfer the land.

One day when a group of youths from the village were celebrating the anniversary of India's Independence Day, Bajey asks them whether the Gorkhas of India are really independent. He shows them the old radio and tells them the story about it. However, Bajey gets really disappointed to learn that the group of youths does not know who Durga Malla is. So he tells them the story of Durga Malla. These youths slowly gets attracted towards Durga Malla and his story. They often came to visit Bajey to hear the story of Durga Malla.

Few days later, Bajey's son and the daughter-in law comes again to visit Bajey. This time they bring along with them their son Rajesh hoping that Bajey after seeing his

grandson would change his decision. Rajesh was meeting his grandfather for the first time. His parents prefer to wait outside and send only Rajesh inside along with the document. Before going inside, Rajesh's mother suggests him to wear a mask to avoid infection. Rajesh enters the house to find his grandfather in the last stage of his life. After seeing the miserable condition of his grandfather he gets shattered and blames his parents for alienating him from his grandfather and from Darjeeling. After talking for some time with Rajesh, Bajey dies on the scene. At the final scene Rajesh opens his masks and pulls the spectacles from the dead body of his grandfather and wears it.

When we critically analyze the above play, we come across various metaphors and implicit statements that deal with the justifications of Nepali identity. Durga Malla always remained worried about the non-recognition and misrecognition of the Nepalis in India. He is known for his respect, concern and love towards the Gorkha *jati*, language and culture. The following song composed by him reflects his concern and love towards the Gorkha *jati*:

*Bachau Aayera Aa Bhagwan* (Come God and save)

*Sutay Ka Jatilai* (the sleeping community)

*Bato Dekhau* (Show them the way)

*K Bhayo Hamilai Aaja* (What happened to us today)

*Kina Buddhi Bhayo Lato* (Why our brains have become dump)

*Bachau Aayera Aa Bhagwan* (Come God and save)

(C.f. Thakuri 2005)

When Bajey with pride claims that the tuberculosis he carried was inherited from Durga Malla, tuberculosis here actually connotes Durga Malla's concern and love



towards the Gorkha *jati* and his quest for recognition of the Gorkhas of India. Good news for Gorkhas which Durga Malla was mentioning while giving the radio to Bajey fundamentally imply the dream of 'Gorkhaland' becoming a reality because, as mentioned several times earlier, a separate state for the Gorkhas has always been conceived as the only solution for the well being and recognition of the Gorkhas of India. Bajey's daughter-in-law averring that the whole Darjeeling is suffering from tuberculosis indirectly expresses non-feasibility of the demand and resultant pain, misery, anguish and distress emanating from it. Selling the land and settling permanently in America entails compromising the dream for statehood permanently. Rajesh's act of opening the mask and willing to be infected by his grandfather's disease and wearing the spectacles of grandfather signifies the younger generation embracing the dream of Bajey and by extension the dream of Durga Malla.

As we see, akin to *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha*, the play *Durga Malla* too highlights the agony of the Gorkha *jati*, it seeks to foreground the lack of concern and love among the Gorkhas towards their *jati*, language and culture and attempts to reinvigorate the feeling of *jatitva* among the younger generation. However on the use of symbolic forms, there is a marked deviation. *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* in an effort to determine the nature, value and significance of Gorkha *jati* reveres eminent Nepali literary figures as the *jati* icons. It brings in Lekhnath Poudal, Laxmi Prasad Devkota, Balkrishna Sam and Bhanubhakta. Here, unlike *Aagoko Jhilkaharu*, though *Ani Bhaleymungro Runcha* attested no uncertainty on the question of homeland and identified the Nepalis of Darjeeling in complete alienation with Nepal, the symbolic forms it drew were essentially from Nepal. All the Nepali literary figures mentioned above are from Nepal. In contrast, *Durga Malla* draws even the symbolic forms from

within India. Durga Malla hailed from Dehradun and is well-known for his sacrifice for the cause of his country's freedom. By bringing in Durga Malla as a potent *jati* icon, the play not only aims to foreground the contribution of Indian Gorkhas in the country's freedom movement but it purportedly also attempts to affirm the Indian identity of the Gorkhas of India. The transformation in the use of symbolic forms should be against the backdrop of the Gorkhaland movement of 1986. During and after the Gorkhaland movement, Nepalis of Darjeeling soon began introspecting and redefining themselves. Major discourses concerning whether or not Agam Singh Giri of Darjeeling should replace Bhanubhakta of Nepali as the *jatya* poet of the Indian Nepalis and debate on the use of Gorkha or Nepali for the name of the language on the eight schedule cropped out mainly to differentiate the Nepalis of India from the Nepalese of Nepal<sup>20</sup>. These circumstances marked the utmost shift from the dominant paradigm to the alternative paradigm of Nepali theatre in Darjeeling.

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<sup>20</sup> The differentiation of the Nepalis from the Nepalese here is taken from T B Subba. He spells the citizens of Nepal as "Nepalese", and the Nepali speaking Indians as "Nepalis". See his, *Ethnicity, State and Development: A Case Study of the Gorkhaland Movement*, Vikas, New Delhi, 1992, pp. 67-74.

*CHAPTER V*

**CONCLUSION**

## CONCLUSION

This dissertation has employed a variety of analytical approaches to understand the role of Nepali theatre of Darjeeling in the construction and representation of Nepali/Gorkha identity in India. Keeping in view that theatre was one of the foundations on which the process of institutionalisation of the Nepali public sphere of Darjeeling rested; this dissertation first studies the roots of the emergence of the early Nepali public sphere in Darjeeling. The findings here shows that Nepali public sphere emerged within the context of a gradual transformation in the social organisation of *symbolic power* beginning from the last decades of nineteenth century; a transformation led by two significant changes viz. the adoption of Nepali language as the *lingua franca* of the Darjeeling Hills and the continuing expansion of various means of knowledge and learning. It was further stimulated by the rise of non-Nepali public institutions. These changes pressed for an increasing desire among the Nepalis of Darjeeling to create their own discursive space where even the issues concerning their community could be highlighted and deliberated upon. This guided the studious development of various institutions of Nepali public sphere towards the early twentieth century giving rise to new forms of interaction and new kinds of social relationships in which information and symbolic content could be exchanged between individuals. The transformation in the social organisation of symbolic power enabled the construction of a new type of Nepali community and along with it the emergence of the Nepali public sphere in colonial Darjeeling.

As theatre was one of the foremost institutions of Nepali public sphere, the dissertation contemplates the role of Nepali theatre in construction of Nepali identity in Darjeeling. Its process of development indicates that Nepali theatre here emerged as the most popular institution because it could embrace the large sections of the hill populace who were mostly illiterate. Theatre as an institution, unlike other institutions of those days that primarily used print communication, employed simple language akin to common language spoken by the people. It did not demand from the participants the ability to read and write. Therefore, Nepali theatre was able to create a certain kind of social situation in which large numbers of people were linked together in the process of communication and symbolic exchange. A situation which brought people together and helped them to make sense of common identity of unified Nepali ethnic group.

On the theatre's representation of Nepali identity, the study has divided Nepali theatre into two paradigms viz. dominant paradigm and alternative paradigm. Dominant paradigm basically refers to that tradition of Nepali theatre active between 1950s and 1970s which essentially juxtaposed the Nepalis of Darjeeling in relation to Nepal. From the beginning of mid-1970s, dominant paradigm slowly gave way to the alternative paradigm. The alternative paradigm, on the other hand, came out with alternative ideas to foreground the identity of Nepalis of Darjeeling. It progressively drew new symbolic forms to alienate the Nepalis of Darjeeling from Nepal. However, the study reveals that the transition from the dominant paradigm to the alternative paradigm was not sudden. It was rather a process which the present dissertation has attempted to decipher by critically analysing four plays.

The alternative paradigm came into being under a social situation where large numbers of Nepalis were being expelled from different parts of India. The dominant paradigm of Nepali theatre no longer appealed to the Nepalis of Darjeeling. It was rather conceived as threatening the existence of the Nepalis in India because it had the tendency to reinforce the claim on which the Nepalis expulsion was being legitimised elsewhere. These circumstances led to the passing of the dominant paradigm and an alternative paradigm of Nepali theatre slowly emerged towards the mid-1970s. A more systematic approach to the statehood demand that emanated in 1980s further reinforced the alternative paradigm. Nepali theatre of this period strongly engaged in the process of self-introspection. It foregrounded the agony of the Gorkha *jati*, language and culture. Although there was no uncertainty on whether Darjeeling is the home of Nepalis or not and identified the Nepalis of Darjeeling in complete alienation with Nepal, it drew several the symbolic that were essentially associated with Nepal. The utmost shift from the dominant paradigm to the alternative paradigm sufficed after the Gorkhaland movement of 1980s. In the aftermath of the movement, there was a serious academic and political debate on the use of symbolic forms. This led even theatre to cautiously choose the symbolic forms.

There are number of similarities among the plays studied above. All the plays single out the identity crisis of Nepalis of India as their fundamental problem. The problem is corroborated by both internal and external causes. The obligation to seek for the solution of the problem has always been pressed upon the new generation. Attempt has been made by all the plays to invigorate the feeling of *jatitva* among the younger generation. And recognition of the Nepalis of India by granting them a separate state has been believed as the final solution to the problem.

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