Environmentalism in the Darjeeling hills: an inquiry
L'environnementalisme dans les collines de Darjeeling : une enquête

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Introduction

This article foregrounds the discourse on environmentalism in the Darjeeling hills, which has been hidden and/or overshadowed by debates on colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism and state-making. Various scholarly attempts have been made to disseminate the notion of environmentalism through conceptualisation such as 'ethnic environmentalism' (Chettri 2017) or 'indigenous environmentalism' (de Maaker 2018) and, more recently, 'Himalayan environmentalism' (Gohain 2021). These conceptualisations help us to understand to some extent the distinctiveness of environmentalism in the Himalayas. However, they risk excluding diverse Himalayan communities. This article creates a broader framework and calls it ‘environmentalism of the hills’. I have not developed the idea of ‘environmentalism of the hills’ in opposition to other varieties of environmentalism (Guha and Martínez-Alier 1997, also prescribing the above-mentioned kinds of environmentalism) but in concertation with these scholars in order to study how environmentalism developed specifically in the Indian Himalayas, in the eastern part of the range. I use ‘environmentalism of the hills’ to represent the kind of environmentalism that is manifest in the eastern Himalayas, which does not normally fit into the existing framework of ‘environmentalism’ as developed by scholars for other parts of India. One cannot explicitly claim that an indigenous history of the environment in the Himalayas or the articulation of ‘indigenous environmentalism’ is inclusive because of the politics behind the term ‘indigeneity’. Thus, to avoid controversies regarding the terms ‘indigeneity’ and ‘environmentalism’, this article seeks to develop ‘environmentalism of the hills’ as an alternative to rethinking conventional forms of environmentalism. Moreover, this article seeks to deviate a little further from existing varieties of environmentalism in
view of possible ethnic closure when a given community and its respective knowledge are utilised as a dominant form of resistance against environmental destruction, thus rendering other communities less significant. In other words, I propose environmentalism of the hills as an analytical approach to recognising a coexisting and relational framework beyond exclusionary and ethnocentric forms of environmentalism. It is an attempt to write about environmentalism in the Darjeeling hills grounded in the coproduction and coexistence of historically diverse communities, which has otherwise been buried under dominant historical narratives about the region characterised by colonialism, ethnicity, nationalism and regional identity politics that often overlook the issue of environmentalism, systematically neglecting it in the process of knowledge production.

2 Environmentalism is a contested concept. Though modern environmentalism has its roots in the European approach to forestry, it mainly originated on the periphery of the British colonial empire in Africa and Asia (Grove 1996) as early as the 17th century as one among many colonising mechanisms (Cohn 1996). Modern environmentalism in the tropics was primarily motivated to meet economic and commercial needs in terms of timber, rather than for the conservation of flora and fauna. It was largely inspired by the German model of forestry which was institutionalised across British-dominated territories during the 19th century. In India, this modern school of forest conservation and administration started when the German expert Dietrich Brandis was encouraged to survey the forests on the eastern Himalayan slopes. On his way from Burma, Brandis inspected some of the forests of Bengal and submitted a proposal for their conservation. As a result, ‘the forests around Darjeeling were the first in Bengal to come under the management of the Forest department’ (O’Malley 1907: 91). This was an indicator of the concern of the British to acquire timber from the highly diverse Himalayan forests. However, British extraction of timber from forests in Darjeeling has not been discussed extensively in historical writings on the region, which has resulted in overlooking issues about the environment per se. As argued by the historian J Donald Hughes (2006: 50), ‘forest history is an older endeavour than environmental history in Europe, the US, and elsewhere, particularly in India’. Hence, in foregrounding environmentalism in the hills, this article sets out to gain new insight into regional environmental history, bringing to the fore the significances that local residents attach to forests in the Himalayas.

3 The Himalayas are relatively little represented in South Asian academic scholarship compared with other parts of this region. Nonetheless, with the growing intensity of the climate crisis and of the environmental conflict, the Himalayas have become a very vulnerable ecological zone. However, ‘the humanistic approach to environmental study has remained on the margin as the overarching trend in both academic and policy arenas has largely revolved around the conception, propagation and rejection of the “Theory of Himalayan Environmental Degradation” that originated in Europe and North America’ (Smyer Yü 2021: 1). This kind of grand theory has rejected human presence in the Himalayas, thereby projecting an image of these mountains as a sacred site associated with religious beliefs or as a retreat for city dwellers keen to avoid the hot summers in the Indian plains and as a site full of natural resources waiting to be exploited by modern development projects. Writing about environmental humanities in the Himalayas, in which I myself am also involved, has opened up a space for
humanistic approaches to environmental studies in the Himalayas beyond national boundaries.

Since the early 2000s, environmental humanities has emerged as an interdisciplinary field of teaching and research in keeping with the global environmental movement and mostly animated by the idea of the Anthropocene or the role of the human as an active agent and cause of the environmental crisis (O’Gorman et al. 2019: 445). Environmental humanists as well as conservationists across the globe have started questioning the role of humans in ecological destruction and climate change. However, ‘human’ is not a universal category in itself because different ‘kinds of people’ (Hacking 2007) have always existed in different sociopolitical and cultural contexts that have shaped the diverse ecological niches in different parts of the world. Moreover, most of the environmental problems that are the focus of attention today are deeply rooted in the past, although the importance of colonial and postcolonial state-making projects in which humans are categorised and classified based on certain racial, ethnic and territorial identities are rarely discussed. This is also the case in many of the ongoing environmental debates on the Himalayas, in which the (co)existence of multiple ethnic groups, linguistic communities and indigenous histories are simply overlooked and, instead, categories created by the colonial state and postcolonial nation states are accepted uncritically. As a result, the diversity in how people live, experience and share ecological knowledge (grounded in indigenous wisdom and relatedness to the landscape) is often neglected in the contemporary environmental debate which presents the environment in the Himalayas primarily as a non-human scientific domain. The main aim of this article therefore is to propose a humanistic understanding of the Himalayas, particularly with regard to local communities’ representation within the broader environmental discussion.

An ongoing trend in Himalayan studies, promoted by the development of concepts such as Zomia (Van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009) is to create space for discussion on ‘human history’ in the Himalayas, rethinking marginalised spaces in nation-oriented histories. (Re)connecting humans and the environment in the Himalayas and exploring the ethics of being human, not as a mere species but as a collective category and as a certain type of ethnic group, requires deconstructing the nationalist history of the region by bringing the environmental debate to the forefront of the debate. The first attempt at such an approach entails establishing the human history of the Himalayas and foregrounding the voices of its local communities, their experiences and wisdom.

This article seeks to challenge the historical colonial imagination of the Himalayas as being free of humans. I argue that local communities have always been integral to the landscape of Darjeeling. However, British colonialism excluded these communities from nature and positioned them as mere colonial coolies. By situating the Darjeeling hills as a strategic location in the British imperial mission in the Himalayas, this article shows how the dominant historical writing about the region has overlooked ecological factors that eventually led to the invisibility of the region’s local environmental history. In fact, local history of places in the Darjeeling hills constitutes an important repository of environmental knowledge, which provides me with a pathway to craft an anti-colonial history of the region, clearly picturing the diversity of human voices, experiences and knowledge about the environment in the Himalayas (Tamang 2021). In this article, I use the history of modern scientific forestry in the Darjeeling hills to highlight the redefinition of forests and local communities’ relationships to the latter following the
advent of British colonialism. This has resulted in the creation of new ecological and social niches in the Darjeeling hills, where different ethnic communities of the eastern Himalayas interacted and co-produced new social and physical landscapes. As the title of this article suggests, ‘environmentalism of the hills’ is a new inquiry to foreground a humanistic approach to the environment in the Himalayas.

**Local voices, environmental conflicts and modern forestry in the Darjeeling hills**

There was no shortage of Himalayan voices, but these voices were often drowned out, displaced by those outsiders who thought their ideas about the Himalayas were more urgent or important. Himalayan people had even adopted these interpretations about their home in the mountains and then sold back to the people who held them. There is an elegant illustration of this, one that mixes religion, commerce and colonialism, bridging the gap between the cosmic and the quotidian. (Douglas 2020: 15)

Every ethnic group has a unique story about its settlement in a place. The Lepcha of the eastern Himalayas have their own particular stories about nature and landscape, and their ecological cosmology reflects a rich history that has, however, been completely crushed by colonialism. I take the Lepcha as one example of the communities in the eastern Himalayas whose relationship with nature has been greatly restructured. The emergence of British colonialism in the eastern Himalayas resulted in the massive transformation of the physical landscape, as well as of the social and cultural landscapes in which Lepcha traditional knowledge of nature used to prevail. The introduction of modern scientific forestry resulted in the alienation of the Lepcha from their forest, land and other natural resources. But Lepcha people’s knowledge of land, landscape and ecology was not completely erased by the colonial state. It remained buried in the shadow of Western thinking and became a ‘traditional’ as opposed to a ‘modern’ perspective. To revalue the former kind of knowledge requires changes in methodology and historiography, reaching beyond colonial epistemology and outside its dominant archive. It is worth noting that local knowledge exist in various forms, ranging from everyday stories, myths, folk songs and poems to prayers, beliefs, objects and values transcending both human and non-human worlds. Environmental humanists have explored these, foregrounding ‘more-than-human histories’ (O’Gorman and Gaynor 2020) and ‘multispecies world’ (Van Dooren, Kirksey and Munster 2016, Tsing 2012, Haraway 2003).

The Darjeeling hills, which were once a contested territory between different Himalayan kingdoms, such as the Gorkha Kingdom (present-day Nepal), the Chogyals of Sikkim and Bhutan, became a strategic location in the eastern Himalayas during the 19th century when the British sought to gain control of Himalayan trading routes. The annexation of the Darjeeling hills from the Chogyal of Sikkim in 1835 created an impetus for the British to introduce new policies in the Himalayan region. This included their plan to annex Tibet, which the British initially attempted to do through the western Himalayas (mainly Ladakh). They dispatched many diplomatic and political missions, yet largely failed to establish control over Tibet. Instead, they then shifted their focus to the eastern Himalayas where Sikkim and Darjeeling became gateways to Tibet (McKay 2007). The Darjeeling hills (along with Kalimpong, annexed in 1865 from Bhutan) became a strategic point in the eastern Himalayas due to its bordering Nepal,
Sikkim, Bhutan and Bangladesh. It provided the British Empire with easy access to the Himalayan states and their historic trading networks, but also disrupted existing ties between the hills and the plains (Baruah 2003), isolating the former from the latter (Scott 2009). Along with this political and administrative restructuring of the region, colonial commercial interests to introduce tea plantations in various parts of Northeast India (including the Darjeeling hills) brought new changes to its ecology, landscape and demography. These commercial interests of the British Empire completely altered the landscape of the region, turning it into a new capitalist frontier for European planters, administrators and military power. Indeed, tea developed as a civilisation project for the colonial state by transforming the indigenous world with Western science (Sharma 2011). The scholarly debate about the region has identified tea as the main cause for the commercialisation of the landscape in the eastern Himalayas (Besky 2013, Sharma 2011, Middleton 2018). However, in addition to tea, timber played an important role in the (re)organisation of forests and in the broader sociocultural and demographic make-up of the Darjeeling hills.

As stated above, the Himalayas were *terra incognita* and *res nullius* in the British colonial imagination. They were considered ‘backwards’ and/or ‘primitive’ and ‘uncivilised’, simply waiting to be appropriated and civilised by the white settler (Pradhan 2017). However, before the annexation of the Darjeeling hills by the British, many indigenous communities such as the Lepcha, Limbu, Bhutias, Koch and Meech had been in constant interaction with each other as their livelihoods were built on the ecologically varied landscapes of the Darjeeling hills (Warner 2014). This shared ecological landscape, once worked through shifting cultivation, emerged as a new resource frontier when the British introduced tea plantations by cutting down a large number of trees. In fact, ‘removing trees not only assisted the spread of cash crop plantation and/or settled agriculture, it was also a way of advancing effective colonial government by eradicating sites of disorder and resistance’ (Mosley 2010: 41). There was minimal local resistance to British imperialism in the Darjeeling hills compared with other parts of India. Hence, it was not difficult for the British to bring forests in and around Darjeeling under their control. The clearance of forests in the Darjeeling hills consolidated multiple British Himalayan administrative and geopolitical strategies. In addition to the clearance of forests for tea plantations, the felling of trees also resulted in the building of a beautiful colonial hill station in Darjeeling. As evident from letters exchanged between British administrators during the 1830s and 1840s, a large number of trees were logged to clear land for European settlement in the Darjeeling Hills. See the description in a private letter, reprinted in several newspapers in 1839:

Darjeeling is on a hill, an isolated hill, divided by deep valleys from all that surrounds it. The ridge of which it forms the centre, is of considerable length, and about half a mile is cleared, I may say, shaved, for hardly a tree has been left and the breadth cleared maybe a quarter of a mile, varying in width...The road presents but few points of beautiful scenery just now, but those are very beautiful. In a few months, the trees will be more cleared, and the scenery will be very splendid. (Pinn 1986: 29–31)

This sustained the Eurocentric vision of the Himalayas as initially ‘empty’ and facilitated the British project to build a hill station in the Darjeeling hills. These developments, along with the establishment of tea plantations, entailed massive ecological changes in which local claims to land and forests were erased through various colonial legal administrative mechanisms. Local communities’ relationship to
the environment was restructured by the colonial state which imposed restrictions on their access to forest resources. In the late 1850s and early 1860s, the expansion of the plantation economy in the hills resulted in a demographic transition because a huge labour force was required to clear land for tea plantations, for construction work and so on. Colonial officer A Campbell singlehandedly created a vast network of informal local workers to supply labour for the newly established station in Darjeeling (Warner 2014: 30). This labour arrangement at the hill station posed tremendous challenges to the colonial state with regard to the management of the landscape, jobs and revenues, which eventually resulted in the alienation of local residents from natural resources.

The establishment of the Forest Department in the 1860s introduced new laws in which local uses of the forest were considered ‘illegal’. For instance, from 1864 to 1879–80, a ‘permit system’ to cut down trees from the newly demarcated forests was introduced in and around Darjeeling, with a fixed price per tree. Towards early 1880, a proposal for the first working forest management plan was put forwards by Sir Dietrich Brandis and revised by Sir William Schlich to prescribe systematic rotation of tree varieties and the felling of trees, as well as the standard length and breadth of plantations. This introduction of modern scientific forestry, exclusively adapted for commercial purposes, gave birth to a new form of human-nature relationship in the Himalayas. And the ecological relationship to nature of the Lepcha people in particular – through which their knowledge, worldview and cosmology are created – entered into a new form of empire-subject relationship defined by legality and modern administration. A Lepcha folk song describes their relationship to nature as an expression of ecological wisdom:

Narak! My Lord, you are the creator of music in the world of the Lepcha
Oh Narak! My Lord, let me dedicate myself to you
Let me gather your music from the springs, the rivers, the mountains, the forests,
the insects and the animals
Let me gather your music from the sweet breeze and offer it to you (Uppal 1928: 14)

However, this ecological relationship was (re)configured into a new imaginary by the colonial state in which local communities were considered encroachers in the newly established ‘government reserved forest’. From the 1870s onwards, large forests in and around Darjeeling and Sikkim were designated as reserved forests and considered government property. Thereafter, everyday interaction of locals with the forest was made illegal and resulted in a new empire-subject relationship, as narrated by Bertram Beresford Osmaston, officer in British India’s Imperial Forestry Service:

On one occasion, I was walking very quietly through the thick forest (in Darjeeling), watching birds without disturbing them. Suddenly I saw a coolie, a few yards away, busy tying up a bundle of sticks. He looked up and saw me standing close beside him. Instantly, he dropped the sticks and disappeared down the steep jungle-covered hillside. Here, I thought, was a chance of catching a thief red-handed, so I followed him straight down through the forest as far as I could travel. He was evidently scared and ran as if his life depended on his escape. I had always rather fancied myself getting down steep jungle, so let myself go. The chase was a long one and though gaining on my man, I could not quite overtake him. Finally, I made a great spurt and leapt on him, as he was just below me, and we crashed to the ground together. We were both so exhausted that neither spoke for some time. I felt angry, but at the same time pleased at having caught the thief. At last I said “why did you come and take fuel from the Government forest without a pass?” he replied “I have a pass and here it is.” He produced the pass which was in order. “Why then did you run away, since you had a pass?” “I was terrified when I saw
Your Honour standing close to me, and I thought you were Shaitan (the Devil) and I ran for my life.” The whole affair was so funny that I could only laugh, and the coolie was rewarded with some bakshish [a small amount of money] (Osmaston 1999: 112–113).

Bringing forests under the control of the state drastically reduced local residents’ claims to it, restricting their access to its resources. This was grounded in the scientific rhetoric behind forest conservation propagated by British foresters. Thus, towards the end of the 19th century, modern forestry provided grounds for new imperial laws to govern the forests in the Himalayas. After World War I, India became an important supplier of timber for the British and the colonial state in India encouraged many botanists to survey ‘India’s temperate and tropical forests, but only a select few species – most notably deodar (Cedrus deodara), sal (Shorea robusta), teak (Tectona grandis) and sandalwood (Santalum album) – were preferred for harvesting to meet the British’s demand for the timber’ (Mosley 2010: 48). Among these species, deodar, sal and teak, which were highly valued timbers, are native to the Indian Himalayas. This further encouraged the British to control the Himalayan forests. To this end, British foresters considered it necessary to first withdraw local usage or customary rights of the forest by enacting several laws. Thus, in 1878, the colonial state passed the Forest Act aimed at criminalising local and/or traditional uses of the forest. The Darjeeling hills, which were then governed as an excluded area, were exempt from certain sections of the Forest Act. Yet the suppression of local usage rights to the forest did have an impact, resulting in the imposition of restrictions on shifting cultivation. In all these efforts to control forest and territory, the administrative division between hills and plains was at the heart of colonial policy.

Recent scholarship on Zomia (Van Schendel 2002, Scott 2009) highlights how states typically created de-facto statelessness among hill populations and suggests that hill populations often deliberately tried to avoid valley-based states, taking refuge in the highlands. This form of resistance – in which a vocabulary of protest against the state emerges not through conflicts or violence against the state but by evading it – constitutes the preliminary foundation of ‘environmentalism of the hills’ in contrast to other kinds of environmentalism that emanate from violent confrontations between peasants and landlords, planters and tribal communities or missionaries and tribal communities and so on, which characterised colonial state-making elsewhere on the South Asian subcontinent.

The hill–valley distinction in colonial cartography (Suan 2009, Tamang and Kipgen 2019) shaped the British ecological reaction in the Himalayas. The hills appeared to be naturally prosperous and would allow the colonial state to establish a ‘resource frontier’ on the periphery, while providing a strategic location in the Himalayas. In addition to the successful expansion of the tea plantation economy, the supply of Himalayan timber was beneficial, making it doubly rewarding to govern the territory and its population. Thus, the British divided the forests of the Darjeeling hills into four broad zones, namely the Valley Forest, the Hill Forest, the Middle Hill Forest and the Upper Hill Forest. Furthermore, to sustain the commercial orientation of modern forestry on the periphery, the systematic felling and planting of trees was proposed. Forests in the Darjeeling hills were divided on the basis of the region’s elevation, while the quality of timber was graded accordingly. For example, forests situated at an elevation of between 600 and 3,000 feet were classed as lower-hill forests where sal plantations were given priority. Henceforth, forests round the River Teesta and the
lower foothills of Darjeeling and Kurseong were rapidly planted with sal. Likewise, forests at an elevation of between 3,000 and 5,000 feet were considered middle-hill forests, with priority for timber from champ (Mecheli champaca), dhupi (Cryptomeria japonica), tun (Cedrela toona) and so on. The section at an elevation of between 5,000 and 9,500 feet was defined as upper-hill forest, with timber mostly from deodar (Cedrus deodara). Forests at between 9,500 and 12,000 feet were considered to be alpine forests made up of conifer and rhododendron yet, owing to its remote location, the extraction of timber at these altitudes was not easy. This move towards monocultures limited to certain varieties of trees of commercial value had a significant impact on mixed forests in the Darjeeling hills, which resulted in the reorganisation not only of local communities’ relationships to the forest but also of the forests themselves which took on a new physical aspect when new species were introduced.

For instance, the British encouraged the plantation of the quick-growing Cryptomeria japonica in the Darjeeling hills to meet the demand for timber in tea plantations and in the railway sector. Initially, the British encouraged the plantation of Japanese cedar ‘within the radius of 5 miles from the centre of the town’ (Dozey 1922: 157). Yet, these Japanese cedars ‘are occasionally portrayed as environmentally negative as they are not suitable for the production of the wide variety of locally important forest products including fuelwood and fodder’ (Rai and Schmerbeck 2018: 115). Therefore, massive monoculture plantations of this species not only resulted in an environmental crisis, but also seriously impacted on local communities’ interaction with forests in the Darjeeling hills. Cryptomeria japonica is not indigenous to the Darjeeling hills and the large-scale plantation of these trees killed much of the local natural undergrowth vegetation (Lama 2008: 37).

The large-scale reorientation of forests in the Darjeeling hills would not have been possible without the recruitment of a large number of labourers from neighbouring Nepal. Clearing the jungle for tea plantations, timber plantations, European settlements and transportation, as well as to establish a sanatorium, required a large labour force which at that time was very difficult for the colonial officials to procure. Labourers from the plains (mostly Adivasis from the region of Chotta Nagpur or from the Deccan Plateau) refused to work in the Darjeeling hills due to the cold weather and the intermittent monsoon. Those who were forcefully rounded up often ran away at night (Lama 2008: 86). Lepcha people also refused to work in colonial ventures and frequently left British-occupied territories in the Darjeeling hills to take shelter in Sikkim. The Nepali novel Tara Kaile (‘But When’) by Prakash Kovidh beautifully depicts the story of the Lepcha people’s refusal to work as colonial coolies in tea plantations because of the hostility the planters’ in Darjeeling Hills showed towards them. Nonetheless, the expansion of tea plantations in the region required more labourers to work as tea coolies. Therefore, the British encouraged the migration of Nepali labourers from the hills of eastern Nepal to the Darjeeling hills. The recruitment of labourers from Nepal was not facilitated by the Nepali government’s threat to cancel the citizenship of those who worked for the British. Yet chronic poverty, combined with a rigid caste hierarchy among Nepali Hindus, forced many individuals from different ethnic groups to migrate to the nearby Darjeeling Hills in search of a better livelihood. Informal labour recruiters (sardar and mandal), who were rewarded with a commission to smuggle labourers from Nepal, brought a large number of them to the newly established Darjeeling hills. Without going into a detailed history of labour recruitment in the Darjeeling hills during colonial rule (Middleton 2018, Warner 2014), it can be said that
towards the end of the 19th century and early 20th century, the Darjeeling hill population had increased manifold. In the early 20th century, the Darjeeling hills had become a new destination for members of different ethnic groups from Nepal, and many were recruited as ‘coolies’ for the colonial state. These migrants and their descendants became a new group in society, with a shared history of exploitation, common topographical and ecological experiences, a shared culture, food habits and so on. In due time, the Nepali language became a new *lingua franca* among these diverse ethnic groups, which reconfigured the social landscape in the Darjeeling hills, whereby new forms of ecological and cultural knowledge emerged in conjunction with Lepcha cosmology.

18 Most labourers from Nepal were sedentary agriculturalists and the British encouraged them to practise wet-rice cultivation (*panikhet*) by making terraces on the mountain slopes. James Scott argues, ‘precisely because wet rice cultivation fosters concentrated, labour-intensive production, it requires a density of population, that is, itself, a key resource for state-making’ (Scott 2009: 41). The practice of wet-rice cultivation by Nepali immigrants helped the colonial state to bring hitherto ‘state-evading communities’ within the ambit of settled occupation. In this context, one colonial official argued that ‘from Nepali they (the Lepcha) have also learnt how to construct on the mountain slope the terraces which form such a distinctive feature of Himalayan cultivation’ (O’Malley 1907: 64). This complicated the notion of ‘local voice’ in the region as the proliferation of the Nepali-speaking population slowly swamped the Lepcha both numerically and culturally (Waddell 1998: 44). The diversity of the labour network that developed in colonial times and the new ecological spaces this created forms another characteristic of ‘environmentalism of the hills’. Different ethnic groups from Nepal brought with them their distinctive ecological knowledge, shamanic beliefs and their deities. However, restrictions on forest access and labelling these people mere coolies certainly limited their interaction with nature as most of them were confined within poorly constructed labour quarters. Nonetheless, local practices of nature worship by different ethnic groups were pursued in various ways and new world views of human–environment relationships emerged characterised by numerous sacred groves (for instance, *devithans* – abodes of the goddess – became a popular site of nature worship among many Nepali in the Darjeeling and Sikkim Himalayas, see Acharya and Ormsby 2017). Similarly, the Lepcha continued their tradition of worshipping mountains, rivers and various other natural sites in Darjeeling and the Sikkim Himalayas (Arora 2006). Bentley (2007: 62) argues that ‘features of Lepcha sacred landscapes are incorporated into the Buddhist interpretation of the sacred geographical surroundings’ after the adoption of Buddhism among the Lepcha community. As a result, the environmentalism of the hills came to deviate from existing varieties of ‘ethnic environmentalism’ or ‘indigenous environmentalism’, opening up shared cosmological space for multiple ethnic groups and their respective ecological knowledge of the Himalayas. It is an endeavour to rethink the environment as presented within common dominant colonial narratives of place, people and identity. I discuss later on how the question of the environment vanished from the discourse on colonial history, constituting another characteristic of ‘the environmentalism of the Hills’.

19 Towards the 1920s, the Nepali language became the standard language in the region (Hutt 1996). This significantly helped the Nepali to become the dominant community in the region, overshadowing the Lepcha and Bhutia. The development and
standardisation of the Nepali language in fact allowed the British to control land and resources in the Darjeeling hills, gaining control of hitherto mobile subjects. This was reinforced by Scottish missionaries who used the Nepali language to reach out to the locals. The missionaries found the Lepcha the most receptive to conversion (Lepcha 2017). Kalimpong, a small Lepcha hamlet, became the centre for missionary proselytisation. Kalimpong saw the establishment of various institutes, churches and schools to train Lepcha Christians who would later become involved in missionary activities aimed at Tibet (McKay 2007: 70). As argued by Bentley (2007: 65), the ‘fear that Christianity will cause a rift in the Lepcha community, because it introduces the converted Lepcha into an entirely new community with different values and social gatherings’ had an impact on Lepchas’ ecological and shamanic beliefs, bringing them closer to modern education and creating a certain detachment from the forests. The Nepali language even became the medium for communication in Lepcha villages, since most Europeans remained ignorant of the Lepcha language. Furthermore, in 1914, the Newari pastor Ganga Prasad translated the Bible into Nepali. This sectarian effort helped to bring the Christian Lepcha into the ambit of the Nepali cultural milieu. The predominance of Nepali, as a spoken and written language, strategically helped the British to accumulate the land in their possession, displacing and/or erasing locals’ claims over land. Thus, by encouraging the Nepali presence in the region, the British were able to replace local claims to land via new land policies such as the tauzzi (district land revenue). This created a land accumulation policy for European planters and foresters (Sarkar 2013), and restricted local land usage. As I have discussed elsewhere, land encroachment through various mechanisms, such as the ‘wasteland rule’, lay at the heart of imperial governance in the eastern Himalayas (Tamang and Kipgen 2022, Tamang 2022). This challenged local ownership of land, and access to forest and other natural resources. Over 60% of land in the Darjeeling hills came to consist of reserved forest, tea plantations and so on, directly restricting locals’ landownership and limiting their access to these areas (see Tamang and Kipgen 2022, also discussed later on).

This curtailment of local rights to land, forests and other natural resources in the Darjeeling hills and the settlement of a large number of Nepali labourers (with no legal landownership) created a new ecological frontier with new environmental laws that forced many forest-dependent communities to leave their land and to work as labourers and coolies on colonial plantations. However, the growing population and expansion of commercial plantations and the cash-crop economy in the Darjeeling hills created pressure on British forests that were maintained for the supply of timber. The British initially encouraged the Nepali to put their animals out to graze on land near forest areas, though they also kept a certain portion of reserved forest open to grazing, mostly with the intention of meeting the demand for milk in the newly established hill station. However, deforestation became a problem and forest conservationists came to see grazing as one of the biggest hindrances to forest regeneration. Colonial conservationists blamed the Nepali for allowing overgrazing, agriculturists for wet-rice cultivation, and those practising cardamom cultivation for soil erosion and water scarcity. In 1910, a committee known as Darjeeling Safety Committee was set up to investigate deforestation in Darjeeling, which primarily aimed at preventing landslides on the region’s hilly slopes. The committee laid out recommendations in June 1911: (a) to reforest the locations on the hillside where landslides had occurred or where they were likely to occur; (b) to prohibit cardamom growing as much as possible and practically everywhere; (c) to prohibit rice cultivation on any but the gentlest slopes;
(d) to restrict grazing on steep and unprotected slopes and (e) to reserve a protective belt of land of a varying width according to the size of the stream on the banks of all main streams (From Proceeding Volume of Hon’ble Lt Governor of Bengal, July 1917, No 1–8) (cited in Sarkar 2017, 111). Similarly, during the 1930s and 1940s, grazing fees were drastically increased and restrictions imposed on the number of cattle to be allowed in each household.

However, a complete ban on grazing was not possible as the colonial state depended heavily on Nepali herds for the supply of milk to civil stations, garrisons and residential areas (Shivaramakrishnan 1999). Highlighting this ambiguity of the colonial state towards grazing and milk supply, O’Malley (1907: 91) writes:

> Excluding the forests in the Tista Valley and on the Singalila Range, three fifths of the total area have been thrown open to the grazing, and it is perhaps not too much to say that if it were not for the facilities of pasturage thus afforded, Darjeeling would be forced to import its milk from the plain.

This anxiety over forest conservation, combined with the demand for milk and the scarcity of labour for work in forests forced the British to stipulate certain provisions for herders. With regards reserved forests in the Tista division, the British ruled that every year each household with grazing animals, who had set up a permanent _bathan_ (cattle shed) inside the reserved forests, had to create a ‘nursery’ to grow forest tree seedlings. Failure to do so would result in a fine of up to twenty rupees or exclusion from the reserved forests. In addition, the number of cattle that could graze here was reduced and, most significantly, the village headman’s informal Mandal provision was reduced from twenty to seven cattle. He was charged the standard fee if he grazed the remaining thirteen cattle, which came as rather a contrast to the previous provision of free grazing in the upper forest. Thus, Nepali cattle herders were clearly used by the British in multiple ways to ensure the supply of timber from forests in the Darjeeling hills. First, they were used to drive the Lepcha away from the forests by getting rid of shifting cultivation. Second, they were used as docile labour to transform the forests into systematic plantations. And third, they were used as cattle tenders to supply milk to European populations in Darjeeling town, while at the same time supplying tree saplings to foresters. In light of the push by the British to favour commercial monocropping as a primary method of forest conservation in the Himalayas, the earlier local use of the forest for slash and burn cultivation was presented as ‘primitive’, ‘backwards’, ‘environmentally damaging’ and ‘politically disruptive’ (Mosley 2010: 46).

In the Darjeeling hills, modern forestry therefore transformed the landscape in two significant ways. This was accomplished first by curtailing the locals’ usage of the forest. This primarily concerned Lepcha people’s relationship to the forest, which the colonial state intervened in by setting new laws that redefined ‘environmentalism’ in the Himalayas. The second way forestry transformed the landscape was by encouraging Nepalis to settle as peasants or plantation labourers. Thus, the British redefined not only the forest but also a social and cultural landscape, creating a new ecological and political niche in the Darjeeling hills. As both the Nepali and the Lepcha entered into a new economy and ecology – marked by rigid colonial laws, plantations driven by the economy and alienated from land and forest – there also emerged a new kind of human interaction with nature. As mentioned before, every ethnic group of Nepali origin brought along their own distinctive ecological knowledge and their ways of worship, including their deities, while the Lepcha pursued their nature worship in multiple ways. Hence, spaces such as the summits of hills, rivers, springs, mountains and so on
became sacred sites for multiple communities in the eastern Himalayas. The environmentalism of the hills also pertains to these forms of co-existence and the resulting co-production of ecological knowledge between different ethnic communities in the Himalayas.

**Hyper-separation of human from nature in environmental debates in the Darjeeling hills**

The historical reconfiguration of the landscape in the Darjeeling hills, catering to the commercial interests of the British, created what Deborah Bird Rose in her engagement with Val Plumwood’s concept of ‘hyper-separation’ describes as ‘the structure of dominance that drives Western binaries, including nature/culture, female/male, matter/mind, savage/civilized’ (Rose 2013: 94). Rose argues that ‘the well-worn dualisms of Western thought have played a crucial role in the violent transformation of peoples and ecosystems. They continue to obstruct our ability to achieve both social justice and environmental justice’.

The great demographic transformation of the Darjeeling Hills, by displacing local claims over land and nature, only benefitted European planters and foresters under whose patronage a large tract of ‘jungle’ was converted into a beautiful ‘Empire’s garden’ (Sharma 2011). To attract labourers from Nepal to work in the tea plantations, British planters placed coins below tea bushes. Sardars, while chanting *chiya ko bot ma paisa falcha* (money grows on tea bushes), brought a large number of underprivileged individuals of different ethnic groups from Nepal and employed them as mere coolies with no rights. Noticing the coins under the tea bushes, Nepali labourers contributed to further popularising this type of proverb across the Himalayas and integrated these in their history of migration. This proverb, ‘money grows on tea bushes’ reinforced the colonial domination of capital over nature, while defining the locals as mere wage labourers rather than recognising them as an integral part of a tea-landscape that encompasses both built and natural environments.

This form of historiography, dominated by European planters and proceeding from colonial pseudoscientific narratives of the Himalayas as spaces ‘free of humans’, resulted in the alienation of humans from nature. Furthermore, colonial historiography of the hills belittled the earlier human presence in the Himalayas and legitimised annexation of the land through civilisation narratives. For instance, when colonial official Campbell surveyed a newly acquired tract of the Darjeeling hills, he recorded a population of just one hundred souls mostly comprised of Lepcha and presented the image of Darjeeling as a ‘virtually uninhabited tract’ (Pradhan 2017). The absence of people (local communities), according to colonial narratives, helped the British to encroach on the land in order to build their hill station in the Himalayas. In the Darjeeling Hills, the colonial encroachment of land not only resulted in the alienation of humans from nature, but led also to the local community’s struggle in terms of belonging, identity and citizenship in India (Tamang and Kipgen 2022).

When the British occupied the Darjeeling hills, they declared a major portion as ‘wasteland’ and categorically ignored the natives’ claim to their ancestral land. Townsend Middleton (2018: 33) argues that ‘the benefit of this primitive accumulation through wasteland worked in two ways: First, privatization subjected these lands to
taxation, enabling Darjeeling to generate revenue to fund its own development. Second, the creation of large chunks of private property set the stage for budding capitalism—most notably, the plantation-driven economy of tea’. The takeover of land for commercial activities (re)defined the notion of ‘being human’ in the Darjeeling hills from being ‘local’ to becoming ‘colonial coolies’. Thus, abolishing community ownership of land furthered the British effort to classify the population on the basis of race and ethnicity. The British subsequently started classifying the kind of people they wished to employ in certain categories of jobs according to their ethnic affiliation. As Canadian philosopher Ian Hacking (2007: 287–288) argued:

classifying kinds of subject people is an imperial imperative. Geography, language, allegiances, previous social cohesion, bodily structure, and skin colour would all have been grounds for forming classifications, and in some cases, those kinds of people would not have existed, as a kind of people, until they had been so classified, organized and taxed.

Thus, when labourers from the plains failed to perform satisfactorily or ran away to escape the cold climate, the British recruited people from the hill tribes, mostly from eastern Nepal, who were docile towards the Empire. They also recruited indigenous labourers such as Bhutia load carriers, Sherpa porters and indigenous Lepcha as local guides (Sharma 2018). This racial division of labour served the British labour requirements and helped to sustain the Eurocentric science of anthropology (Cohn 1996). As ‘the boundary setting between what was, and what was not, “natural” was intellectually arbitrary, and often deeply racist and patriarchal’ (Moore 2015: 27), the racial and gender classification of labourers and the alienation of local communities from their land by the colonial state was the beginning of the separation between human and nature in the Darjeeling hills. ‘This hyper-separation structure of human and nature within the prism of British colonialism accords value to one side of the binary, and relegates the other side to a position of oppositional subordination’ (Rose 2013: 94). This colonial practice made a radical difference to environmental conservation in which a sharp boundary was set between European use of nature for commercial purposes and the locals’ alienation from their homeland. This resulted in what I call the ‘bureaucratic hierarchy of nature’ in which conservation was to be managed from the top through various legal mechanisms, while local communities were situated at the bottom, with no legal rights to land, forest or other natural resources.

Depriving forest dwellers and tea-garden workers of landownership in the Darjeeling hills, even after the British left India, continued to fuel environmental conflicts in the postcolonial era. Subsequent contestation over the land and the environment constitutes another component of the ‘environmentalism of the hills’. However, these conflicts ironically resonate not with resistance against ecological destruction but rather with the narratives of regional identity politics in which the issue of ‘Gorkhaland’, as an ethnic homeland, became a central issue in the postcolonial Darjeeling hills. Demands to create Gorkhaland are intrinsically linked to Gorkha ethnic identity. Questions of land in postcolonial Darjeeling thereby shifted towards politics of identity, divorced from the discourse of ‘land as environment’. As the landownership crisis in the Darjeeling hills became a means for regional political parties to venture into ethnic-based identity politics, it successfully united historically diverse groups over the question of a ‘Gorkha identity’. As Sarah Besky argues, ‘Nepali claims to belonging in Darjeeling have continually been hamstrung by a sense that they are, like
the plants they and their ancestors cultivated, exotic outsiders' (2017: 22); hence, the struggle for land manifested in sub-nationalist zeal for the homeland, often represented by symbolic politics of ‘anxious belongingness’ (Middleton 2013), where language, culture and identity play a vital role in ecologically sensitive spaces (Besky 2017). Thus, environmentalism and regional identity politics cannot be separated from one another, just as other scholars have argued for the interconnectedness of environmentalism and the struggle for social justice.

The sub-nationalist agenda, driven by ethnic identity politics, reduced the space for the ecological debate, reinforcing the colonial notion of the environment as a bureaucratic subject. Land was fundamental to any community’s claim over territory and resources, and taking away land from the community undoubtedly limited human interaction with nature. Local communities predictably continue to be left out of the discourse on environmental conservation, since they struggle every day for recognition and identity within the rhetoric of regional political outfits. This was further articulated when Subash Ghising and the Gorkha National Liberation Front claimed Party bhanda Jati Thulo, Jati Vanda Maato (community is above party and land is above community) as their political stance and emerged as a powerful regional party in the 1980s (Tamang and Kipgen 2022). In these instances, the categorical representation of humans as citizens and political actors occupied central stage but failed to receive recognition as a true subject in terms of environmental conservation. Their ethnic affiliation, whether to the ‘Gorkha’ or to other micro-ethnic identities such as Tamang, Rai, Gurung and the like, became more useful in regional politics.

Once categorised as ‘coolies’ by European planters, these different ethnic groups in the Darjeeling hills have been represented as ‘contested subjects’ in postcolonial identity politics – constantly struggling to define their identity and citizenship of ‘being Indian’ in a contested borderland between India and Nepal. Communities in tea gardens and forest villages continue to be deprived of basic rights over land and resources and to seek recognition through identity politics. I argue here that this has resulted in a further separation of humans from nature, clearly defining humans and nature as two distinct domains, the former being a source of identity contestation and the latter being a ‘bureaucratic space’ marked by the criteria of ownership. Landownership plays a crucial role in both of these domains. In the former, symbolic belonging to land (ownership in a symbolic sense) pertains partly to the ethno-political movement for rights and access to resources (Tamang 2022), while in the latter, the state controls ownership through institutions such as the Forest Department, designated land for tea plantations and so on. In the Darjeeling hills, where the majority of the land since colonial times is either covered in forest or tea plantations – comprising two of the largest industries in the region – this separation between humans and nature became more acute within the prism of regional identity politics in postcolonial Darjeeling. Thus, within this contested arena of defining ‘human’ and their rights to nature, it is necessary to clarify the idea of environmentalism of the hills as discussed throughout this article. It is important to understand how these communities, who are historically alienated from nature, assert their state of belonging to nature and landscape, especially in the context of modern environmental laws, such as the Forest Rights Act (FRA 2006), which seek to undo historical injustice to forest dwellers and other communities living in close interaction with the forest. It is beyond the scope of this article to discuss the FRA and the incompetency of the state and regional parties to implement this type of act in the Darjeeling hills. But it is noteworthy that the political
manipulation of the FRA and the relegation of it to a mere beneficiary scheme by the state and regional parties (Tamang 2021) has combined environmental rights with ethnic issues and highlighted the necessity to assert environmental rights via the ethnic route. Therefore, environmentalism of the hills holds that ethnicity and environment cannot be separated and should not be separated, if we are to understand local communities’ participation in the environment and politics.

**Environmentalism of the hills: the beginning of the conversation**

As stated in the introduction, the idea of the environment and associated concepts in the Darjeeling hills have been hidden in the shadow of grand historical narratives of the region represented by the broad framework of colonialism, ethnicity and nationalism. Therefore, conceiving the idea of ‘environmentalism’ in the Himalayas is not a straightforward endeavour and I argue that before dwelling on contestation over concepts such as ‘environmentalism’, it is imperative to deal first with problems centred on categorising or recognising ‘human’ in the era of environmental conservation. As argued in this article, ‘human’ is a historically complex category in the Himalayas and the question of ‘who constitutes what kind of people?’ (Hacking 2007) was often determined by the ecological framing of the region. In other words, the hyper-separation of humans from nature during colonial development makes me question the very idea of ‘being human’ in an ecologically sensitive zone like the Himalayas. Gohain in her article ‘Himalayan Environmentalism’ (2022: 85) asks an important question: ‘Conceptually, how do we frame an environmentalism that is not defined by any religion but by the practical character of Himalayan life?’ This article attempts to provide ways to reconceptualise the notion of environmentalism in the Himalayas by suggesting that Himalayan environmentalism is inclusive, removed from religious identity and focused on borderland politics and the militarisation of spaces (Gohain 2022).

This article on ‘environmentalism of the hills’ considers a similar endeavour to capture the dynamic of environmentalism in the Himalayas. However, I intend to dwell more on the historical formation of the dominant discourse on the Himalayas that resulted in a categorical segregation of humans from nature. This endeavour to clarify environmentalism of the hills is the beginning of a conversation with the environmental humanities approach to the Himalayas proposed by Smyer Yü and de Maaker (2021), which is taken further in this special issue. My conceptualisation of environmental humanities and of the environmentalism of the hills argues for the recognition of local populations and of their identity as equal citizens of the modern state, and as true representatives of the landscape rather than as mere ‘coolies’ or ‘troops’ categorised by the colonial state. This recognition comes from efforts to acknowledge their relationship to the land and to grant them material ownership of the land. The latter is central to the environment, as well as to identity politics for many tribal communities in South Asia (Jairath 2021, Tamang and Kipgen 2022); therefore, manifestations of landownership in the Himalayas can provide an avenue to encompass the narratives of local communities and what constitutes their environment. Therefore, the discussion about environmentalism within the grand
historical narratives of the regions must at first recognise that local communities’ relationship with nature existed in various forms.

Having said this, environmentalism of the hills is also about recognising the differences and co-existence of diverse Himalayan ethnic communities whose relationship to nature has, in one way or another, been impacted by British colonialism. As argued above, Nepali communities and their ecological knowledge was used by the British in multiple ways to create room for the plantation-based economy in the hills and was also used against Lepcha environmental ethics. However, over time, syncretism developed between different Himalayan communities and paved the way for new ecological landscapes in the eastern Himalayas, characterised by diversity and co-existence, as well as by differences. This forms the core of the environmental humanities in the Himalayas where multiple voices, complex beliefs and shared experiences have shaped the idea of ‘environmentalism’. Though ‘recognizing that the human life is always lived in relationship with others (beyond human)’ (Harvey 2006) is central to environmental humanities, I argue that recognising the historical separation of human and nature since colonial times and creating space for environmental debates by integrating locals is the first step towards environmental humanities in the Himalayas. It is indeed true that a ‘human is just one kind of person among many’ (Rose 2013) whose relationship and interaction with other personhoods (more than human) on this earth define the core of environmental humanities. Nonetheless, the act of becoming human as an active part of the ecosystem must unravel both the political and social struggles of existence within the given environment. Indeed, this article has focused on discussing the complexity as well as the contested history of people, territory and forestry in the Darjeeling hills to understand contestation around the idea of environmentalism.

Last but not least, the distinctiveness of environmentalism of the hills from other types of environmentalism lies in the epistemological contention in Indian environmental debates that is deeply rooted in the ideology of the Indian environmental movement. In their proposition about environmentalism of the poor, Guha and Martínez-Alier (1997: 4) argue that ‘the “Indian environmental movement” is an umbrella term that covers a multitude of local conflicts, initiatives and struggles’. The Chipko movement which started in Garhwal Himalaya in April 1973 is regarded as ‘the forerunner of and in some cases the direct inspiration for a series of popular movements in defense of community rights to natural resources’ (Guha and Martínez-Alier 1997: 5). This environmentalism of the poor in the Darjeeling hills has taken on a different format. First, there has not been a popular environmental movement in the Darjeeling hills or in the greater eastern Himalayas because historical resistance against the destruction of the environment and the entrenchment of community rights has generated little or no popular response. Therefore, the idiom of resistance became manifest in ethnic terms as an ethnopolitical movement for homelands. Second, the historical absence of local communities’ resistance to land encroachment and government-led natural resource management makes it difficult to situate this form of environmentalism of the hills within the framework of popular types of environmentalism and hence, makes it distinctive in its approach and understanding. Environmentalism of the hills constitutes an endeavour to engage in conversations to develop a framework for understanding the notion of ‘environmentalism’ in the Himalayas.
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NOTES

1. Lepcha author Arthur Foning (1987) wrote an influential book, *Lepcha, My Vanishing Tribe*, in which he highlighted the danger of losing one’s culture and tradition. However, he reinforces the colonial narratives of the Lepcha being driven away from their land by Nepali agriculturalists and other Himalayan tribes (see also Gergan 2016: 06) instead of analysing the effect of colonial development in the region. An article by Bentley (2007) also highlights various aspects of changes in the culture and tradition of the Lepcha community in Sikkim. In the present article, instead of focusing on the cultural dimension of changes in the Lepcha community, my interest lies in exploring the historical expansion of British colonialism, particularly in the Darjeeling hills and its effect on the local community’s relationship to nature.

2. It would be wrong to argue that there was no resistance to British foresters or European planters in the Darjeeling hills. But the lack of archives on local resistance has made it difficult to establish the existence of this resistance.

3. Colonial administrators, ethnographers and foresters were aware of Lepcha people’s proximity to nature and on many occasions, they called the Lepcha ‘true naturalists’ (see Waddell 1998). However, in the official discourse, the colonialism process rejected claims about Lepcha people’s relationship to nature and instead used the Lepcha as mere guides and scouts for the British troops in their expansion into and conquering of nature in the Himalayas.

4. The links between Japanese cedar monoculture and the environmental crisis would require separate scientific and ethnographic research but this is beyond the scope of this article.

5. Nepal, at that time the Rana Kingdom, tried to enforce a unified legal code called Muliki Ain (1854) and to categorise diverse ethnic populations under unified Hindu Laws. In addition, several other factors, such as newly established border tensions between Nepal and British India and tax exploitation by the Chogyal and the Gorkha kings, caused many labourers to consider Darjeeling a safe place.

6. This has been suggested by the Bengal Government’s Conservator of the Forest, as mentioned in letter No 248-T. R dated 19 May 1927 from the revenue secretary to the commissioner of the Rajshahi division. Darjeeling Forest Office (working plan division).

7. I discuss the practices of shamans and their deities and their perception of nature conservation in the Darjeeling Himalayas in another publishing project on environmental humanities.

8. From the online course titled ‘Environmental Humanities: Remaking Nature’ UNSW Sydney Australia; https://www.futurelearn.com/courses/remaking-nature, accessed on 18 July 2021; see also Rose (2013).
9. See, Lebong Samarika, a vernacular magazine by Gorkha Sanskriti Sancharan Samity, published by Lok Sanskriti Sancharan Samity Lebong Darjeeling, 2000, 207.

10. Claiming the Darjeeling hills and its territories as different from the rest of Bengal, demands for the separation of Darjeeling were raised as early as 1907 by the Hillmens Association, which comprised members from Nepali, Bhotia and Lepcha ethnic groups. Nepali-speakers in India consider themselves to be ‘Gorkha’, that is distinct from citizens of Nepal. The Gorkha constitute the numerical majority in the hills and they demand a separate homeland there, Gorkhaland. Mostly conveyed through the rhetoric of Gorkha identity, the demand for a separate state in postcolonial India reflects the Gorkha identity crisis caused by their citizenship always being questioned and by their being viewed as foreigners in India and being deprived of landownership in ‘their’ own land (Besky 2017). Within this ‘anxious belongingness’ (Middleton 2013) of the Gorkha in India, this ethnic demand for a homeland (Subba 1992, Sarkar 2013, Besky 2017) turned into a violent movement in 1986 when the Gorkha leader Subash Ghisingh and his party Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) created the imaginary that ‘achieving Gorkhaland is the only way to development in the region’. All other development narratives (infrastructural, social, cultural, political and economic) were associated with this aspiration and resistance to it was organised accordingly.

11. For details about their struggle to ensure a livelihood and about environmental conflicts, see Guha and Martínez-Alier’s [1997] proposition on the environmentalism of the poor.

ABSTRACTS

This article focuses on the discourse on environmentalism in the Darjeeling hills, which has been hidden and/or overshadowed by factors such as ethnicity, nationalism and state-making. Centring on what I call the ‘environmentalism of the hills’, this article examines the history of environmentalism in the Indian Himalayas that was shaped by how British colonialism controlled territories, resources and subjects. I show how colonialism resulted in a distinct separation between humans and nature as suggested by Deborah Bird Rose (2013). Identifying the Darjeeling hills as one of the important locations for Himalayan scholarship, I conceptualise the ‘environmentalism of the hills’ as one of the possible ways of rethinking the debate on environmentalism in the Himalayas. In this article, I develop a framework that encourages an exchange of views on different varieties of environmentalism in academic scholarship, taking into account specific local histories and cultural contexts, and how these are embedded in and shaped by more encompassing larger ideational frameworks.

Cet article se concentre sur le discours sur l'environnementalisme dans les Darjeeling hills, masqué par des facteurs tels que l'ethnicité, le nationalisme et la construction de l'État. Centré sur ce que j'appelle l'environnementalisme des collines, il examine l'histoire de l'environnementalisme dans l'Himalaya indien, façonné par la façon dont le colonialisme britannique a contrôlé les territoires, les ressources et les sujets. Je montre comment le colonialisme a entraîné une séparation distincte entre les humains et la nature, comme le suggère Deborah Bird Rose (2013). En identifiant les Darjeeling hills comme l'un des lieux
importants pour la recherche himalayenne, je conceptualise 'l'environnementalisme des collines' comme l'une des manières possibles de repenser le débat sur l'environnementalisme dans l'Himalaya. Dans cet article, je développe un cadre qui encourage un échange de points de vue sur les différentes variétés d'environnementalisme dans la recherche académique, en tenant compte des histoires locales et des contextes culturels spécifiques, et de la façon dont ceux-ci sont intégrés et façonnés par des cadres idéologiques plus larges.

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Mots-clés: environnementalisme, Himalaya, Anthropocène, nature, dualisme nature/culture, Darjeeling

Keywords: environmentalism, Himalayas, Anthropocene, nature, hyper-separation, Darjeeling

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Sangay Tamang, in his doctoral thesis The Environmentalism of the Hills: Empire, environment and ethnicity in the Darjeeling Himalayas, explores environmental and ethnic politics through the history of the forest, place and community (2022, Department of Humanities and Social Sciences, Indian Institute of Technology Guwahati, India). More broadly speaking, his research focuses on the intersection of the environment, development and ethnicity in the eastern Himalayas. He has published in journals such as Economic and Political Weekly, Sociological Bulletin, Indian Anthropologist, Himalaya and Ethnicities, and has written short commentaries and op-eds for online platforms such as The Third Pole, Raiot and Countercurrent. ORCID ID: 0000-0002-5776-9684