

The Colonial Ethnography of the Eastern Himalayas: A Political Ecology of Contested Histories, Identities, and Regional Formation in Sikkim and Darjeeling-Kalimpong Region

Mr. Aniket Sarkar

MA Sociology, Centre for the Study of Social Systems (CSSS), Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi

ORCID: <https://orcid.org/0009-0009-6193-6199>

Abstract

This paper argues that the politics of tribal and indigenous recognition in the Sikkim-Darjeeling-Kalimpong Himalaya cannot be understood within the nation-state frame that is conventionally, and anachronistically, projected onto its history. Before it was divided between the modern territorial states of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, this Eastern Himalayan corridor was a comparatively continuous zone of chiefdoms, Buddhist networks, and trans-montane trade routes that recognised no such boundaries. Colonial treaty-making between 1814 and 1865 began the work of carving this corridor into discrete national territories, a process only completed in the twentieth century. Layered onto this new territorial grid was a second, equally consequential imposition: a colonial ethnographic classification of "tribe," developed by administrators such as H. Risley (1891) and E. T. Dalton (1872) on evolutionary and racial-typological premises poorly suited to a subcontinent whose social boundaries have always been fluid, interactive, and historically shifting. This paper traces how that classification, despite its shaky empirical foundations, was inherited almost intact by the postcolonial Indian state through the Lokur Committee and the constitutional Scheduled Tribe framework, and became progressively more, rather than less, consequential over time, as a fixed political category collided with an expanding and contested field of claimants. The divergent recognition regimes that subsequently emerged in Sikkim and the neighbouring hill districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong are read here as one especially clear product of this deeper history: two adjoining fragments of a single pre-national region, channelled into different constitutional fates by the differential timing of their absorption into the Indian nation-state.

Keywords: Eastern Himalayas; Colonial Border Formation; Identity Politics; Tribal Recognition; Sikkim; Darjeeling-Kalimpong.

1. Introduction

It is difficult to write about Sikkim, Darjeeling, and Kalimpong without immediately reaching for the vocabulary of the nation-state: India's northeastern frontier, the tri-junction with Nepal and Bhutan, the sensitive border with China. This vocabulary is not incorrect, but it is retrospective in a way that is easy to overlook. The territorial entities it invokes, India, Nepal, Bhutan, China, in anything like their current bounded form are largely modern achievements, and for much of the history this paper examines, they did not yet exist as the fixed containers we now assume them to be. The Eastern Himalayan corridor that today straddles four national borders was, for centuries before colonial intervention, a comparatively continuous zone of chiefdoms, monastic networks, and trans-Himalayan trade, in which political authority, religious affiliation, and kinship radiated along river valleys and mountain passes

rather than along the lines that would later appear on a colonial or postcolonial map. To read this region's deeper history through the nation-state frame, treating Sikkim, Nepal, and the Chumbi Valley as always-already discrete national spaces whose current borders simply needed to be discovered or confirmed, is to import a much later cartographic imagination into a period that did not share it, and in doing so to obscure exactly the historical process, gradual, colonial, and contested, by which that cartographic imagination came to be imposed in the first place.

This paper undertakes two connected tasks in response. The first is historical: to recover, in as much detail as the secondary record allows, the region's political and social life before and outside of the nation-state grid, and to trace the specific colonial treaties through which that grid was subsequently laid down between 1814 and 1865. The second is analytical: to examine a second, equally consequential colonial imposition that arrived alongside the territorial one, a system of

ethnographic classification that divided the region's population into "tribes" according to criteria developed by colonial administrators for reasons that had little to do with the population's own social organisation and a great deal to do with the administrative needs of a colonial state. This classification, this paper argues, was analytically unsuited to India from the outset, resting on assumptions about bounded, static, racially distinct populations that fit poorly with a subcontinent whose social boundaries have always been historically fluid and continuously renegotiated. Its persistence, however, has had little to do with its accuracy and a great deal to do with its institutionalisation: inherited by the postcolonial Indian state through the Lokur Committee of 1965 and the constitutional Scheduled Tribe framework, this ill-suited colonial category became, if anything, more consequential over time, not less, as it hardened into a fixed political currency, reserved legislative seats, quota entitlements, constitutional safeguards, over which communities now compete in terms its colonial architects never anticipated and could not have designed for.

The neighbouring territories of Sikkim and the Darjeeling-Kalimpong hills provide an unusually clear vantage point on both processes at once, because they were, before colonial and national bordering, substantially one region, and because they subsequently diverged sharply in how the inherited colonial classification was translated into postcolonial constitutional fact. Sikkim's Lepcha and Bhutia communities hold twelve reserved seats in a thirty-two-seat state legislature under a special constitutional provision, Article 371F, found nowhere else in India; their ethnic and linguistic counterparts sixty kilometres away in Darjeeling and Kalimpong hold no equivalent guarantee, and the region's politics there has instead crystallised around a five-decade demand for a separate state of Gorkhaland. This divergence, this paper argues, cannot be explained by any difference in the two populations' historical claims to belonging, which, as the paper's historical sections show, were substantially shared. It is instead a product of the differential timing and legal mode by which each fragment of this once-continuous region was absorbed into the Indian nation-state: Darjeeling and Kalimpong's uninterrupted administrative continuity from 1947, against Sikkim's twenty-five-year protectorate interregnum and negotiated merger in 1975.

The paper proceeds in seven further steps. Section 2 recovers the region's pre-national political and social history, establishing it as a single, internally connected corridor rather than a set of separable proto-national units. Section 3 traces the colonial treaty-making of 1814 to 1865 through which this corridor was first divided into the territorial units that would later harden into national borders. Section 4 examines the colonial ethnographic classification of "tribe" in detail, arguing that it was analytically unsuited to Indian social reality from its inception. Section 5 traces how this flawed classification was nonetheless inherited and constitutionalised by the postcolonial state, becoming progressively more consequential as its stakes escalated. Section 6 turns to the Sikkim-Darjeeling comparison itself, showing how a shared, flawed colonial inheritance was subsequently split by differential nation-state incorporation into two starkly different political architectures. Section 7 examines the resulting, still-unresolved contemporary contestations on both sides of the border. Section 8 uses the whole argument to revisit the long-running theoretical debate between Andre Beteille (1986, 1998), Virginius Xaxa (1999, 2008), and Bengt Karlsson (2003) over whether "indigenous peoples" is a coherent category in India at all.

A recent review of this literature has observed that, notwithstanding its considerable depth, Indian tribal studies scholarship has given comparatively little sustained attention to the political mobilisation of tribal communities and the emergence of new tribal movements, or to the ways in which globalisation, migration, and digital connectivity are reshaping tribal identity in the present (Kikon and Karlsson, 2019; Chettri, 2017). The Sikkim-Darjeeling case examined here, precisely because it turns on organised political mobilisation, reserved legislative seats, ethnonationalist movements, and contemporary hydropower contestation, speaks directly to that gap, even as its argument proceeds through history and constitutional analysis rather than ethnographic fieldwork.

2. Before the Nation-State: A Region Without Borders

Long before it was divided between the modern states of India, Nepal, Bhutan, and China, the Eastern Himalayan corridor connecting the Tibetan plateau to the plains of South Asia was already a

densely interconnected political and cultural space. The Lepcha, who call themselves Rongkup, "children of the snowy peaks," are generally regarded as the region's oldest known inhabitants, settled across the Teesta and Rangit river valleys since at least the early medieval period. Between roughly the seventh and thirteenth centuries CE, this corridor functioned as an active conduit linking South Asia and Tibet, carrying successive waves of Tibetan Buddhist migration into the hills without displacing the existing Lepcha population so much as layering new communities and religious traditions alongside it. Before the seventeenth century, no unified kingdom governed this space; it consisted instead of scattered Lepcha chiefdoms and Tibetan Buddhist settlements, connected by trade and pilgrimage routes that ran along river valleys and mountain passes without regard for any bounded territorial sovereignty in the modern sense. This changed, though only partially, with the founding of the Namgyal dynasty around 1642, when Phuntsog Namgyal was consecrated as the first Chogyal, or religious king, at Yuksom by three Tibetan Buddhist lamas. Sikkimese historical tradition frames this founding moment as a tripartite political compact, often rendered as the Lho-Mon-Tsong-Sum alliance among Bhutia, or Lho, Lepcha, or Mon, and Limbu, or Tsong, communities, a founding narrative that itself assumes negotiated coexistence among multiple peoples rather than the isolated sovereignty of a single one. What matters most for the present argument, however, is less the internal character of this kingdom than its territorial extent, which bore almost no relationship to the modern state of Sikkim. The Namgyal kingdom governed the Chumbi Valley, today part of the Tibet

Autonomous Region of the People's Republic of China; the entirety of what is now the Darjeeling hills and the Kalimpong region, today districts of the Indian state of West Bengal; and substantial portions of the Terai plains and eastern Nepal, today part of the sovereign state of Nepal. A single seventeenth-century Himalayan kingdom, in other words, occupied territory that a modern reader instinctively parses into four separate national jurisdictions, and did so without any of the population living within it needing to resolve which nation it belonged to, because no such category yet existed to resolve.

To describe trade between eighteenth-century Sikkim and the Chumbi Valley, or pilgrimage between Yuksom and monasteries now on the Chinese side of the India-China border, as "cross-border" activity, as a great deal of subsequent writing on the region unreflectively does, is to project a much later international boundary backward onto a period in which no such boundary existed for the people actually making the journey. The conceptual habit of organising this region's past around nation-state categories that would only later be imposed upon it is not merely an innocent shorthand; it structures, often invisibly, the assumptions that historians and policymakers alike bring to questions of who belongs where, assumptions this paper argues cannot be sustained once the region's actual pre-national political geography is taken seriously. By the eighteenth century, the kingdom's population consisted mainly of Lepcha, Bhutia, and Limbu communities, moving, trading, and intermarrying across a space that had not yet been asked to organise itself around the idea of the bounded nation at all.

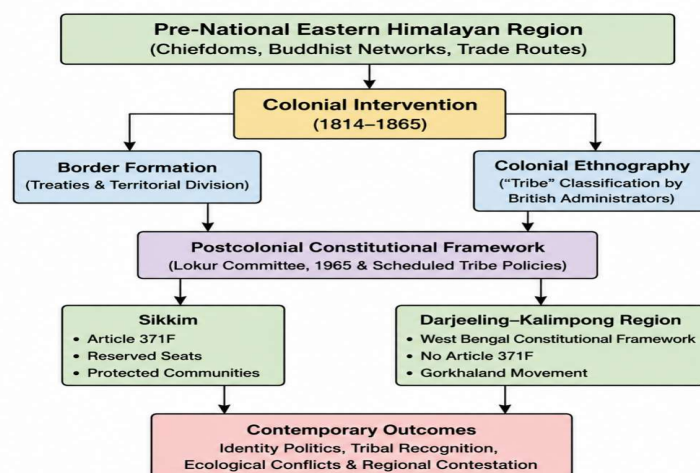


Figure: Conceptual Framework of Colonial Border Formation, Constitutional Evolution, and Contemporary Identity Politics in the Eastern Himalayas

The transformation of the Eastern Himalayan region from a historically interconnected socio-cultural landscape into politically differentiated territorial units was primarily driven by colonial intervention, administrative restructuring, and ethnographic classification. British colonial policies not only redefined territorial boundaries but also institutionalized categories of identity that significantly influenced postcolonial governance and constitutional recognition (Barth, 1969; Scott, 2009). These historical processes created contrasting political trajectories for Sikkim and the Darjeeling–Kalimpong region, particularly in relation to tribal recognition, citizenship, and regional autonomy (Subba, 2018; Middleton, 2013). Furthermore, the persistence of identity-based political movements and ecological conflicts demonstrates that colonial administrative legacies continue to shape contemporary debates on indigeneity, governance, and regional development in

the Eastern Himalayas (Hutt, 1997; Zou & Kumar, 2021; Government of India, 1950).

3. Bordering the Frontier: Colonial Treaty-Making, 1814 to 1865

The corridor's transformation from a fluid political and cultural zone into a set of bounded territorial units belonging to discrete sovereigns was neither instantaneous nor complete before the colonial period, but the process accelerated sharply between 1814 and 1865, driven by British commercial and strategic interests rather than by any internal reorganisation of the region's own political life. Gorkha expansion from Nepal had already stripped Sikkim of considerable territory in the late eighteenth century when the Anglo-Nepalese War of 1814 to 1816 prompted the first systematic colonial bordering of the region.

Diagram 1: Timeline of Colonial Territorial Division (1814-1865)

- **1814-1816:** Anglo-Nepalese War initiates systematic colonial bordering.
- **1816:** *Treaty of Sugauli* - Nepal cedes recently acquired territory to the British.
- **1817:** *Treaty of Titalia* - British restores tract between Mechi and Teesta rivers to Sikkim; establishes formal Sikkim-British relationship.
- **1835:** *Deed of Grant* - Chogyal cedes Darjeeling to the British East India Company.
- **1861:** *Treaty of Tumlong* - Tightens British control over Sikkim's external trade and relations.
- **1864-1865:** *Anglo-Bhutan War & Treaty of Sinchula* - Kalimpong transferred from Bhutanese to British control and folded into Darjeeling district.

Under the Treaty of Sugauli of 1816, Nepal ceded much of its recently acquired territory to the British; under the Treaty of Titalia of 1817, the British restored to Sikkim the tract between the Mechi and Teesta rivers that Nepal had taken, while simultaneously establishing the first formal Sikkim-British relationship, one that would deepen over the following decades into an increasingly asymmetric protectorate arrangement. Each of these treaties did more than redraw a boundary line; each treated Sikkim, Nepal, and British India, for the first time in the region's documented history, as discrete legal personalities capable of ceding and receiving bounded territory from one another, a form of political geography the region's own pre-colonial rulers had not previously required.

In 1835, the Chogyal ceded Darjeeling to the British East India Company through the Deed of Grant, ostensibly to establish a hill sanatorium; the adequacy of the compensation attached to this cession was disputed almost immediately, and continuing friction over Darjeeling and associated trade questions precipitated a brief Anglo-Sikkimese conflict in 1861, resolved by the Treaty of Tumlong, which further tightened British control over Sikkim's external trade and relations and pushed the kingdom further toward the protectorate status it would formally acquire nearly a century later. Kalimpong, meanwhile, followed a separate colonial trajectory: it remained under Bhutanese rule until the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864 to 1865, when the Treaty of Sinchula transferred the tract to British control, after which it was

administratively folded into the Darjeeling district, severing it permanently from the polity that had previously governed it and attaching it instead to a British administrative unit that had no prior relationship to it beyond geographic proximity. By 1865, a single Himalayan corridor whose political geography had for centuries been organised around chiefdoms, monastic authority, and a loosely centralised kingdom had been redrawn, treaty by treaty, into the constituent pieces of what would eventually become four separate national jurisdictions, British India, Nepal, Bhutan, and, following the later absorption of the Chumbi Valley into Tibet and Tibet's own subsequent incorporation into China, the People's Republic of China.

Yet this accelerating territorial bordering did not correspond to any equivalent hardening of the region's actual social geography. From the 1850s, the British developed a large-scale tea plantation economy in the newly acquired Darjeeling hills, and the existing Lepcha and Bhutia population was far too small to meet the resulting demand for labour. The colonial administration responded by actively encouraging and organising the migration of thousands of workers from eastern Nepal, Rai, Limbu, Gurung, Magar, Tamang, Kami, Damai, Sarki, Newar, and other Nepali-speaking communities, into a territory that colonial treaty-making had, only decades earlier, formally assigned to a different sovereign than the one these labourers were subjects of (Sinha and Subba, 2003). The people moving across the region continued, in practice, to treat it as the interconnected space it had always been, crossing what colonial treaties had newly designated as an international boundary in numbers large enough to permanently alter the demographic composition of the entire hill region, in Sikkim as well as in Darjeeling, well before anyone involved thought to describe this movement as migration between two nations. By the early

twentieth century, Nepali-speaking migrants had become the numerical majority across both territories, while the Lepcha and Bhutia populations, though politically and symbolically central, had become demographic minorities in many areas. This is the pattern this paper takes as its baseline: a single, demographically continuous region, increasingly divided on paper by colonial treaty-making, but not yet divided in the lived movement of the people who actually inhabited it.

4. The Colonial Misclassification of "Tribe": Ethnography Ill-Suited to India

Alongside this territorial bordering, a second colonial project arrived that would prove, in the long run, no less consequential: the ethnographic classification of the subcontinent's population into fixed, nameable "tribes" and "castes." Colonial administrators such as H. H. Risley, whose survey *The Tribes and Castes of Bengal* appeared in 1891, and E. T. Dalton, whose *Descriptive Ethnology of Bengal* appeared in 1872, undertook large-scale ethnographic and, in Risley's case, anthropometric surveys intended to catalogue India's population into discrete, measurable categories. Risley's method relied in part on physical measurement, the nasal index prominent among his tools, to array Indian populations along a presumed racial hierarchy, a methodology now understood as an application of Victorian race science whose scientific pretensions have not survived scrutiny (Dirks, 2001). Dalton's (1872) ethnological survey, though less explicitly racial in method, similarly proceeded from the assumption that India's population could be sorted into bounded, internally homogeneous ethnological units, each occupying a fixed rung on a single evolutionary ladder from "primitive" to "civilised."

Table 1: Summary of Literature on Tribal Classification in India

Scholar / Administrator	Key Work / Era	Primary Approach / Perspective on "Tribe"
André Bêteille	1986	Bêteille rejected the view of tribes as a primitive stage of social evolution, emphasizing their historical interaction with civilization and arguing that tribal identity in India was shaped by their relative position outside the state and mainstream society, while colonial administrative classifications artificially separated tribes from the caste system.
G. S. Ghurye	1943, 1963	Assimilationist perspective; viewed tribals as "backward Hindus" requiring integration into mainstream society.

Verrier Elwin	1944	Protectionist perspective; advocated for the isolation and preservation of tribal cultures from mainstream disruption.
D. N. Majumdar	1937, 1944	Integrationist perspective; proposed "creative adaptation" where tribes integrate while maintaining cultural identity.
N. K. Bose & S. Sinha	1941, 1958	Continuum models; proposed the "Hindu method of absorption" and the tribe-caste continuum based on gradual exchange.
Virginus Xaxa	1999, 2008	Constructivist/Relational perspective; views tribal identity as continuously produced through interaction and political claim-making.

This classificatory model was poorly suited to the social reality it claimed to describe, and the historical record assembled in Sections 2 and 3 of this paper illustrates why. A population whose kingdoms had incorporated multiple ethnic communities from their very founding, whose territory had been repeatedly redrawn by treaty rather than by any change in the people living within it, and whose demographic composition had been transformed by large-scale labour migration that colonial administration itself organised, does not resolve easily into bounded, racially distinct, internally static units. The religious and cultural texture of the region reinforces this point further. Sikkimese Buddhism absorbed elements of pre-existing Lepcha animist practice, most visibly in the shared veneration of Mount Khangchendzonga as a protective deity recognised by Lepcha, Bhutia, and Limbu communities alike, while Nepali-origin migrants brought Hindu ritual practice into a hill society that had never been exclusively Buddhist. Inter-marriage across these communities, and the gradual adoption of Nepali as a regional lingua franca even among some Lepcha and Bhutia households, further blurred boundaries that colonial ethnography sought to fix through the tidy language of racial and tribal type. None of this is to suggest that no meaningful cultural distinctions existed between these communities; Lepcha, Bhutia, and the various Nepali-origin groups retained, and retain, distinct languages, life-cycle rituals, and origin narratives (Shneiderman, 2015). It is only to observe that these distinctions coexisted with centuries of exchange and mutual adaptation, a pattern considerably more complicated than the bounded ethnological units Risley and Dalton's surveys required their data to produce.

The instability of the resulting classification did not go unnoticed even within the late-colonial and early-independence administrative establishment, though the debate it generated rarely escaped the basic

premise that "tribe" was a coherent object about which the state needed to formulate a single policy. G. S. Ghurye (1943), writing in the 1940s, argued that so-called tribal populations were better understood as "backward Hindus" whose distinctiveness was a matter of degree rather than kind, and who should accordingly be assimilated into the mainstream Hindu social order rather than administered as a separate racial category. Verrier Elwin (1944) took the opposite position, arguing for the protective isolation of tribal communities from mainstream society and economy in order to preserve their distinct cultures from disruption. The Ghurye-Elwin debate is often remembered as a disagreement over assimilation versus isolation, and it was that, but it was also, more fundamentally, a debate conducted entirely within the colonial ethnographic frame it inherited: both positions treated "tribe" as a bounded, self-evident administrative object requiring a top-down policy resolution, neither seriously entertaining the possibility, later advanced by scholars such as Virginus Xaxa (1999) and Nandini Sundar, that tribal identity might be better understood as relationally and historically produced rather than as a fixed condition to be either preserved or dissolved. Independence, in this sense, did not rupture the colonial classificatory logic so much as hand its unresolved internal debate to a new set of institutions.

The classificatory debate did not end with Ghurye and Elwin; if anything, the succeeding generation of Indian anthropologists multiplied rather than resolved the disagreement. D. N. Majumdar (1937, 1944), examining the Ho of Chota Nagpur in *A Tribe in Transition* and the Korwas in *The Fortunes of Primitive Tribes*, rejected Elwin's proposal for protected tribal reserve areas in favour of what he called creative or generative adaptation, integration into the wider society that nonetheless preserved respect for tribal cultural identity. N. K. Bose

(1941), in an influential essay on what he termed the "Hindu method of tribal absorption," proposed that tribal and Hindu society were joined not by a fixed boundary but by a continuum along which groups moved gradually through religious, economic, and marital exchange, a position Surajit Sinha (1958) would develop further as the tribe-caste continuum, and B. K. Roy Burman (1983) would recast again as a socio-geographical buffer zone, a transitional space of exchange, intermarriage, and, at times, exploitation, standing between tribal and mainstream society rather than cleanly separating the two. S. C. Dube's (2012) work on the Kamar of

Madhya Pradesh added a further dimension, arguing that tribal identity was not simply eroding under contact with the wider society but was fluid and continuously renegotiated, with some communities integrating through the Sanskritisation process that M. N. Srinivas had described for caste society more broadly, and others retaining, or newly asserting, distinct identities through political mobilisation. Each of these formulations sought to correct the static, evolutionary premises of the Risley-Dalton generation; none, however, dislodged the underlying assumption, carried forward essentially unchanged into the Lokur Committee two decades later, that Indian tribal society could be adequately described along a single axis of contact, isolation, or absorption, an assumption this paper's Section 2 suggests was never well suited to a region whose communities had been exchanging, migrating, and intermarrying across contested boundaries since long before any colonial or national administrator arrived to classify them.

Previous studies have emphasized that the political and social transformation of the Eastern Himalayan region cannot be understood without examining the intertwined processes of colonial border-making, ethnographic classification, and postcolonial state formation. Scholars argue that colonial administrative practices institutionalized ethnic identities and reshaped regional governance, creating long-term implications for tribal recognition, citizenship, and identity politics in Sikkim and the Darjeeling–Kalimpong region (Barth, 1969; Scott, 2009; Subba, 2018).

5. Tribe, State, and Civilization: The Historical Construction of Tribal Identity in India

The Indian Constitution does not define "tribe" in anthropological terms. Article 366(25) instead

specifies that Scheduled Tribes are those communities notified as such under Article 342, which empowers the President of India to designate particular groups as Scheduled Tribes for a specific state or union territory; any subsequent addition or removal requires an Act of Parliament. Scheduled Tribe status is accordingly a constitutional and state-specific administrative category, produced through political and legal process rather than derived from any settled anthropological definition, precisely because no such settled definition existed for it to derive from.

The semi-official criteria that guided this process for decades originate in the Lokur Committee of 1965, which proposed five indicators for tribal recognition: primitive traits, distinctive culture, geographical isolation, shyness of contact with the wider community, and general backwardness. These criteria reproduce, with remarkably little modification, the evolutionary assumptions embedded in Risley's and Dalton's nineteenth-century surveys discussed in Section 4; independence had changed the institution responsible for classification without meaningfully changing the classificatory logic itself. Scholars including Xaxa (2008) and Sundar have extensively criticised these criteria as static and colonial in origin, portraying tribal communities as isolated and unchanging rather than as historically dynamic, interactive, and politically capable. Nicholas Dirks (2001) has argued more broadly that colonial censuses, ethnographic surveys, and administrative reports did not merely document Indian society but actively constructed the categories of tribe and caste that postcolonial governance subsequently inherited and institutionalised.

Within this broader national framework, Sikkim and West Bengal followed different specific paths, a divergence examined in full in Section 6. The Lepcha and Bhutia communities of Darjeeling and Kalimpong were recognised as Scheduled Tribes in West Bengal in 1956; when Sikkim itself became a state in 1975, its Lepcha and Bhutia population received equivalent recognition, but with an addition unavailable to their counterparts across the border, the constitutional protections of Article 371F, including twelve Bhutia-Lepcha reserved seats in Sikkim's thirty-two-seat Legislative Assembly. What matters for the present section is what happened next: rather than settling the question of who belonged within this colonial-derived category, the 1956 and 1975 recognitions opened a field of

contestation that has only widened since. Limbu and Tamang communities were added to Sikkim's Scheduled Tribe list in 2002, following decades of campaigning, and this inclusion was largely responsible for the dramatic rise in Sikkim's recorded Scheduled Tribe population, from 20.6 per cent in the 2001 census to 33.8 per cent in 2011. Yet neither community received reserved Assembly seats: the Bhutia-Lepcha political reservation established under Article 371F proved to be a historically frozen category tied to a specific 1975 settlement, distinct from and non-generalising to the more elastic administrative Scheduled Tribe list that could subsequently be expanded by ordinary parliamentary act. A colonial category that had never been analytically coherent to begin with was, by the early twenty-first century, generating an internally two-tiered structure of its own, a fixed political tier and an expandable welfare tier, whose boundaries corresponded to no anthropological logic but carried enormous material and political weight regardless. Communities still excluded from Scheduled Tribe status, including the Rai, Gurung, Mangar, Sunuwar, Newar, Bhujel, and Jogi, now press for inclusion in a category whose original criteria even its own architects would struggle to defend, while the already-recognised Lepcha and Bhutia communities express concern that further inclusion would dilute an already-fixed quota of benefits. The classification has not become more settled with age; it has become more contested, precisely because each new addition to the list raises the material stakes without ever resolving the underlying incoherence of the category itself.

6. Two Regimes from One Flawed Inheritance: Sikkim and Darjeeling-Kalimpong Diverge

If Sections 4 and 5 establish that Sikkim and Darjeeling-Kalimpong inherited substantially the same flawed colonial classificatory apparatus, this section asks why that shared inheritance nonetheless produced two starkly different political architectures. The answer, this paper argues, lies in a second, later moment of nation-state bordering, this time conducted not by Britain but by independent India itself, whose timing and legal form differed sharply between the two territories.

Darjeeling and Kalimpong, having been directly administered by the British as part of the Bengal Presidency since the mid-nineteenth century, passed into independent India in 1947 through simple

administrative continuity. There was no separate negotiation, no distinct legal personality to dissolve, and no question of sovereignty to resolve; the districts were incorporated into the new state of West Bengal in essentially the same administrative form they had held under colonial rule. Sikkim's path was categorically different. The kingdom retained a recognised, if increasingly constrained, independent political status through the transfer of power, and the Indo-Sikkim Treaty of 1950 formalised this as a protectorate relationship rather than an incorporation: the Chogyal, Palden Thondup Namgyal from 1963, continued as constitutional monarch with authority over internal administration, while the Government of India assumed responsibility for defence, external affairs, and communications. Sikkim's strategic importance to India grew substantially over the following decade and a half, sharpened by the Chinese annexation of Tibet in 1950 and the Sino-Indian War of 1962, both of which sat on Sikkim's immediate frontier.

This protectorate arrangement proved unstable for domestic political reasons as much as geopolitical ones. Democratic movements within Sikkim, led by figures such as Kazi Lhendup Dorjee Khangsarpa and the Sikkim National Congress, pressed through the 1960s and early 1970s for political representation that the existing monarchical system, dominated by the Bhutia-Lepcha aristocracy, did not adequately provide to the numerically larger Nepali-origin population. Widespread protests against the Chogyal in 1973 produced a tripartite agreement among the Chogyal, Sikkimese political parties, and the Government of India that substantially expanded India's role in Sikkim's governance. A new constitution followed in 1974, and in 1975 a referendum, whose overwhelming result in favour of merger with India remains a subject of some historical debate given the circumstances under which it was conducted, provided the political legitimisation for full incorporation. The Indian Parliament's Thirty-Sixth Constitutional Amendment gave this effect, and on 16 May 1975 Sikkim formally became the twenty-second state of the Republic of India, ending more than three centuries of Namgyal rule. Because this merger was negotiated as the surrender of a distinct, internationally recognised sovereignty rather than an ordinary act of internal administrative reorganisation, it created constitutional room for a special-provision settlement of a kind that a district reorganisation could never generate. Article 371F,

inserted specifically to give effect to the terms of Sikkim's merger, protected existing Sikkimese laws, land tenure arrangements, and the fixed allocation of Bhutia-Lepcha reserved seats that reflected the pre-merger political settlement among Sikkim's elites. Darjeeling and Kalimpong, never having possessed a separate sovereignty to negotiate away, had no equivalent constitutional moment in which such a settlement could be produced.

The consequences of this divergence for ethnic politics on either side of the border have been substantial (Middleton, 2015). In Sikkim, ethnic politics has organised largely around the defence and incremental extension of an existing constitutional settlement; the Bhutia-Lepcha reserved seats function as a fixed asset whose value depends on continued state recognition, and political energy is directed toward preserving that asset, including by invoking Article 371F's cultural-protection provisions in ecological disputes. The Rathong Chu movement of the early-to-mid 1990s illustrates this well: the proposed thirty-megawatt hydroelectric project, sited near Yuksom, the very location of the Namgyal dynasty's founding consecration in 1642, within the sacred landscape surrounding Mount Khangchendzonga, drew opposition explicitly framed around both ecological harm and the constitutional protections Sikkim's distinct status was supposed to guarantee; the project's cancellation in 1997 established a template subsequently followed by the Affected Citizens of Teesta, formed in 2003, whose campaign against dam construction within or near the Dzongu Lepcha Reserve culminated in prolonged hunger strikes through 2007 and 2008 (Gergan). Darjeeling and Kalimpong, lacking any equivalent constitutional asset, developed instead a politics organised around the demand for recognition itself: the Gorkhaland movement, beginning in 1986 under Subhash Ghising's Gorkha National Liberation Front, founded in 1980, and continuing through the Darjeeling Accord of 1988, the Gorkhaland Territorial Administration of 2011, and recurrent agitation since, most recently in 2017. The West Bengal government's response, creating a proliferating series of separate development boards for individual micro-ethnic communities from 2013 onward, has been read by critics as a strategy of fragmenting the collective Gorkha political identity into smaller, more manageable constituencies, a strategy with no parallel in Sikkim, where the relevant political category had already been fixed by

the 1975 settlement rather than left open to this kind of administrative subdivision.

7. Contemporary Contestations: Ecology, Recognition, and Escalating Stakes

The divergence traced in Section 6 is not a settled historical outcome but an active, ongoing condition on both sides of the border. In Sikkim, the eleven "left-out" Nepali-origin communities discussed in Section 5 continue to campaign for Scheduled Tribe status, and because these communities are considerably more numerous than the already-recognised Lepcha and Bhutia population, their inclusion would substantially alter the composition of the Scheduled Tribe category without automatically altering the frozen allocation of Bhutia-Lepcha reserved seats, producing a genuinely zero-sum dynamic between communities that might otherwise share substantial common ground, not least on questions of hydropower and ecological degradation (Guha, 1989). The continuing resurgence of hydropower construction in Sikkim, much of it contracted to private developers with comparatively little public disclosure, keeps these recognition categories materially rather than symbolically consequential, since Scheduled Tribe status and Article 371F remain the primary legal grounds on which affected communities can contest land acquisition and project approval. In Darjeeling and Kalimpong, the Gorkhaland demand remains similarly unresolved, and ethnopolitical mobilisation on either side of the border, whether organised through the idiom of tribal recognition or of regional statehood, has so far done comparatively little to address the structural economic problems, rising unemployment and youth out-migration prominent among them, that affect both territories.

The material stakes of this classification are not merely local to Sikkim and Darjeeling. Virginius Xaxa's wider body of work, and his subsequent leadership of the Government of India's 2014 High Level Committee on the Socio-Economic, Health and Educational Status of Tribal Communities, has documented how development and infrastructure projects nationally have produced land alienation, displacement, and environmental degradation disproportionately borne by Scheduled Tribe communities (Xaxa, 2014; Fernandes). This national pattern echoes, at far greater scale, the same underlying dynamic this paper has traced regionally: an ill-fitting colonial classification determining, decades later, who bears the costs of development

and who can claim its protections.

The plains-dwelling communities bracketed out of this paper's core comparison, the Toto, Rabha, and Garo of the Terai-Dooars belt in North Bengal, offer a useful further test of the argument advanced here. These communities' colonial administrative history diverged from the hill case in a crucial respect: they were never part of the Namgyal kingdom's territory, and their incorporation into British India, and subsequently into independent India, followed the ordinary district-administration pathway that this paper has argued was decisive for Darjeeling and Kalimpong's hill communities as well. If the incorporation-pathway argument developed here is correct, the Terai-Dooars plains tribes should exhibit a recognition politics considerably closer to Darjeeling and Kalimpong's pattern than to Sikkim's, regardless of whatever independent claims to cultural distinctiveness these communities might present on their own terms. Confirming or disconfirming this prediction lies beyond this paper's remit, but it is worth flagging as a natural extension of the argument. Read together, these ongoing contestations confirm that the divergence identified in this paper produced not two settled outcomes but two distinct, and equally unresolved, modes of political grievance, both of them downstream of a colonial classificatory apparatus that was never analytically sound to begin with and has only grown more consequential, not less, with age.

8. Indigeneity Reconsidered: Beteille, Xaxa, and Karlsson in Light of a Denationalised History

The international framework of "indigenous peoples," consolidated through instruments such as the International Labour Organization's Convention 169 and given global visibility through the United Nations' 1993 International Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples, developed primarily out of the historical experience of settler-colonial societies such as Australia, New Zealand, Canada, and the Americas, where a comparatively clear-cut encounter between an established native population and a technologically dominant colonising settler population makes the category of "indigenous" relatively unambiguous. Andre Beteille (1998) has argued influentially that this framework does not transpose cleanly onto the Indian subcontinent, whose demographic history has been shaped by continuous migration, settlement, and cultural interaction over millennia, producing no clear

historical cleavage between original inhabitants and later arrivals. On this view, singling out particular communities as uniquely "indigenous" risks flattening a genuinely complex history of migration and mutual accommodation into an imported settler-colonial binary that fits the Indian case poorly. Beteille's (1986) fuller argument, developed in an earlier essay specifically on the concept of tribe, holds that what has actually distinguished tribal communities in the Indian context is not race, origin, or chronological priority but a historical position outside the state or civilizational mainstream, maintained by choice or by circumstance, and that it was colonial administration that first hardened this loose positional distinction into the rigid, separately enumerated category of tribe as against caste. This earlier formulation sits unusually well with the argument developed across this paper: a region whose political geography long refused to resolve into the bounded categories later imposed upon it is, in Beteille's own terms, a textbook instance of a population whose position outside the state was a matter of historical circumstance rather than any essential or original difference from its neighbours, until colonial and national bordering made that outsideness into a fixed administrative fact.

Virginius Xaxa (1999) and Bengt Karlsson (2003) have offered an influential counter-argument, contending that tribal identity should be understood as relational and continuously produced through interaction rather than as fixed by origin, and that its imperfect anthropological fit does not diminish its considerable value as a vehicle for claims to land, cultural recognition, and rights. The history assembled in this paper offers a way to hold both positions at once rather than choosing between them, and the denationalised historical account developed in Sections 2 and 3 sharpens the point further. Even the Lepcha, the region's earliest known inhabitants and the community with the strongest available claim to indigenous priority, occupied and continue to trace their history to a cross-border cultural space that never mapped onto a single nation, a fact that complicates any indigeneity claim framed in national terms, since the very territory being claimed as ancestral now sits astride the boundaries of India and, historically, territories now administered by China and Nepal. Beteille's skepticism about clean priority claims is, if anything, strengthened by this observation. Yet the postcolonial Indian state, precisely because it operates within a national frame the region's own history never fully honoured, still

had to draw an administrative line somewhere, and once drawn, through the 1956 and 1975 recognitions and the 2002 addition traced in Section 5, that line acquired enormous political consequence entirely independent of its shaky anthropological and, this paper adds, its shaky national foundations.

This suggests a modest refinement to the Beteille-Xaxa-Karlsson debate rather than a resolution in either direction. Beteille's empirical claim, that Indian indigeneity claims rarely survive close historical scrutiny as clean priority claims, and Xaxa and Karlsson's political claim, that indigenous status nonetheless functions as a hugely consequential category of collective action, are not in tension with one another; both are true simultaneously, and the Sikkim-Darjeeling case demonstrates exactly how. Indigeneity's anthropological incoherence does not prevent, and arguably enables, its capture and formalisation by the state as a fixed administrative category; and it is precisely this state formalisation, necessarily conducted in the vocabulary of the modern nation-state, that generates the political stakes that Xaxa and Karlsson's framework is better equipped to explain. Indigeneity in this reading is neither an original, pre-political fact about a population nor merely an incoherent conceptual import; it is a state-produced category whose political force derives from institutionalisation itself, a constructivist-institutionalist position that draws on both sides of the debate while collapsing neither into the other, and one that only becomes visible once the nation-state frame in which that institutionalisation occurs is itself treated as a historical object rather than a natural starting point.

9. Conclusion

This paper has argued that the sharply different regimes of ethnic and tribal recognition that distinguish Sikkim from the neighbouring hill districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong cannot be adequately understood within the nation-state frame conventionally applied to them, and cannot be explained by appeal to differences in the two populations' historical claims to indigeneity, which were substantially similar. Both territories were shaped by the same pre-national corridor of Lepcha chiefdoms, Tibetan Buddhist migration, and Namgyal-era political integration; both were subsequently divided from that shared corridor, and from each other, by a sequence of colonial treaties between 1814 and 1865 that imposed a national-territorial grid the region's own history had never

required; and both inherited the same analytically unsuited colonial ethnographic classification of "tribe," developed by Risley and Dalton and carried forward with little modification by the Lokur Committee and the postcolonial Scheduled Tribe framework. What differed was a second, later moment of nation-state bordering, this time conducted by independent India: Darjeeling and Kalimpong's uninterrupted administrative absorption in 1947, against Sikkim's twenty-five-year protectorate interregnum and negotiated, referendum-legitimated merger in 1975. It was this differential incorporation, layered on top of an already ill-fitting colonial inheritance, that produced Article 371F's reserved seats in Sikkim and their durable absence in Darjeeling and Kalimpong, and that subsequently produced two qualitatively different modes of ethnic politics.

The paper has also used this comparative case to revisit the long-standing theoretical debate between Andre Beteille and Virginius Xaxa and Bengt Karlsson over the applicability of the international "indigenous peoples" framework to India, arguing for a constructivist-institutionalist synthesis in which the anthropological and national fluidity that Beteille rightly identifies does not prevent indigeneity from becoming, once state-formalised, exactly the kind of consequential political category that Xaxa and Karlsson describe. More broadly, the case suggests that scholars of tribal and indigenous recognition in India would do well to treat the nation-state frame itself as a historical artefact requiring explanation, rather than as a neutral backdrop against which indigeneity claims are simply adjudicated. Two adjoining fragments of a single pre-national region, sharing a common history that neither colonial nor postcolonial cartography ever fully honoured, were nonetheless

channelled into starkly different recognition regimes by a difference in nation-state incorporation timing that had little to do with either population's own claims to belonging (Baruah, 2005).

This account has been built substantially from the secondary historical and constitutional record, and its argument would benefit considerably from primary archival substantiation, colonial correspondence and gazetteers held in the India Office Records, Sikkim's own state archives, and Bengal Presidency administrative records prominent candidates, as well as from contemporary fieldwork tracing how these inherited categories are actually lived, contested, and mobilised by the communities

on either side of the border today. That latter task, the lived experience of a divergence whose deeper origins this paper has traced to a contested history of borders and classifications rather than to any natural difference between peoples, is left to future research.

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