**The *Land* in Gorkhaland: Rethinking Belonging in Darjeeling, India**

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Since the mid-1980s, regional separatist parties in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal have been agitating for the creation of an Indian state of Gorkhaland, which would comprise the region’s majority of Indian Nepalis, or “Gorkhas.” In the autumn of 2007 a newly formed political party, the Gorkha Janamukti Morcha, or GJMM, reignited the Gorkhaland agitation. Since then, GJMM leaders’ arguments for statehood have often taken spatial form. Tea and timber, Darjeeling’s two most abundant natural resources, “flow down the mountain,” but revenue from these industries rarely comes back up. Since Darjeeling’s founding as a British hill station in the 1830s, tourists have come “up the mountain” to enjoy the cool air and Himalayan vistas, and to catch a glimpse of the region’s natural wonders: red pandas, snow leopards, and cascading rivers. With a separate state of Gorkhaland, the economic boons of the region’s industries—in particular the “three T’s” (tea, timber, and tourism)—would circulate back from the plains to the mountains.

This spatial vision of injustice is encapsulated in the Nepali linguistic dynamic between *oraalo* (downhill) and *ukaalo* (uphill). Himalayan scholars have long analyzed the gravitational and capital forces on resources and people that force them to “go down” (Hitchcock 1961; Seddon et al 2002). Stopping downhill-uphill circulation through general strikes, or *bandh*s (literally “closed”) was a key tactic in the direct actions of the GJMM. Bandhs included not only closures of all businesses, but also the roads and railways that connected Darjeeling to the rest of India. During bandhs, rallies, and frequent month-long “cultural programs,” GJMM politicians insisted that Darjeeling residents, both women and men, wear “traditional” dress. Party leaders promoted performances of Gorkha dance, song, and theater as a way of showing to a wider public the existence of a distinct identity. Their speeches were peppered with metaphorical references to the deep relationships between Gorkhas and the soil, flowers, and other features of the Himalayan landscape—the same images that lured tourists to the hills.

During fieldwork from 2008 to 2011, I attended rallies and lived through bandhs with Gorkhas who supported the movement but who were not part of the GJMM vanguard: women tea workers, laborers in markets and restaurants, students, and recent graduates. Bandhs and cultural performances are common expressions of belonging in Indian subnationalist movements. These activities attest to an overlap between place and identity. They reinforce the notion that subnational movements are struggles *for land* by a particular group of people. Existing scholarship on subnationalism in India has done much to illustrate the multiple meanings of ethnic, “tribal”, and indigenous belonging, but land itself has figured less prominently in these analyses (Bagchi 2012; Baruah 1999; Middleton 2011; Nag 2002; Singh 2010; Shneiderman 2014). In this paper, I argue that for many Indian Nepalis (for Gorkhas; I use these terms interchangeably as do my interlocutors), the salient political struggle was as much *with land* as it was *for land*. For those outside the political vanguard, dress codes, performances, and speeches were all “good fun,” but they were *just* political (Besky 2014). Most Gorkhas with whom I worked knew that they were not *indigenous* inhabitants of Darjeeling. Many were the descendants of laborers recruited from Nepal during the colonial era to work on British tea, timber, and cinchona plantations.These plantation crops were likewise imported to the region during the colonial period. Gorkhas also helped construct Darjeeling town, a British hill station and mountain refuge.

The experience of land for Gorkhas is, to paraphrase Donna Haraway, one of troubled “inheritance” (Haraway 2008, 2010). The story of Gorkhaland is one of both asserting ethnic belonging and struggling to maintain plants, animals, and an urban infrastructure whose place in the region, while firmly rooted, is far from “natural.” Questions about the rights of Gorkhas to place are bound up with questions about the ecological effects of tea plantation monoculture, the sustainability of forests, and the appropriateness of a sprawling city in the high Himalayan foothills.

To understand how land figures into questions of belonging requires a move away from attention to strategic representations of people and place and toward analysis of everyday experience. After offering some historical background and framing, I track three struggles with land. First, I examine the problem of landslides on tea plantations, showing how Gorkhas were implicated not only in the maintenance of a monoculture but also in working the edges of tea and forest. As a result of pressure on plantation land, as I show next, Gorkhas have begun moving to Darjeeling town. Environmental activists and longtime town residents have begun to blame this new population for speeding the decay of colonial infrastructure, particularly through a lack of attention to waste management. Debates about working-class Gorkhas’ role in urban waste and infrastructure deterioration came to a head in Cyclone Aila in September 2009 and raised further questions about who and what belonged in the region. Despite moves by some Gorkha activists to use Aila as a pretext for more local control of environmental management, the state and the GJMM have continued to emphasize stewardship of indigenous wildlife, particularly endangered red pandas, in their discourses about land. The outsized place of pandas, as I argue in the final section, elides the everyday encounters between townspeople and urban “pest” animals. These encounters, which result in part from the squeeze on land, reveal a further problematic overlap between discourses of ethnic and ecological belonging.

In discussing how questions of belonging manifested in landslides, urban decay, and confrontations with waste and animals, I bring attention to what Rob Nixon, following Anna Tsing (2004), calls the “ecological ordinary”—the “quotidian,” historically and geographically particular interactions between people, land, and nonhuman creatures that tend to defy easy political representation (Nixon 2011: 184). Ethnographically, I focus on a series of “edge effects.” In ecology, an edge effect describes the results of contact between two types of ecosystems. Nixon uses the term metaphorically, to describe a crossover between humanistic, social scientific, and ecological knowledge about the environment (Nixon 2011: 30, see also Cronon 2014). I use the term in this way, but I also call attention to the ways in which struggles with land in Darjeeling occurred in the region’s material “edges”: where tea plantations filled with the imported Chinese *j*ā*t* (variety) of tea bush meet “native” forest, where a Raj-era town meets Himalayan countryside, and where humans meet nonhumans. Here, I define “land” as an ongoing series of human-nonhuman interactions, and I draw on Emily O’Gorman’s idea that belonging is never simply a question of biology or culture in isolation, but a terrain of contested biocultural meanings (2014: 285). In Darjeeling, land was less a passive territory or raw material than a confluence of economic, aesthetic, climatic, and biological activity. A view of Gorkhaland as a struggle *for* land might focus on questions of geopolitical or ethnic *boundary* making (Barth 1998). A focus on *edges*, on the other hand, is less about boundaries than about overlaps—everyday instabilities and vulnerabilities that make and unmake land and people’s place within it. As long-term components of Darjeeling, tea, timber, inorganic waste, colonial infrastructure, and pests straddle the edge between “invasive” and local.

**Darjeeling as Agrarian Environment**

Nepali claims to belonging in the region have continually been hamstrung by histories of labor migration and colonial service. Gorkhas and their ancestors were all deeply implicated in the crafting of an extractive landscape in which imported plantation crops (tea, softwood timber, cinchona) were planted in vast monocultures, and in which a tourist industry grew up to commodify the “nature” that surrounded the plantations. Darjeeling is an “agrarian environment,” in which the conservation of nature and its capitalist cultivation have gone hand in hand with the production of identity (Agrawal and Sivaramikrishnan 2000; Gidwani 2000).

19th century British texts characterized Nepalis as “good workers:” amiable, brave, and industrious, in what Piya Chatterjee calls a “colonial taxonomy of labor” (2001: 77-78; Golay 2006).  Ideas about Nepali men and women (as well as indigenous Lepchas and Bhutias) as endowed with natural proclivities to certain kinds of labor were woven into the colonial economy. When British settlers established tea plantations in the mid-19th century Darjeeling, which was then sparsely populated, they recruited farmers from Nepal’s eastern hills to build and work them. Nepali ethnicized labor, however, is perhaps most apparent in the construction of Nepalis as a “martial race” and recruitment for special “Gurkha” army regiments (see Des Chene 1991). Gurkhas were valorized as loyal and brave (Golay 2006). These regiments were dispatched to quash independence revolts around India, and into the far corners of the empire, from Hong Kong to Fiji.

By the turn of the 20th century, Nepalis (often with Tibetans, Bhutias, and Lepchas) began forming social and political associations, representing themselves alternately as “Nepalis,” as “Hillmen,” and as “Gorkhas.” The first call for administrative recognition of Gorkhas was officially lodged by the Hillmen’s Association 1907 (Rhodes and Rhodes 2006). Pre-independence movements for Gorkha recognition gave way to post-independence movements to break the region off from Bengal. In 1947, union leaders used Gorkhas’ senses of shared identity as well as their concerns about deteriorating working conditions to initiate the first calls for a separate state of “Gorkhastan” (Subba 1992). Those calls failed, and the Darjeeling district became a part of the Indian state of West Bengal. As a minority in their own state, and as a group known for its loyalty to the British military, Gorkhas remained marginalized.

After independence, leaders of the Nepali Bhasa Andolan (Nepali Language Movement) fought for decades for language recognition.  In 1961, Nepali became an official language of the Darjeeling district (Subba 1992). Amid a series of high profile attacks on Nepalis elsewhere in India, the 1980s saw a rise in Nepali political action. In literature and political spheres, Gorkhas began articulating what they still call an “identity crisis” (see Sinha and Subba 2003; Subba et al 2009). They are Indian citizens but perceived as foreigners. As Michael Hutt (1997) describes in his account of the Nepali diaspora, beginning in the 1960s, after a series of Indo-Chinese border disputes, thousands of Nepalis and other “foreigners” were expelled from Northeast India, where they had been living for generations. By the end of the 1980s, tens of thousands of Indian Nepalis had been evicted from Bhutan, a country to which the King recruited them generations before for agricultural labor, much like the Nepalis of Darjeeling. When Gorkhas went to Nepal, their behavior, especially the way they spoke Nepali, marked them as outsiders as well. It was against the backdrop of evictions that the 1980s Gorkhaland agitation took hold.

From 1986 to 1988, Subhash Ghisingh, who grew up on a Darjeeling tea garden, and his political party, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), led a revolt that ended with the formation of a semi-autonomous Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (Ganguly 2005; Subba 1992).  This agitation pitted GNLF activists against both the West Bengal government and India’s Central Reserve Police Force. Memories of violence of the first Gorkhaland were still vivid during my fieldwork during the second Gorkhaland agitation, which began after a decade of unrest, as ethnic groups in Darjeeling petitioned for recognition under the 6th Schedule of the Indian Constitution (see Middleton 2011, 2013a, 2013b; Shneiderman 2014). In late 2007, another tea garden resident, Bimal Gurung, and his party, the GJMM, rejuvenated the movement for Gorkha subnational autonomy (Bagchi 2012; Middleton 2011).

**Landscapes of Subnationalism**

Most recent accounts of subnational belonging in India focus on *representational* practices: language, ethnic identification, and the formation of political parties (see Singh 2008, 2010). Darjeeling’s subnational separatist politics have tended to take their most visible form in three kinds of actions: violent attacks on people and property; bandhs; and displays of cultural difference. In this, the Gorkhaland movement is similar to other similar agitations: in Nagaland, Telangana, Bodoland, Uttarakhand (see Baruah 1999; Nag 2002). Critical analysis of these movements has revealed the ways in which politicians’ and activists’ claims of unique ethnic and linguistic identities mask deeper complexities. Ethnicity, in other words, is rarely as clean or as uniform as pro- or anti-subnationalist stances portray it. As Townsend Middleton (2013b) writes of ethnic politics in Darjeeling, the various manifestations of the Gorkhaland struggle reveal not a sense of shared belonging but rather a longstanding and shifting set of ethno-nationalist “anxieties.” These anxieties play out in representational practices and, as Middleton explains, in a self-conscious spatial politics: bandhs reinforce territorial boundaries, protests occupy prominent visible spaces, and violent attacks are crafted to target high-profile locations.

Despite these linkages between the fractured politics of ethnicity and the spatialization of struggles against marginalization, critical analysis of subnational belonging has paid less attention to *land* itself. In pointing out such inattention, I do not aim to discount the validity of other scholars’ findings. Rather, by interrogating the *land* in Gorkhaland, I hope to bring together several disparate understandings of land in political and environmental anthropology.

One prominent way of understanding land has been to discuss *landscape*. The term landscape connotes aesthetic formation as well as a working (and worked) socio-natural assemblage (Basso 1996; Ingold 2000; Olwig 2002). Both agrarian and “wild” landscapes figure prominently in historical and representations of Darjeeling, as well as in Gorkha activists’ representations of the Gorkhaland struggle. The landscape—as a hegemonic viewpoint and a deliberate formation (Mitchell 1996)—is something with which Gorkhas continue to struggle. Landscapes are worked over with edges: in Darjeeling the successful cultivation of tea in plantations required plantation managers (not professional foresters) to maintain patches of Himalayan forest (usually a combination of “native” and nonnative species). In anthropology and other disciplines, land as landscape has been conceived as both what Nixon calls an “affective, historically textured” site of belonging and an alienating expression of political or capitalist dominance over people and resources (Nixon 2011: 17). Belonging to or in land-as-landscape is a question of representation and aesthetic framing.

At another level, land can be understood in its physical sense: as *soil*. Land in this sense is the material substrate for production (usually agricultural). In the interdisciplinary field of political ecology, this connotation of land—as a resource whose management is essential for the production of other resources—has been a guiding concept. Seminal work in political ecology has analyzed land degradation and land use in the Nepal Himalayas (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Ives 2004; Ives and Messerli 1989). The question of land degradation, however, meets uncomfortably, at best, with the question of ethnic belonging in in India. In fact, a recent article in the ecology journal *Biodiversity and Conservation* on tiger reserves in the Northeast claimed that subnational activism adversely affected conservation efforts (Velho et al 2014).  In Darjeeling, Gorkhas, whose topographical *oraalo* (downhill)-*ukaalo* (uphill) discourse is central to reckonings of landslides, urban waste flows, and interspecies encounters, likewise struggle with how they might frame themselves in relation to land.. At times, they willingly take up a role as stewards or guardians, but in the contexts of landslides and urban instabilities I discuss below, they have just as often found themselves blamed—as laborers, as peri-urban settlers, and as an overpopulated demographic—for degradation.

Historically-minded political ecologists have studied land as *territory*. In this sense, land is not just living, managed soil but also the ways in which states and communities make claims to it. , The emergence of productive agrarian environments and conservation discourses in colonial South Asia came alongside the formation of subnational identities (Agrawal 2005; Agrawal and Sivaramikrishnan 2000: 15-16; Sivaramikrishnan 1999; Guha 1990). The volatility of indigenous and other kinds of subnational land claims has emanated in part from the twinned problems of ownership and knowledge. Claiming territory, as Nadasdy (1999) notes, often entails claiming “property,” yet the political and practical question of sovereignty becomes thorny when, as is the case of Darjeeling, most of the people making claims have no formal property rights and a tenuous ancestral claim to place.

Across India’s margins, where subnationalist movements are active, colonial and postcolonial processes of territoriality have turned land into an abstractable *resource.*  Gorkha identity struggles have emerged amid the development of a particular “resource environment” in Darjeeling (Richardson and Weszkanlnys 2014)—an assemblage of infrastructure, bodies, and technology. As political ecologists have argued for some time, the long temporal scale of colonial and capitalist transformation makes it difficult to mobilize against. Environmental movements frequently emerge when such transformations take an unbearable toll on bodies and environments: when ecological violence becomes too acute to ignore (Kosek 2006; Peluso and Watts 2001; Nixon 2011). In the Indian state of Assam, for example, subnationalist activists have recently begun mobilizing to oppose the state’s construction of hydroelectric dams, seeing in the state’s megaproject an unjust capture of land (see Baruah 2012). The construction of resource environments in India has also raised the problem of so-called “invasive” species: plants and animals that enter landscapes through capitalist cultivation and slowly overtake “native” species (Jeffery 2014; c.f. Robbins 2001, 2004). In settler societies, particularly Australia and the United States, scholars have critically engaged the social divisiveness of such narratives of species “invasion,” tied as it has become to anxieties about “alien” peoples and cultures (Raffles 2014; O’Gorman 2014; Lavau 2011; van Dooren 2011). Attention to questions of belonging in settler-dominated resource environments enriches this critique by calling attention to what Val Plumwood (2008) calls “shadow places.”. Darjeeling is something of an internal settler colony within India, where “The very concept of a singular homeplace or ‘our place’ is problematised by the dissociation and dematerialisation that permeate the global economy and culture” (Plumwood quoted in O’Gorman 2014: 285).

Land can also be understood as territory in a second sense. As Laura Ogden (2011) notes in her study of the Florida everglades, slow-moving *human and nonhuman* “territorial” actions help to give landscapes their shape and form (see also Rose 1992; Tsing 2004). This notion of land as a site of human-nonhuman interaction is central to my analysis. As I describe the experience of Gorkhas in Darjeeling with (among other things) landslides, urban decay, and pest species, I draw both on the notions named above (landscape, soil, and territory) as well as ideas from feminist political ecology. A feminist approach emphasizes the everyday environmental politics that to some extent float beneath the surface of subnational movements as portrayed in the press and in much scholarship.  In Darjeeling, the “ecological ordinary” revolved around socio-ecological “edges”: the borders between plantations and forests, between city and town, and between species (Tsing 2004). In her work on interspecies encounters, Donna Haraway (2008) speaks of “contact zones” between humans and other species as sites of particular ethical concern. It is in these edges, Haraway (2010) argues, where people feel compelled to consider the question of inheritance: to devise ways to “leave more quiet country” for future generations (see Rose 1992). To understand land as an inherited relationship, then, I turn now to the question of soils and stabilities on Darjeeling’s iconic tea plantations and their forest edges.

**Plantation and Forest Edge Effects**

The Darjeeling district is a landscape of rolling Himalayan foothills contained by the borders of Nepal to the east, Bhutan to the west, the plains of Bengal and Bangladesh to the south, and the Indian state of Sikkim to the north. Atop one of the highest ridges in the district sits Darjeeling town. From town, bright green tea plantations and ribbons of forest slope down steeply into the valleys below. The GJMM bandhs made strategic use of the region’s topography and geopolitical significance. Bandhs halted the everyday movement of Darjeeling residents and jammed the circulation of people and things to these adjacent areas. The GJMM effectively shut down the district’s timber industry, a state of West Bengal enterprise. Bandhs also crippled the tourist industry. Though tea was sometimes brought into the remit of bandhs, more often, it was quietly exempted.

The exception for tea seems surprising, given the beverage’s prominence in popular imaginaries of the region. One explanation I often heard from Darjeeling residents regarding the exemption of tea from bandhs was that GJMM politicians were bought off by tea plantation owners. Another explanation had to do with a combination of instrumental and symbolic politics. At an instrumental level, a total blockade of tea would mean lost wages for tea plantation workers, leading to an erosion of the GJMM’s support base. Most GJMM politicians had families who depended on tea plantation wages for survival. At a symbolic level, Darjeeling tea—a nationally and globally recognized brand—said what GJMM politicians alone could not. The GJMM’s own symbolic displays frequently included images of tea leaves and tea pluckers (Figure 1). The downward flow of tea, as well as of images of Nepali tea plantation workers, reinforced Darjeeling’s geographical and cultural “distinction” (Besky 2014b). As a political tactic in the struggle *for* land, the GJMM’s careful manipulation of up/down flows of both commodities and symbols was in keeping with subnational land struggles elsewhere. In bandhs aimed at managing the *oraalo/ukaalo* flow of resources and people, GJMM politicians engaged land in the territorial sense, in the resource sense, and in the aesthetic sense. This was political work *on* land. Tea plantation workers, on the other hand, had to work *with* land to manage flows of thing and people.

The discourse of *oraalo* and *ukaalo* had resonance in the everyday lives of plantation workers, albeit in a less geopolitical sense. Each afternoon, women plantation workers carried tea to huts on access roads, from which it was carted down to factories from processing and onto the market center of Siliguri in the plains.  The trucks that plied these roads always came up empty, but they left full.  Medicines, water, and construction materials, mandated by Indian labor law, rarely came up. A victory for GJMM, workers said, would not directly change much about this uneven flow. When I asked about the GJMM’s repeated refusal to directly address the question working conditions on tea plantations, one worker said, simply, “That is not important.” Under Gorkhaland, she said,

The plantation—the factory and other things—will be the owner’s, but the whole land becomes ours… That means that the *soil* is ours too. The owner will need to pay us [in taxes]. ...It’s like this, at that time Darjeeling tea will become *Gorkha* Darjeeling tea, because we Gorkhas are working. But the land is not the owner’s.

For tea workers, Gorkhaland named not only a struggle for autonomy over resources and a means of controlling their flow through territory, but also a struggle with the land *underneath* tea. Workers were well aware of the problems of plantation monoculture on steep Himalayan foothills, both within and beneath the “factory and other things.”

Plantation owners in the early 2000s were intensifying production to meet increasing international demand for Darjeeling tea. This demand came after decades of industrial decline, in which overuse of pesticides and poor land management had made antique tea bushes less productive (Besky 2014a). Instead of replanting old tea bushes, workers found themselves being asked to plant tea in areas where they had never planted it before: in recently cut-back forest (tea plantations include forest buffers separate from timber plantations in other parts of the district) and in steep gullies (*jhor*ās). Amid this intensification, the *oraalo/ukaalo* discourse signaled a different kind of precarious belonging—one of actual soil, plants, and water. One geologist writing about landslides in Darjeeling described the region as being in “quasi-unstable equilibrium,” meaning that any amount of rainfall could result in a landslide of any magnitude (Sarkar 2011: 125). Workers, too, experienced life on the plantation—especially at its edges, in places like cleared forests and *jhor*ās —in a kind of quasi-unstable equilibrium. Planting in *jhor*ās and clearing forests were recipes for disaster. The question was not if land would slide, but when.

The most famous landslide in Darjeeling is located on Ambootia Tea Estate, in a deep valley south of Kurseong on the road down to the plains. In October 1968, after a period of continuous rainfall, the landslide began about one-third of the way down the ridge, where a forested area divided Ambootia from a neighboring plantation and covered a particularly steep slope. For the next 20 years, land continued to erode around the edges of the 1968 slide, until the early 1990s, when scientists, local environmentalists, and organic agriculture advocates coalesced around mitigating the devastation.

The location of this landslide is significant. On plantations, forests serve not only as property markers, but also as ecological barriers, providing crucial protection during the yearly monsoons for the tea bushes and people who reside around them. Older planters told me that forest cover was crucial in three locations: at the tops of ridges, at the bottoms of ridges, and in the *jhor*ās. Forests should also be kept thick in places where it is “too steep to plant,” such as the location of the Ambootia landslide.

Laborers on Ambootia and other plantations lived in villages situated sometimes above, but more regularly, below tea fields. On plantations, edges of all kinds mattered. When the rows of planted tea began to lose their linear, contoured structure—when they began to dip and sag—workers saw a signal of impending danger. Underneath the hard, gnarled bushes that workers cling to as they pull their way across shear slopes of tea was something dangerously soft. The demands of labor and agricultural intensification made landslides—either already-existing ones or potential new ones—a matter of considerable concern. Workers traveled from villages to different parts of plantations each day to pluck tea. During the monsoon, those who lived farther “down” in valleys risked both contributing to landslides as they trudged through the fields (roads and footpaths are a common landslide origin point ) and being victims of them when the returned home. For tea pluckers, the threat of landslides spoke to the impending loss of Gorka *land*.  Even land itself went down the mountain, but never came back up. Claiming land, preserving it, in both meta-political and material senses, was key not only to a more stable future for future generations of Gorkhas, but a future in which accountability might be measured.

Scientific accounts of the Ambootia landslide, however, present an “apolitical” version of its history, noting both that the Himalayas are “very young” mountains that have difficulty “maintaining equilibrium” *and* that deforestation and road construction play a role (Froehlich et al 1992; Froelich and Starkel 1987; Starkel 2010, 1972; Starkel and Basu 2000; Starkel and Sarkar 2014). These studies do not discuss plantation agriculture. Indeed, while landslides are perhaps the most prevalent socioecological threat to *all* Darjeeling’s people—on the plantation or in towns—the tea industry’s role in preventing or causing them remains controversial. On World Environment Day in June 2008, a local NGO organized an all day program, complete with lectures, films, art competitions, and a walking tour of Darjeeling. I attended a presentation by the leader of “Save the Hills,” a Kalimpong-based landslide prevention group. As he discussed the histories of famous landslides, including the one at Ambootia, he evaded the question of tea altogether, discussing instead the congeries of “social” and “natural” factors that made each landslide different. Some environmental activists based in Darjeeling claim that tea contributes to landslides, while others claim that the unique root structure of some clones of bushes (with both taproots and surface roots) actually prevent landslides. At Ambootia, a biodynamic tea and timber project is currently underway, underwritten by various international agricultural and development agencies, to recover the eroding landscape (Starkel 2010).

Landslides are thus both ecologically spectacular and ecologically ordinary (Nixon 2011; Tsing 2004). According to Bishnu and Monu, women tea workers I interviewed, before the GJMM took control in 2007, nobody came down to the plantation when “problems” like landslides struck. Tea workers knew that that there were bright young people “up in town” that might be able to help, but the plantations took a back seat to other issues. They joked that the GJMM leadership—in their big new SUVs and fancy new clothes—only “came down” to *look at* their problems. Politicians made a big spectacle of their visits, but the end result was largely the same:

**Bishnu**: We know that that they are doing very well now because, say, if we have some problem they come down and they *look*. They look around.

**Monu**: But what do they do *for* the landslide?

**Bishnu**: Right, what *can they do for* the people?

**Monu**: Yes. Yes. All the party did was come around and *look around*.

Landslides were a form of what Nixon calls “slow violence,” both distanced from centers of power and “discounted by dominant structures of apprehension” (Nixon 2011: 16). They were the result of simultaneous productive and destructive work: daily tea plucking and long-term deforestation. On plantations, landslides—either realized or imagined in the bending rows of tea—highlighted a sense of what Nixon calls ”displacement in place:” the condition of “being simultaneously immobilized and moved out of one’s living knowledge as one’s place loses its life-sustaining features” (Nixon 2011: 19). Landslides reference an ecological, visceral sense of what Middleton (2013b), writing about Darjeeling, calls “anxious belonging.” Landslides, long a concern of Himalayan geography and political ecology, remain problematic because they are both a “natural” feature of high-gradient landscapes and traceable threats to already-marginalized people, even as those most vulnerable are blamed for their prevalence (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987). In Darjeeling, landslides were manifestations of the paradoxes of edge effects: between plantation monoculture and forest, mountains and plains, and, as I show in the next section, between plantation and town.

**“Sundays” in the Queen of the Hills**

New jobs in plantations like Ambootia are rare. Since Indian independence in 1947, plantation populations have grown, while the demand for plantation labor has stayed the same or perhaps even decreased. Gurkha army recruitment targeting plantation men has also dwindled. As plantation populations have grown, village residents not employed on plantations have moved up to Darjeeling town and its environs. The decline of the tea plantations and the influx of “Sundays” (a derogatory term for tea plantation workers, who usually only visit Darjeeling town on their days off) accelerated in the wake of the first Gorkhaland agitation. Under the GNLF in the 1980s, housing construction was “free for all.” *Busti*sin and around townsprang up in places deemed unfit for construction by colonial-era engineers. Despite building codes that prohibited structures taller than three stories, a growing market for in-town housing (both low- and high-end) has inspired developers to go skyward, often as many as eight stories high. Hastily built flats in town, like tea bushes or cut back forests on plantations, have begun falling into *jhor*ās and sliding down the mountainsides with alarming frequency. It was post-agitation migrants and the descendants of plantation workers who bore much of the blame for Darjeeling town’s environmental problems, yet these people—organized into urban “wards”—were the foot soldiers of the revived movement. One person from each household had to attend every rally in town.

An *oraalo/ ukaalo* discourse was just as salient in town as on plantations.Getting off of plantations and into a house and job in town, closer to plantation villages than faraway Delhi, Kolkata, or abroad (where many Gorkhas go in search of work), was a common aspiration among younger tea plantation residents, but those who did get out faced forms of (ecological and economic) marginalization similar to those that beset the plantation.  In the bodies of “Sundays,” Darjeeling town met Darjeeling plantations, and the concerns of environmentalists about the precarity of land met uncomfortably with the question of regional belonging.

A high-visibility occupation of town was key to the GJMM political agenda. Unlike the previous incarnation of the movement in the 1980s, which held rallies in the Chowk Bazaar (or “Down Bazaar,” a market lower on the ridge), GJMM activists held their speeches and events at the top of the ridge, in a plaza called Chowrasta. While the Chowk Bazaar was the social and economic center of what is colloquially called “downtown,” where non-British settlers in Darjeeling lived during the colonial period, Chowrasta was the center of “uptown,” the all-white section of Darjeeling. Today, though the growth of urban and peri-urban *bustis* has contributed to a breakdown of stark class and racial distinctions between “downtown” and “uptown,” Chowrasta remains, as in the colonial period, the tourist center of Darjeeling. From Chowrasta, the landscape seems vast. Foothills blanketed with verdant tea bushes appear to undulate for miles, contained only by misty Himalayan peaks. But in the other direction, back towards the Chowk Bazaar, the ridge is congested and finite: so much so that it is sometimes hard to see where a given edifice meets the ground.

In the recent Gorkhaland agitation, most every GJMM rally began downtown and snaked up the ridge to Chowrasta. Speeches blaring from speakers tied to bamboo rigging celebrated the unity of Gorkhas and declared a shared sense of oppression and underdevelopment at the hands of the state of West Bengal. Beneath the veneer of these symbolic claims to Gorkha unity and their cooption of a racial and class-based up/down divide, however, laid a messier politics *within* Darjeeling town. Increasingly, town was itself a source of danger and social division. Its decay raised questions about the material possibilities of “belonging” in an erstwhile colonial refuge.

Darjeeling’s was a 19th century infrastructure supporting a 21st century population. This material disconnect has produced some painful ironies in everyday life. Water shortages are chronic. Town residents—particularly downtown—have no regular access to water for multiple months of the year, despite the fact that Darjeeling, on the “wet” southern face of the Himalayas, has some of the highest rainfall of anywhere in India. Today, the *jhor*āsthat lead downward, out of the city and towards the plantations below, are nearly constantly glutted with organic and inorganic waste.

For over 150 years, colonial and postcolonial depictions of Darjeeling for tourist consumption have portrayed the mountain landscape as a space of leisure, good feeling, and relaxation.  Present-day uptown maintains, in patches, a distinctly British feel: gabled Tudor cottages and stone bungalows adorned with gingerbread ornamentation sit tucked behind iron gates and the dark shadows of *duppi* trees (*cryptomeria japonica*)that the British imported (and Nepali laborers cultivated) to make Darjeeling appear more in line with British ideals of a restful and natural landscape (Kennedy 1996).  During my fieldwork, however, spaces of urban decay revealed a landscape of what Ann Stoler (2008) calls “imperial debris” (from bungalow verandahs to strolling paths). Imperial debris sat in tension with actual debris (from corn cobs, to horse dung, to little plastic *paan* packets).

In late 2009, students from Darjeeling’s St. Joseph’s College produced a series of short films, ominously titled *Black Darjeeling*, that interrogated the paradox that India’s most famous mountain refuge was also a site of pressing environmental problems (St. Joseph’s 2009). The films portray Darjeeling as a“sleepwalking” place, caught in

a perpetual holiday mood…and stuck somewhere in the middle of running and sleeping in the feigned rat race. Chaos reigns…in dingy apartments and unlivable hygienic conditions, [and] in the surprising lack of drinkable water in this part of the world where the rainfalls are healthy (St. Joseph’s 2009).

In her work on “contact zones,” Haraway (2008) discusses the ethical and political question of how to “inherit” unsavory relationships. Though Haraway speaks specifically of inter-species relationships (e.g. between humans and dogs), the St. Joseph’s students’ invocation of Darjeeling’s legacy as the historic site of colonial leisure allows us to extend her insights about inheritance to non-living infrastructure as well. The films in *Black Darjeeling,* which tackle problems from landslides, to education, to waste management, are united by both a sense of privileged twenty-something angst and an appeal to an environmentalism that hinges on a sense of shared responsibility. In Gokul Sharma’s “Waste: A Journey Toward Change,” the narrator wanders through streets lined with clogged drains and broken pipes and past garbage-filled *jhor*ās, interviewing shopkeepers and garbage collectors. The film juxtaposes scenes of accumulated waste below and the famous mountain vistas on high, creating its own edge effect. Sharma explains:

Darjeeling is a place that appears to be like an artists masterpiece... a paradise. But slowly…I find that Darjeeling as a paradise is just an illusion. As I walk the streets each day, I am encountered with only waste… Darjeeling lives on top of the waste and proudly calls itself the ‘Queen of the Hills’ (St. Joseph’s 2009).

The term “Queen of the Hills” dates back to 19th century colonial tourist guidebooks. Sharma’s ironic use of it frames Darjeeling as a city out of place. In this depiction, Darjeeling’s residents—living on top of one another, apathetic and insensitive to the problems *they* created—are perpetrating slow violence upon themselves. While Chowrasta is still a tourist destination for sipping tea and gazing at mountains, the infrastructures for sewage, waste, and water have never been upgraded. The former is part of a colonial Raj-era imaginary, the latter a postcolonial problem. In a material way, Darjeeling—and its landscape of imperial debris—sat in the messy edge between colonial past and postcolonial present. Waste—matter out of place—was subtly linked to a population of people out of place. The question of who and what should and should not go “up” or “down”—a question that the colonial architecture of the place was designed to answer—was reignited in the waste debates.

**Saturation and Seasonality**

In her discussion of the problem of “slum” housing in Kathmandu riverbeds, Anne Rademacher (2009) describes what one of her informants calls the problem of how to manage the “rural in the urban:” the influx of dwellers (and dwelling practices) that seem out of step with the demands of space. In Kathmandu, landless “slum” settlers were cast as “outsiders.” Indeed, Nepalis spread rumors that they were Indians who did not belong in Kathmandu at all, and who misrecognized the riverbed where they lived as “land” (Rademacher 2009: 519). In response, planners in Kathmandu moved to reconstruct the riverbed as a watercourse. In the face of Darjeeling’s waste problem, environmentalists made the case that overpopulation and “uneducated” town dwellers misrecognized *jhor*ās. As the leader of the Save the Hills campaign told students gathered for World Environment Day in 2008:

... the water used to percolate through the valley. Water used to run off. But now with tremendous urbanization, all the water drains off into another drain, and it goes eventually into our *jhor*ās. *Those jhor*ās *are not meant to hold water.* So the *jhor*ās are eating up [the land around them].

The sense that contemporary town-dwellers misunderstood the vulnerability of the landscape in which they dwelled was central in such assessments of the consequences of rapid urbanization, but when the slow violence of waste management morphed into the acute violence of disaster, some Gorkha activists linked environmental misrecognition with the quest for political recognition.

Monsoon rains, which come May and run through September can and often do lead to landslides, devastating housing settlements precariously clinging to the slopes below Chowrasta. Questions of environmental belonging came to a head in the aftermath of Cyclone Aila. In early September 2009, Cyclone Aila spun around the Bay of Bengal, then burst north across the plains, settling over the Himalayan foothills. Aila was a well-documented event, causing massive death and damage in West Bengal and Bangladesh. In Darjeeling, landslides destroyed infrastructure and villages. The most significant damages occurred in Lower Tungsung village, on the backside of Darjeeling town, on land popularly described by longtime town residents as “unbuildable.” They said that British engineers had deemed it so because it was not only steep but also covered in loose soil and backfill from the construction of “uptown” Darjeeling. Those most affected by Aila were those living on the most intimate terms with everyday environmental and social marginalization.

Aila struck during the height of the GJMM’s agitation, but in the aftermath, politicians, environmentalists, and residents struggled over how to characterize the event. Attempts to contextualize the loss of land, housing, and life brought questions of ecological belonging together with questions of political belonging in unexpected ways. As Nixon puts it, “Contests over what counts as violence are intimately entangled with conflicts over who bears the social authority of witness, which entails more than simply seeing or not seeing” (Nixon 2011: 16). News reports documented deaths in Lower Tungsung, but the question of the extent to which human and nonhuman action could be blamed for the disaster—a question that, like the question of landslide etiology, has long been prominent in political ecology—seemed difficult to answer (Blaikie and Brookfield 1987; Blaikie 1985; Ives and Messerli 1989). After all, cyclones, earthquakes, and landslides have been part of life in the hills since long before the Gorkhaland agitation.

At one GJMM cultural program held in the aftermath of Aila, a leader of a Nepali ethnic-group *samaj* (organization) deployed a familiar middle-class discourse of collective responsibility to link the landslides to the problems of waste and unsustainable urban living:

There was an Iron Age, a Stone Age, an Ice Age. You know what our age would be called? The age of plastic litter… But it is much more than that. In the cities plastic may be an aesthetic issue, but in the hill station, it is a ‘life issue.’ It is in the *jhor*ās, in *our* *jhor*ās, in our drains, in our landslides—the landslide in which people die. Our hills are choking with plastic litter. We [are] making such a thing that goes against [nature] and that is dangerous to nature…the very thing which Darjeeling has given us.

In the wake of Aila, activists became more willing to weave the instability of land—and the problematic edge effects of rural and urban decay—into narratives of Gorkha resistance to West Bengal, if only for a time.

The political approach to land degradation in the region remains largely one of spectacular *response* rather than deliberate prevention (recall Bishnu and Monu’s criticism of the party for coming after the fact and merely “looking around”). It was over relief that environmentalists and Gorkhaland activists converged after Aila. In the wake of the disaster, the West Bengal government responded with financial and material resources. This relief, however, failed to account for the *ecological* distinctiveness of Darjeeling. One GJMM activist and retired civil servant with experience in the Northeast explained:

Disaster management plans are made in the Writers Building, so they do not know anything about the Darjeeling. We are totally different up here. Here, we need warm clothes. In the past they have even sent cycles [bikes]. [The] whole disaster management plan was prepared in Calcutta, it was not prepared by local people. [Sending] a cycle, [sending] *dhoti*s [skirt-like light cotton wraps], this is a very *casual* approach to disaster management.

After Aila, Gorkhaland’s outward manifestation as a struggle *for* land began to merge, if only briefly, with the everyday struggles *with* land. The same activist continued:

Once we get a state of Gorkhaland, the decision making process will be here in Darjeeling, not in Calcutta… In disaster management, it is not sympathy, it is empathy [that is needed]. *It is about place*. Calcutta will not bother, because it is not their brothers. So empathy means—suppose I am the Secretary concerned and whatnot, and I know my people are dying. They are my relations, so I will work faster. The disaster management plan will be prepared by Darjeeling people, who have experience with how to handle the landslides, so *they know* that *dhoti* is not the item, or a cycle is not the item.

The idea of Gorkha disaster management, however, was a minority current in the movement. Out of the Gorkhaland agitation, a new hill council formed in 2011, which promised increased autonomy and local control over Darjeeling’s resources. But in the summer of 2012, years after the disaster, many residents of Lower Tungsung had yet to see any material or monetary relief, while others had received pittances for their destroyed houses. The party continued to come down and look around.

**Knowing Nature, Knowing Pests**

The out-of-place-ness of town and people sits in tension with images of “natural” mountain landscapes: Kanchenjunga, snow leopards, rivers, and tea bushes. These images were prominent both in environmental programs like *Black Darjeeling* and those organized by NGOs, but also in GJMM depictions of Gorkha “heritage” and nationally-distributed images of Gorkhas. The endangered red panda was a particularly prominent (and peculiar) symbol (See Figures 2 and 3).

In a lecture at the 2008 World Environment Day forum, a representative from the Darjeeling zoo discussed the responsibilities of local people to help conserve the red panda. Red pandas are fickle creatures. Undeniably cute and problematically solitary, they present conservation challenges. Their lack of enthusiasm for mating in the wild, according to the zoo official, meant that it was “our job” to help conserve them in the Darjeeling zoo. They are an integral part of the Darjeeling Himalayas—of the land. In the official’s narrative, the under-population of red pandas came as a result of the overpopulation of Gorkha people, specifically their encroachment on the forest both historically, from the construction of tea and timber plantations, and today. Since the 1990 Rio Earth Summit, the zoo representative explained, preservation of endangered species had become the responsibility of the local governments where those species were indigenous. Being “native” to the region necessitated caring for “native” species. She explained:

This means the red panda must be in Darjeeling. They cannot be kept in the zoo in London, because we find red pandas in Darjeeling, Arunachal, and Sikkim. Animals must be kept where they are found. We cannot keep them in the Kolkata Zoo. We do not find red pandas in Kolkata. We do not find red pandas in London. We do not find red pandas in United States.

In the presentation, as in Gorkha political rallies, “saving” the panda and protecting Gorkha “heritage,” were couched as a shared cosmopolitan responsibility, just as it was a shared responsibility keep waste out of *jhor*ās. The causes of both environmental issues were amorphous, but ultimately grounded in “overpopulation” and “upward” migration.

Talk of the conservation of megafauna, like talk of waste management, revolved around a distinctly moral, middle-class aesthetic consciousness: an uptown sensibility that plantation women also mocked when they referenced the GJMM politicians’ SUVs, fancy wardrobe, and concerned gaze. Conservation narratives hinged on the image of Darjeeling as an edenic “garden” refuge. In what Nixon (2011: 184) calls an “eco-archaic” discourse, those species that belonged needed to be conserved, paradoxically, alongside the remains of colonial architecture (Besky 2014b). Nixon juxtaposes the eco-archaic to the “ecological ordinary—those quotidian interactions between humans and nonhumans that move beyond the racialized theatre of the eco-archaic” (Nixon 2011: 184). While environmentalists railed about the shared responsibility to care for endangered red pandas and to protect the valleys from garbage, poor town-dwellers lived in a different kind of relationship to these nonhuman elements of the landscape.

Here, Haraway’s articulation of zones of inter*species* contact and inheritance is more relevant. In Darjeeling, residents rarely saw red pandas face-to-face, but they had almost daily encounters with less charismatic megafauna: macaque monkeys and stray dogs. Unlike red pandas, these species had no trouble reproducing. They were problematically numerous. Darjeeling’s macaques live at the Buddhist-Hindu Mahakhal Temple, the site of an old monastery on the highest point in town, just above Chowrasta (as well as other temple around town).  The monkeys are sacred and their home predates both colonial and Nepali settlers.  For Gorkhas, ever mindful of the need to appeal to primordial belonging in the hills, macaques are deeply problematic. The macaques cannot be excised from the landscape because they are in some sense the living descendants of its oldest residents. They are living reminders that Gorkhas are *not* the original inhabitants of the area.

Their more recent role, as annoying pests who routinely attack tourists and townspeople, has rendered them into moving manifestations of colonial and postcolonial underdevelopment. Macaques are both detrimental to infrastructure and a part of it: they occupy space and crowd up against people, but they also feed on waste. Shopkeepers routinely clash with macaques, but they cannot remove these “sacred” creatures from the landscape. Instead, they have to try to manage them.

To manage monkeys, townspeople work with local dogs.  Dogs are the messengers of Yamaraj, the god of death (Across Nepal and Darjeeling, people celebrate Kukur Puja, Dog Puja, on the second day of Tihar.  Stray dogs are washed, tikka-ed, and garlanded.)  Like monkeys, dogs mediate the relationship between people and the sacred: dogs connect people to an afterlife.  But in Darjeeling, dogs also help manage macaques.  A local veterinary NGO only neuters female dogs, not males. Town residents prefer males hungry and territorially aggressive. In this state, they corral macaques in space, keeping them from coming “down” beyond the temple site.  Despite their utility in controlling monkeys, stray dogs are, like monkeys, a danger to people.  Their backgrounds are troubled.  These are the dogs of colonial occupation: welsh corgis, terriers, Rottweilers, Labradors.

The everyday work of mediating relationships between monkeys, dogs, and humans amid a fragile, overcrowded mountain landscape, forged a sense of belonging “up” in town.  These encounters—a kind of ordinary, slow interspecies territorial violence—problematize analytical categories common to both ecology and the anthropology of Indian subnationalism: terms like “natural resource,” alien and indigenous species, and even “sacred” and “profane.”  Town-dwelling Gorkhas inherited the struggle with waste and with pests, much as they inherited the antiquated streets and *jhor*ās *—*the “contact zones” in which they met. These contact zones were so embedded in the *land* of Gorkhaland that they seemed to resist political representation. Dogs and macaques manage waste even as they threaten life and livelihood. The territorial clashes between dogs, macaques, and Gorkha people underscore the degradation and ecological vulnerability of town (Ogden 2011). The strapped commodity-producing landscapes below and the mountains beyond have put town-dwellers (people, monkeys, and dogs) into uncomfortable proximity.

**Conclusion: Being(s) Out of Place**

Darjeeling is best known for two things: tea and separatist politics. I have tried to attend to the configurations of people in the spaces between these pillars of agriculture and ethnonationalism. By bringing together Darjeeling’s primary material and representational forms—as well as the people and things that travel down and up the mountain—I have worked to further an ongoing discussion of the meaning of belonging in Indian subnationalism. Landslides, urban waste, and inter-species encounters in Darjeeling speak to the existence less of a coherent, unified “homeland” than to a “shadow place,” dislocated by the flows of things and ideas about those things and the people and places the produce them (Plumwood 2008; O’Gorman 2014). Darjeeling’s existence has long been predicated on the provision of goods and services for places-elsewhere—from the colonial metropole to the global market.

The presence of Gorkhas in this shadow place is marked by ecological instabilities that exist in tandem with feelings of “anxious belonging,” or precarious senses of Indian citizenship (Middleton 2013b). By giving a material sense of that anxiety, this paper’s contribution is to prompt a closer consideration of the meaning of land in subnational politics. Just as we should never take identity for granted, we should not take the ground on which people contest and rework symbolic representations of themselves as stable or uniform. Gorkhas, the tea worker I quoted above told me, are concerned about the fate of the “whole land”with which they work. But just as concerns about ethnic or national identity are inflected by conflicts over framing, tactics, and knowledge, concerns about land are complicated by the overlap between environmentalism, post/colonial infrastructure, and even the status of places and animals as sacred, dangerous, or “natural.”

Land in Darjeeling defies easy categorization. Certainly, it is a kind of political territory, where “state” and “community” are often articulated interdependently from one another (Agrawal and Sivaramikrishnan 2000). But the creation of a Gorkha *state* remains evocative. Darjeeling’s is an intentionally crafted landscape—a living image of colonial productivity and leisure now occupied (anxiously) as a subnational homeland. Darjeeling, as an agrarian environment, is thus an appropriate site not just for rethinking belonging but for examining the processes by which people encounter the temporally problematic “edge effects” of colonial monoculture, urban underdevelopment, and perhaps even what it means to live in “quasi-unstable equilibrium” (Sarkar 2011). Gorkhas, as I have argued, have inherited these edge effects, and the ways in which they confront them can enrich anthropological and related approaches to justice and injustice in agrarian environments. Stopping the downhill loss of land and people was not just a strategy of GJMM political action, but also a desire of nearly all Gorkhas with whom I talked. Belonging is relationship between Gorkhas and both material and metaphorical land. These material and epistemological framings of land undermine clean claims to territory and uniform re-shapings of landscape.

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**Figure 1. Gorkha Territorial Administration (GTA) Logo**



**Figure 2. Float at a GJMM rally**



**Figure 3. Red Pandas in Gorkha “Tribal” Dress distributed by the Election Commission of India in Darjeeling.**

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