

Darjeeling Reconsidered: Histories, Politics, Environments

Edited by Townsend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2018, 336 pp., ISBN 0-19-948355-8.

Reviewed by Anna Pradhan

This volume of work edited by Townsend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman is an ambitious one. The central thread of the book is that the legend of Darjeeling – including its vivid imagery of lush tea gardens and mountain vistas plastered across billboards and used as backdrops for Bollywood films – conceals the ‘hard realities of life in this particular corner of India’ (p. 2). The work of the 11 chapters then, is to present Darjeeling ‘on its own terms’ (p. 21), producing new readings of the region which has long been the subject of colonial and post-colonial fantasy. Interdisciplinary to its core, *Darjeeling Reconsidered* assembles chapters from sociologists, anthropologists, geographers, historians, development practitioners and others to work in ‘productive tension’ with one another and to offer new insights into tales told about this place (p. 4). The volume is divided into three categories: (I) Histories of Exception, (II) Politics and Social Movements and (III) Environments and Labour, and is accompanied by an Introduction and an Afterword.

Townsend Middleton and Sara Shneiderman’s Introduction sets out a compelling case for refreshing the scholarly study of Darjeeling, an area of inquiry that has seemingly been eclipsed by growing interest in nearby Sikkim (p. 263). The allure of reconsidering Darjeeling, they argue, is in its potential to reflect on the wider challenges of ‘modern South Asia and the postcolonial world writ large’ (p. 4). Taken together, the chapters analyse the ‘entanglements’ of economic change, social politics and territory from different disciplinary perspectives, and how these themes proliferate in the lives of those residing in the hills today (p. 4).

The chapters that follow are vaguely chronological, with Townsend Middleton’s first essay on the ‘unwritten histories’ of Darjeeling, carefully tracing Darjeeling’s status as an ‘exceptional place’ (p. 28).

Through an interesting exploration of the labour histories of the region, Middleton argues that Darjeeling's 'exceptionality' was produced by British administrators, and not a 'natural outcome' of its wider geographical setting (p. 29). Rune Bennike then develops this with a thorough deconstruction of how the tourist gaze and the wider perception of Darjeeling as a place of respite and relaxation conceal the exploitative labour practices on which it was established. Jayeeta Sharma's chapter follows with an excellent analysis of the labouring histories of those who 'played a crucial role in the constitution of Darjeeling as a vibrant space for circulation and enterprise' during the colonial era (p. 75). She provides a vivid and fascinating account of the lives of 'Himalayan subjects' in early Darjeeling whose identities and stories 'appear only fleetingly' in established archives (p. 75). These three chapters work together to revisit Darjeeling's status as an exceptional or unusual place, drawing on historical perspectives to locate the town within the wider social dynamics on which it was established.

The second part of this volume compiles the work of six scholars to explore the complex electoral, ethnic and activist politics that marks Darjeeling's recent history and its present-day realities. Bethany Lacina delivers a clear account of the Gorkhaland Movement, tracing the different phases of Gorkhaland politics through a biographical lens of the major political leaders. Miriam Wenner follows this with an analysis of the moral politics at the heart of the movement's evolution, which links up well with Mona Chettri's essay, which follows, on Darjeeling 'rowdies'. The subsequent chapters shift the focus from party politics to the contemporary tribal and ethnic politics of the region. Nilamber Chhetri sheds light on the transformation of ethnopolitics in Darjeeling, an analysis that has wider ramifications for understanding how other ethnic minorities interact with the post-colonial state (p. 155). Later, Swatahsiddha Sarkar and Babika Khawas delve into the work of Kumar Pradhan, addressing 'the class question' with respect to 'Indian Nepali national identity formation.' (p. 178). These five chapters produce a comprehensive and diverse account of contemporary Gorkhaland and of the ethnic political struggles facing those in the region. They are a very useful starting point for scholars of Darjeeling, particularly those embarking on a study of Gorkhaland politics.

In the third section, Sarah Besky's ethnographic account of the short-lived Darjeeling Tea Management Training Centre gives readers detailed insight into the tension that lies at the heart of a new generation of hopeful tea managers striving for qualifications and security but whose aspirations ultimately conflict with the political intentions of the centre. Roshan Rai and Georgina Drew's chapter also stands out, with its intricate explanation of the failings of Darjeeling's water management system and the promise of local solidarity networks to help communities navigate these challenges. It is these essays and Debarati Sen's chapter on fair trade and female entrepreneurship on local tea estates that provide a captivating account of how Darjeeling's everyday politics revolves around the hillside. The chapters in this section are some of the best in the volume, with the authors paying urgent attention to the micropolitics of Darjeeling's natural resource management issues.

A remarkably honest summation and critique of the contents of this book is found in Tanka Subba's Afterword (p. 262) in which he questions the authors' wider engagement with post-colonial theory. Subba makes a welcome contribution, reflecting on the contemporary political, social and environmental landscape of Darjeeling in light of the authors' varied perspectives. While aspects of the volume might prove highly specialised for readers unfamiliar with the area, the ethnographic material of certain chapters, the editors' skilfully written Introduction and Subba's lively Afterword inject some spirit into the book, making it broadly accessible to students and scholars alike.

In many ways, the chapters assembled in this volume recount sprawling, disparate narratives about Darjeeling; but such is the challenge of reconsidering a region steeped in various academic, political and resource struggles. Despite the diversity of disciplinary backgrounds, all the works compiled in this volume stay true to the book's premise and challenge and ultimately reconsider the tales told of this remarkable place. Editors Middleton and Shneiderman and the multiple scholars that follow them achieve in three-hundred pages a thorough work of care and commitment to the people of Darjeeling, providing an honest assessment of the historical, political and environmental forces that have shaped the region. This volume is a productive starting point for scholars of Darjeeling and its surrounds and gives urgent and careful

insight into the issues shaping the everyday realities of those residing in the hills.

Anna Pradhan is a master's student at the School of Geography, University of Melbourne, Australia.

annapradhan@gmail.com