

Ethnic Identities and Development in the Darjeeling Hills: A Critical Reasoning

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Abstract

Over exaggeration of community spirit can lead to ethnicism creating a closed in society. It is highly probable that this is the current threat that the ethnic communities of Darjeeling are beginning to face. Language, culture and identity are significant pillars of ethnicity. Darjeeling has been witnessing a series of developments based on the assertion of ethnic identities. The cultural and development boards established for the promotion of culture and people are not without price. Each ethnic community is busy tracing its root and asserting its identity. There have been attempts to recreate the past and live in it. This has led to the creation of two contrasting and conflicting images of the ethnocentric insider and the intruding alienating outsider. Darjeeling apparently is one but multiplied from within. The objective of the paper is to pour forth a critical reasoning on the interplay between the assertion of ethnic identities and development. The method followed will be basically qualitative complemented by both deductive and inductive method of logical enquiry.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Ethnic, Identity, Development, Philosophical

An effort has been made to focus on the anthropological aspect of the ethnic communities (human) of the Darjeeling hills from a philosophical perspective. Philosophy is a rational investigation or critical enquiry into the nature of reality. The three basic aspects of reality are: World, Human Beings, and God. The paper seeks to make a rational investigation or critical enquiry into the phenomenon of ethnicity and development in the Darjeeling hills since October 2007 upto March 2017. According to Copi (1997), "Logic is the study of the methods and principles used to distinguish good (correct) from bad (incorrect) reasoning."¹ It is an art as well as science of reasoning which can be deductive or inductive. The method used will be logical reasoning, both deductive and inductive. The thrust of the paper will be on the present situation of Darjeeling, the challenges it is facing in the name of ethnicity and development.

Method of Deduction

Keeping the oft used exceptive proposition 'Only God is Perfect' as the major premiss, we can go on to state that human is not God, therefore not perfect. We can argue in a syllogistic manner here. All culture is human-made. Therefore no culture is perfect. This is an enthymeme of the first order where the major premiss has been suppressed (All that is human is imperfect). On the basis of the above arguments we can go on drawing conclusions following the method of deduction that no politicians are perfect, no law-makers are perfect and no intellectuals are perfect.

¹ Irving M. Copi, *Introduction to Logic* (Seventh Edition) (New York: Macmillan Publishing Company, 1986), 3.

The traditional square of opposition of proposition helps us to ascertain the truth values of propositions when they are juxtaposed. On the basis of the universal proposition 'All culture is imperfect' - we can ascertain the validity of the particular proposition 'This/that culture is imperfect'. Keeping in mind the contrary relation we can convert the universal affirmative (A) proposition into Universal negative (E) as 'No culture is perfect'. Thus, the relation of subalternation leads us to ascertain the truth of the particular negative (O) proposition 'Some culture is not perfect'. However, this does not give us the possibility of some culture being perfect as our argument has been already based on the universal truth 'Only God is perfect'.

There is another metaphysical truth: Change implies imperfection. Therefore, the most perfect being does not change. All the rest undergoes change. Since culture is a man-made phenomenon it undergoes change. A culture has core and peripheral elements. On the basis of the dictum: *pantha rei* (everything flows) or everything is in a flux, let us formulate a hypothetical argument:

If the core changes, then it is a major change.
 Religion is the core of culture.
 Therefore, if religion changes, it is a major change.

Using Truth Table Technique we can formulate the following truth table:

P	Q	If P then Q	P	Q
T	T	T	T	T
T	F	F	T	F
F	T	T	F	T
F	F	T	F	F

In the above argument form, in the first substitution instance, the premises are true, but the conclusion is also true. Therefore, this argument is valid. However, validity does not imply truth necessarily. An argument can be valid but may not be true. That is why further critical reflection is necessary. Moreover, a major change should not be understood as a total change.

Multiple Identities and Ethnicity

Today we talk about multiple identities. Culture gives cultural identity. Religion gives religious identity. Language gives linguistic identity. However, in most of the ethnic groups, culture, belief system (religion) and language seem to be forming one composite whole. For example: When we say a Tamang he/she is expected to be following *Bonism*, speaking in Tamang (*Tamyig*) and following their *rimthim* (culture). But the impact of other religions, languages and culture cannot be denied. For example: Majority of the Tamangs have embraced Buddhism and some are Christians or Hindus. Today, most of them converse in Nepali only since it is the lingua-franca in the Darjeeling hills.

Culture and Identity are two main pillars of ethnicity. Religion is often considered as a core of culture. Therefore, change of religion amounts to a major cultural change. Whether this argument works for us or not, depends on how we define religion or who defines religion for us. If we take religion as a belief system, then there can be a belief system with a definite creed, doctrines, etc., or, there can be a belief system without these elements. Thus, we find two kinds of religion or belief systems: Doctrinal which is often revelatory and non doctrinal which is non-revelatory. The tribal belief systems fall into the second category. The animistic and shamanistic characteristics present in them have led the scholars to consider these as cosmic religions.

Culture (sanskriti) has been derived from the sankrit words: *samyak* + *kriti* which means something which has been purified and considered for living. Therefore, it is in the very nature of culture to be constantly purified and renewed. If a culture does not change it is either stagnant or dead culture. However, this explanation has been from the side of the sanskritic tradition. Let us consider it from the perspective of the tribals. Their culture is highlighted in their concrete living, in the simplicity and innocence of life and nature around them. It is basically related to their life especially in matters of birth, marriage, death and tribal festivals including their manner of thinking, moving, eating and drinking. For example: Lepchas call it *moo* culture, Tamangs call it *rimthim*, and similarly, all the tribal groups have their own terms for their culture.

Assertion of Ethnic Identities

People in the Darjeeling hills are all set to ascertain their ethnicity. Even the minority groups like the Tibetans, Marwaris, Biharis and others are feeling the need to be together in their respective groups. They feel socially and psychologically secure and comfortable in their own groups which is posing a sort of threat. Darjeeling is facing the threat of becoming a ghetto. Apparently, it seems one but internally it is fragmentary. This has resulted in the contrasting and conflicting images of the ethnocentric insider and the intruding alienating outsider.² This is because ethnicity has been overemphasized where outsiders are not welcome. The consequences being the development and cultural boards. Ordinary people have been mobilized on the basis of cultural, linguistic and even religious identities. The common people take it seriously that they should go back to their past and must preserve their culture and tradition. What is other than theirs is considered as threat. Thus, traditionalization is very vivid in Darjeeling. Preservation of culture and tradition is good but an overemphasis will be detrimental. Further, nobody can re-create the past and live in it. If you really want to support your culture and tradition these need to be purified further. These need to be lived in better ways, in simpler ways further, in simplicity and in holy innocence which are perfect characteristics of tribal and ethnic communities of Darjeeling. But we are becoming complicated contrary to the basic tribal and ethnic values that we cherished once upon a time.

²Terence Mukhia, *Impact of Christianity on the Lepcha and Tamang Tribal Communities in the Darjeeling District (1841-2012): A Philosophical Perspective*, Ph. D Thesis (Guwahati, Assam: Assam Don Bosco University, 2017), 376.

Change and Development

Change is necessary for development and it can be either positive or negative. Change does not always imply positive development. It can be a mal-development. Example: an eco-friendly area turns ugly due to pollution. The ethnic communities of Darjeeling have not remained the same because there have been several impact factors. Both the internal and external factors have created waves of impacts leading to change. Let me put it as a syllogism:

Where there is impact there is change.
There is an impact on the ethnic communities.
Therefore there is a change.

Schematically,

If there is A then there is B.
There is A.
Therefore B.

If we go back to 1980s, Darjeeling was being governed by Gorkha National Liberation Front under its leader late Subash Ghising. One of its party members, Mr. Bimal Gurung, rebelled against the party and established Gorkha Jan Mukti Morcha (GJMM) on 7th October 2007. Thus, began a new political era in the Darjeeling district. Mr. Gurung managed to convince the people of the district that Gorkhaland, a demand for a separate state, was highly possible, and he managed to gain the confidence of the people. The people of Darjeeling irrespective of caste, religion, sex, culture, parties, and associations began supporting the cause which Mr. Gurung stood for. The people set aside their differences and began to identify themselves as one -the Gorkhas. All the people living in the district were considered Gorkhas, since Darjeeling would be Gorkhaland soon and all dwelling in Gorkhaland would be counted as Gorkhas. Such a unity and the formation of a new identity posed a serious threat to the opposition parties, especially those who did not favour the demand for a separate state. The result was Gorkhaland Territorial Administration and the Development and Cultural Boards. Darjeeling witnessed a different kind of change.

Political Impact, Change and Development

The development boards are supposed to be non-political organisations concerned with the development of members under it observing equity. But is real development taking place in Darjeeling? These development boards have been strongly manipulated for political gains by the political parties. The benefits are going to those who support that which is advocated by the leaders of the boards and the respective associations related to it. Thus, those who want to reap the harvest should stand in unanimity with the group's ideals and policies. If you differ then you are an outsider. Can we call it a real development?

Earlier the communities were divided in the name of ethnicity. Now, the division is taking place in the name of religion as well. Though the agenda is that of development yet it gave further impetus to the weakening of the oneness of the people in the Darjeeling hills. The Government of West Bengal decided to establish development board for the religious minority groups in the Darjeeling district. As a result the honourable Chief Minister Mamata Banerjee announced Pahadiya Minority Board for the minority community in the hills. The Muslim community boycotted it initially and the Christian community demanded a separate Christian Minority Board. Nevertheless, the board continued to function.

A surge of ethnic community spirit brought a new kind of revolution in the Darjeeling hills. Though each ethnic community was looking for an opportunity for development, yet they stood as one in their demand of a separate state which required a broad mindedness, crossing of boundaries and rising above selfish motives. The West Bengal Government was quick to entertain the developmental projects as it would not only bring the sectional development of the hill people creating imbalance but also weaken the demand of a separate state. It gave the government an alternative solution to the demand of a separate state. Fifteen development and cultural boards were established in Darjeeling and Kalimpong Districts, namely, Mayel Lyang Lepcha Development Board, Tamang Development and Cultural Board, Sherpa Cultural Board, Bhutia Development Board, Khambu Rai Development Board, Mangar Development Board, Limbu Development Board, Pahadia Minority Development and Cultural Board, Gurung Development and Cultural Board, Kami Development and Cultural Board, Khas Development and Cultural Board, Sarki Development and Cultural Board, Bhujel Development and Cultural Board, Newar Development and Cultural Board, Damai Development and Cultural Board.³ Some boards got more money and some got less; some got more privileges whereas some got less. The point which the government failed to see was that such a disbalance would bring the vast majority to unite as one for a joint development and not sectional ones. Further, even the development boards could not satisfy the large sections of different ethnic communities since the major issues related to identity and development remained unanswered. Thus, there remains the need of just one match-stick to light the fire, that is, another phase of the movement for a separate state. However, selfish moves for benefits through development projects and lack of a proper planning, strategy and leadership will still pose a big barrier to the demand of a separate state. Further, if the demand is based more on the ethnic and emotional issues, it is highly probable that the demand of a separate state will be a failure even it picks up a pace. Such a movement will have its ups and downs resulting in more wastage and harm than developments. We can also deduce this fact to some extent even from the previous instances of demand for a separate state.⁴

³ <http://www.darjeeling.gov.in/>

⁴ This article was written before the second phase of Gorkhaland Movement that began under Gorkha Janamukti Morcha led by Bimal Gurung in 2017.

Conclusion

Over-exaggeration of the community spirit can lead to ethnicism creating a closed-in-society in which foreigners and minorities are discriminated against.⁵ Let us follow the method of induction here by presenting two kinds of arguments. Over exaggeration of Hutus and Tutsis in Africa led to ethnicism. There was bloodshed. Similar events took place in the Naga communities of Nagaland in India. Northeast India has witnessed similar ethnic violence. Based on the above events it seems highly probable that ethnic violence may erupt in Darjeeling one day. Now, let us formulate the counter argument. In case of *Hutus, Tutsis, Nagas, Khasis*, etc. they were concentrated in one place. Thus community sentiment was strong. Whereas, in the case of Darjeeling the ethnic communities are mixed and often scattered. There are very few villages where we find people of one community in majority but still there are others living with them. Thus, Darjeeling has little possibility of ethnic violence. The second argument seems to be appropriate in our case here. Further, there have been intermarriages and exchange of religious beliefs. Example: There are Tamangs who have accepted Buddhism, Christianity and Hinduism. Still, we cannot rule out the fact that Darjeeling is becoming a closed-in-society. Apparently, it looks united and one but there are divisions within. A divide and rule policy is still operative in case of Darjeeling where the organizers are the politicians, both local and foreign. This has definitely given a great blow to the demand for a separate state.

Assertion of ethnic identities has taken different turns. Many people opine that the development and cultural boards divide, a separate state, outside West Bengal, unites. Here is exactly where the game of asserting ethnic identities comes in. The people of Darjeeling believe that only the formation of a separate state will fulfil their aspirations. They say that unlike the people from the plains, the hill people are different, having different language, culture, custom, tradition, food habits, mentality, worldview, belief systems, ways of living and unique geographical features. Thus, the umbrella term '*Gorkha*' has been used for the people dwelling in the hills and the name '*Gorkhaland*' has been proposed for the much demanded state.

Change is a must for development but it does not mean all changes are healthy. All the fifteen development boards have definitely created impact and brought changes. However, particular impact leading to a particular change cannot be generalized. It would not be just to conclude that a development and cultural board has brought development of people in Darjeeling as a whole. All the people of Darjeeling are not contained within fifteen development and cultural boards.

Asserting ethnic identities is not bad but we cannot go on over-asserting our individual ethnic identities. Change and Adaptations are necessary. The world is a big place to live in. There is a need to be broad minded and allow others to fit in as well. You make them fit in and you will fit in the world of others. This will pave a way for true development or else there will be Development and Cultural Boards only, leaving Darjeeling apparently one but divided and multiplied from within. The hope for a

⁵ Isizoh, 1998, 127.

separate state dwindles within the over-assertion of ethnic identity, and even if we get one, it will not be a haven of freedom. Grouping together on the basis of emotion and ethnicity only, going on with long bandhs, murdering work culture, hampering education and ending up with development and cultural boards is really questionable.

Once upon a time associations (*samaj*) held an important place in the lives of the people of Darjeeling. It had members from various ethnic communities. Now that new associations or *samaj*-s have been formed on the basis of ethnic, political and religious identities the earlier *samaj*-s are falling into oblivion. Let us consider *Rai Samaj*, *Tamang Samaj*, *Sunuwar Samaj*, etc for example. Here, membership is open to their respective ethnic and cultural communities only. Similarly, in a religious *samaj* like Catholic *Samaj* or Hindu *Samaj* or Buddhist *Samaj*, only the members of the respective religions have a place. One way to fight the over-exaggeration of ethnicity is to strengthen our local *samaj* where people from various ethnic communities fit in and live together. That is why many people have objection to the name Gorkhaland if not to the movement. Another important remedial measure is education, such an education which will help us to accept each other as brothers and sisters, which will help us to go beyond the barriers of caste, creed, sex and culture forming an inclusive society, where everybody is considered as the children of one God.

