Project Proposal

Does Identity Politics Subsume Local Governance!
A Study of the Darjeeling Hills

Introduction:

It is widely accepted that the idea of local governance in India, self-rule, in other words, got further prominence through the 73rd and 74th Constitutional Amendment Acts in 1992. While the 73rd amendment deals with the rural local bodies (Panchayati Raj Institutions – PRIs), the 74th amendment relates to urban local bodies (Municipalities). Interestingly, this study seeks to understand a self-rule struggle, despite being in vogue for more than a century, still stumbles to create the constitutionally guaranteed decentralised governance. It is said that the Darjeeling hills had been struggling for self-rule since 1907 when for the first time an 'administrative set-up' was demanded (Samanta, 2000; Sarkar, 2013b; Subba, 1992). Thereafter, this struggle, in varied forms continued till contemporary times. In its 114 years old history of struggle, it has witnessed the establishment of decentralised bodies like the Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) in 1988, Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) in 2012, and finally, the formation of Development Boards since 2013. Even, a proposal to bestow the Darjeeling hills with 6th Schedule status – the provision for tribal areas, also came into prominence. Erstwhile DGHC and the present GTA, in a way, were established to socio-culturally and economically empower the areas under their respective jurisdictions. On the other, the recent Development Boards, which do not have any restricted territorial delimitation, are formed within the GTA to socio-culturally empower the individual ethnic communities under the Gorkha agglomeration.

Review of Literature:

It is argued that the socio-political movements, which are also autonomy movements of different sorts, challenges the state to bargain sufficient power to self-rule (Routledge, 1996). In other words, autonomy refers to having sufficient power to self-rule. Scholars argue that the nomenclature *autonomy* hints at something that is a category of power to challenge the state authorities and state-centric realities. The meaning of autonomy seems mostly situational and subjective in most of the cases as it varies across time and space, institutions and organisations, and even inter-personally. The subjective interpretation from the

perspectives of the subjects being governed, autonomy is mainly to invent a space that is bereft of statist politico-legal paradigms. As autonomy apparently unfolds itself as contestation to state authority in the direction to achieve self-rule, it would be reductionist if we categorise it only in terms of *freedom* and *power*, as 'freedom is essentially a value, while autonomy is essentially a category of power' (Samaddar, 2005, p. 10). Even autonomy should be distinguished from self-rule as the former signifies the processes opaque to the realities of governance, whereas the latter points towards competency of individuals or a group of persons to govern themselves (Samaddar, 2005).

Genealogy of autonomy, in historical terms, suggests that autonomy as a value had always been underrated. Autonomy for individuals prescribes the situation of being one's own. Individuals can be labelled as having autonomous existence, should they apply reason and morality to establish the same without being dependent on externalities (Bose, 2005). Conversely, it is argued that rather than being individualistic, autonomy is relational, where one feels autonomous only in relation to otherisation, as the concept of *self* is related in contradistinction to others. Hence, autonomy should be viewed in terms of communitarian societal relations rather than libertarian individualistic argument (Bose, 2005). It is not out of the context to mention that autonomy can also be distinguished from freedom. Freedom provides an individual or a collective the liberty to walk, not to walk; to speak, not to speak, depending upon the thought process the individual or the collective is undergoing. On the other, autonomy is a form of power and hence, it has some politico-legal regulations, restrictions, etc. (Samaddar, 2005). Such a vexing situation leads us to the duality of autonomy's conceptualisation, as any discussion on autonomy cannot be bereft of the governmentality of states. Whether state machinery provides autonomous functions to the subjects, or the subjects themselves bargain autonomy from the state, both the situation is at the concession of state. The paradox of autonomous claim rests here.

In this work, the concern will be to look at the autonomy aspirations in the Darjeeling hills. Despite being in the momentum to demand autonomy from the state for more than a century, it is still struggling to get the constitutionally guaranteed autonomous structure (PRI) in the rural areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong. Scholars have documented that one of the most compelling issues that influenced the perpetual autonomy aspirations in the Darjeeling hills has been the 'crisis of identity' (Golay, 2006; Hutt, 1997; Samanta, 2000; Sarkar, 2013b; Subba, 1992). However, there are another group of scholars (Chakrabarti, 1988; Dasgupta,

1988; Lama, 1988) who made economic issues responsible for the sustenance of this movement.

Relevantly, studies on the autonomy aspirations in the Darjeeling hills emphasised that amidst the promulgation of the *Indian Council Act 1907*, Darjeeling hill-dwellers submitted a memorandum to the British for a decentralised administrative set-up 'outside Bengal' (Chhetri, 2016). This demand of decentralisation was said to have submitted in 1907, although, it does not have any documentary evidence. However, it is argued that its reference for the first time was noticed in 1952, when another memorandum for autonomous existence was submitted by the All India Gorkha League (AIGL) (Sarkar, 2013a, p. 68). Later on, to carry forward this demand for autonomous set-up, Hillmen's Association (HA) was formed in 1917 (Chhetri, 2016; Hutt, 1997). Subsequently, this HA had also raised its demand for autonomous existence in 1920, 1930 and 1934 (Samanta, 2000). These demands for autonomous existence, however, should not be viewed in isolation, rather contextualising with the colonial governmentality. It is argued that the British has kept the Darjeeling hills as 'non-regulated' (till 1874), 'scheduled' (1874), 'backward tracts' (1919) and 'partially excluded' (1935), which ultimately set the motion for the demand of autonomy (Samanta, 2000). In this regard, Swatahsiddha Sarkar, a scholar in the Eastern Himalayas, opined, as the colonial rulers kept the Darjeeling hills away from the governance of the mainland Bengal, it had also contributed to the demand for autonomous structure in the psyche of the hill-dwellers. This 'strategy of segregating' had nourished the sentiment that "the more they remain isolated the better it would be for the future development of local culture and local resources" (Sarkar, 2013a, p. 89).

Measurably, the Darjeeling hills had been experiencing varied forms of autonomy aspirations in the Darjeeling hills. From an autonomous 'administrative set-up' in the early twentieth century, the demand for autonomy had reappeared in a different *avatar*, in the late 1980s, e.g., the demand for Gorkhaland state. This demand for autonomy, instead, had provided a decentralised structure called *Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC)* in 1988 under the leadership of Subhash Ghising (Samanta, 2000; Sarkar, 2013b; Subba, 1992). Additionally, the Government of West Bengal proposed to bring the DGHC under Sixth Schedule during the same decade, however, it was also turned down by Ghising. However, when he realised the importance of this constitutional provision during the early 2000s, he started different manoeuvrings to portray that the Gorkhas are tribals. For that matter, Ghising also started

'Shila Puja' (stone worshipping) and prohibited the idol worship of *Lord Durga, Saraswati* and *Vishwakarma* to portray the Gorkhas as *animist* (The Hindu: January 23, 2006). Even he had introduced revering *eighteen armed* Durga as opposed to the traditional *ten-armed* Durga to portray distinctiveness with the Hindus (S. K. Das, 2017).

Interestingly, after Ghising and DGHC style of governance, the Darjeeling hills had also witnessed the establishment of another decentralised structure, *Gorkhaland Territorial Administration (GTA)* in 2012, under the leadership of Bimal Gurung, a disciple of Subhash Ghising. Gurung came into the picture of hill politics, Swatahsiddha Sarkar argues, with his 'anti-DGHC' and 'anti-Ghising' rhetoric (Sarkar, 2013b). Amidst these, a newer political churning has been observed in the hill politics, namely the formation of the *Development Boards* since 2013 just a year after the formation of the GTA. In all these political exuberances, the aspect of constitutionally guaranteed decentralised governance is missing. Thereby, it can be said that the autonomy aspirations in the Darjeeling hills had always been under continuous shift since its initial demand for a decentralised set-up in 1907 to the formation of *Development Boards.* But it failed to bring a working set-up for local governance in the Darjeeling hills. In such circumstances, one can still have the apprehension – what is the mechanism of getting basic amenities in the rural Darjeeling and Kalimpong in the absence of any working local governance! Are there any traditional governing structures in these areas that take care of these basic amenities and facilities?

These issues become topical when we notice that the parent state of Darjeeling – Sikkim, has a two-tier system of local governance in existence. More strikingly, Sikkim became part of India in 1975 and implemented the constitutionally envisioned two-tier local governance through *Sikkim Panchayat Act* in 1993. However, there are two villages (Lachen and Lachung) in the district of North Sikkim that still practice traditional system of local governance, namely, *Dzumsa,* by intentionally deferring the two-tier PRI system (Thapa & Sachdeva, 2017). Now, a question may be raised whether the rural areas of Darjeeling hills intentionally did not prefer to come under the PRI structure? If the rural areas in the Darjeeling hills practice traditional local governance and because of which they do not want any statist form of governing structure there? Is it so that as the movement for Gorkhaland, seeking considerable autonomy, has been in vogue in the borderland areas, the state does not want to extend sufficient autonomy? There is a dearth of literature that can reflect on these

issues. Even there is hardly any literature that can confirm the existence of PRI vis-à-vis traditional local governance in the rural Darjeeling and Kalimpong.

Importance of this Study:

Available literature concerning the ethnic politics in the Darjeeling hills has analysed the self-rule struggle mainly through the lenses of *identity* and *development.* If we go deeper, it appears, academia has dealt with the identity issue majorly through the nation and nationality question, whereas the development angle has been elaborated broadly through economic attributes. Although the existing literature has also established that the idea of identity preservation and socio-economic development are also intricately juxtaposed with governmentality of the state (Middleton, 2016; Samanta, 2000; Sarkar, 2013b; Subba, 1992), it falls short in synthesising the identity and development issue with decentralised governance. But if we analyse the governmentality question only through the lenses of the state of West Bengal and the Union of India, it may provide us a narrow understanding of the self-rule aspirations in the Darjeeling hills. Hence, there is an immediate need to academically engage with the issue of governance through the efficacies of local governing structures in the Darjeeling hills. This issue becomes topical when we notice that the politico-administrative set-ups (DGHC and GTA), which were regarded as a move towards establishing decentralised governance, hardly delivered the expectations of the hill-people. Moreover, when there was a proposal by the Union of India to provide 6th Schedule status to Darjeeling hills, the subsequent leadership negated this provision laying non-tribal rhetoric. However, in the present scenario, there is all round consciousness of getting tribal status. Thereby, an apprehension may arise – does the identity movement in the Darjeeling hills camouflage decentralised structure? This study seeks to unearth this.

Moreover, the constitutionally empowered (73rd Amendment) institution of decentralised government still eludes the Darjeeling hills. Originally, in the DGHC Act, 1988, a two-tier PRI system was enshrined, where DGHC would act as the third-tier of the system (Verghese, 2004), in tune with the West Bengal Panchayat Act, 1973. Similarly, the GTA Act, 2011 also enshrines the establishment of a two-tier Panchayati Raj Institution (PRI), within the framework of the 73rd Amendment Act 1992, where GTA would act as the third-tier of governance. Surprisingly, these provisions remained on paper and are yet to be implemented. To add to this surprise, the Darjeeling district also practices a dual structure of local governance. On one hand, while the rural areas are yet to get any constitutional local body,

the urban areas are bestowed with municipalities. Further, there is a dichotomy in the practice of a decentralised system between the plain and the hill areas of the Darjeeling district. While the plains of the Darjeeling district are bestowed with a three-tier PRI system and municipal bodies, the rural areas of Darjeeling hills are yet to come under PRI. This study, thereby, seeks to deal with these issues with the following research questions:

Research Questions:

1. What hinders the establishment of PRI in the rural areas of Darjeeling hills[1]?
   a) Whether the rural areas of Darjeeling hills did not prefer to come under the PRI structure?
   b) Does the rural areas in Darjeeling hills practice traditional local governance?
   c) Is it the state that does not wish to establish local governance?

2. Why are the local governance structures non-existent in the rural areas vis-à-vis the urban areas of Darjeeling hills?
   a) Why do Darjeeling hills practice dual structure of local governance?
   b) Which agency provides basic amenities in the rural areas in the absence of local governing structures?

3. Does identity politics subsume the essence of decentralised governance in Darjeeling hills?
   a) Does the identity-based politico-administrative structures – GTA and Development Boards – treated as the institutions for decentralised governance?
   b) Why has the demand for Gorkhaland fell short in addressing the issue of decentralized rural governance?

Methods of this Study:

This study seeks to collect data through primary field-work applying the methods of focused group discussions (FGDs), in-depth interviews, and institutional ethnography through semi-structured and non-structured questionnaires. Field-work will be carried out in select villages

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[1] Darjeeling hills also comprise of the hill-blocks within the Kalimpong district.

of Darjeeling hills. The field survey would provide us the very essence of decentralised governance, and it will also provide insight into how do the hill-people negotiate the lack of a PRI system in the rural areas. In terms of history, polity, ethnic composition, land-use and altitude; hill areas of Darjeeling and Kalimpong districts have commonalities as well as marked distinctions. Both the districts have three administrative blocks in the hills. Jorebunglow-Sukhiapokhri, Kurseong and Mirik are the three blocks in the hills of Darjeeling district whereas Kalimpong district has Kalimpong I, Kalimpong II and Gorubathan blocks. Nepalis, Lepchas and Bhutias are the major ethnic communities in the hills of both the districts. However, within the Nepali ethnic constellation, there are several other communities like Tamang, Rai, Gurung, Limbu, Sunwar, Yolmo, etc. While Nepalis are in majority in the hill areas of both the districts, proportionally, the shares of Lepchas are higher in Kalimpong compared to Darjeeling. Relevantly, although Bhutias are less in number in both the districts, socio-politically they hold considerable influence. Thus, in order to be representative, the sample selection for the study should not only be from the villages of both the districts but also include respondents representing all the major ethnic groups in the Darjeeling hills.

Additionally, in-depth interviews with the government officials, elected representatives of the municipalities, representatives from the political organisations as well as the local intelligentsia will further enrich the data collection of this study. Moreover, as Development Boards came into existence as an afterthought to the DGHC and GTA model of governance, institutional ethnography with select Development Boards and GTA may further provide us with a varied perspective. This study will select three villages each from the administrative blocks depending upon and distance from the nearest administrative headquarters for data collection. Two remote-villages and another one from the nearby areas of the administrative blocks will comprise the data collection sites for this study. In total, eighteen (18) villages will be selected for data collection. Respondents from these villages will be chosen across the ethnicities, mainly through snowballing techniques.

Tentative Timeline of this Study:

Phases	Tentative Outcomes
	In this phase, the entire fieldwork will be completed. Tentatively, we expect to

Phase 1 (April 2022- September 2022)	answer the following questions within the broader research question 1. 1. What hinders the establishment of PRI in the rural areas of Darjeeling hills? a) Whether the rural areas of Darjeeling hills did not prefer to come under the PRI structure? b) Does the rural areas in Darjeeling hills practice traditional local governance? c) Is it the state that does not wish to establish local governance?
Phase 2 (October 2022- March 2023)	In this phase, we expect to answer the remaining research questions. 2. Why are the local governance structures non-existent in the rural areas vis-à-vis the urban areas of Darjeeling hills? a) Why do Darjeeling hills practice dual structure of local governance? b) Which agency provides basic amenities in the rural areas in the absence of local governing structures? 3. Does identity politics subsume the essence of decentralised governance in Darjeeling hills? a) Does the identity-based politico-administrative structures – GTA and Development Boards – treated as the institutions for decentralised governance? b) Why has the demand for Gorkhaland fell short in addressing the issue of decentralized rural governance?

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Budget

Sl. No.	Heads		Period I (Six months)	Period II (Six months)	Total	Remarks
1	Salaries / Payment to Research Staff	Lead Researcher (5000/month)	30,000	30,000	60,000	Yearly honorarium of the PI at 5000/month
2	Salaries / Payment to Research Staff	Expert Associate (10000/month)	60,000	60,000	1,20,000	Yearly remuneration of the Co-PI cum expert associate at 10000/month
3	Salaries / Payment to Research Staff	One Research Assistant (6 months at 20000/month)	0	1,20,000	1,20,000	One RA for 6 months, spread over both the periods, at 20000/month
4	Field work - Data collection	Honorarium (6 Field Investigators for 2 months) 18000*6*2	2,16,000	0	2,16,000	6 Field Investigators for two month at 18000/month
5	Field work - Data collection	Local conveyance	36,000	0	36,000	Local conveyance for 6 Investigators for two month at Rs. 100/day. (100*6*30*2)
6	Field work	Accommodation and food	72,000	0	72,000	Daily allowances of Rs. 200/- for 60 days for 6 investigators
7	Field work - Survey	Outstation travel	10,000	10,000	20,000	Although the field-work is scheduled in the 'Budget period I', some funds are kept in reserve for revisiting the field to fill-up the research gaps before finalising the report. It is mainly for the PI & Co-PI
8	Field work - Survey	Local conveyance	10,000	10,000	20,000	Although the field-work is scheduled in the 'Budget period I', some funds are kept in reserve for revisiting the field to fill-up the research gaps before finalising the report. It is mainly for the PI & Co-PI
9	Field work - Survey	Accommodation and food	20,000	9,200	29,200	Although the field-work is scheduled in the 'Budget period I', some funds are kept in reserve for revisiting the field to fill-up the research gaps before finalising the report. It is mainly for the PI & Co-PI

10	Overhead	Institutional Researcher (Overhead 7.5%)	39375	17,420	56,795	The Institution of affiliation of the PI, i.e., Institute of Development Studies Kolkata (IDSK) has agreed to receive 7.5% of the total allocated budget as the Institutional Overhead
		Total	5,56,000	4,44,000	7,49,995	