

## Dirty Politics and Virtuous Movements. Morality, Space, and Politics in Darjeeling/India

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### Introduction

This paper explores the relations between morality, space and politics based on an example from South Asia. More explicitly, it asks how political actors utilize idealized imaginations of virtue and morality in struggles over authority and legitimacy and how space figures in these. To answer these questions I focus on a movement for autonomy in Darjeeling district situated in northern West Bengal. Here, the Nepali-speaking majority, or “Gorkhas”, demand a separation from West Bengal and the formation of a separate Union State “Gorkhaland” to accommodate their demands for full recognition as Indian citizens and for development (Middleton 2013, Wenner 2013). Against the backdrop of the movement, I analyze how leaders of contending regional political parties struggle for the leadership of the agitation by utilizing a specific spatio-ethical rhetoric and strategies. Drawing on qualitative data (including interviews in Nepali or English with tea plantation workers, business-persons, politicians, intellectuals, non-participant observation of political rallies and audio and video-records covering the time between 2007 and 2017), I show that especially the purification of space from allegedly undesired, immoral elements serves as a major strategy to gain a reputation as virtuous and dedicated leaders. Such purification happens in both, discursive and physical domains, which separate an imagined pure, virtuous social movement for Gorkhaland from the realm of destructive, “dirty” party-politics.

### Morality, Space and Politics

In a descriptive sense, morality refers to “certain codes of conduct put forward by a society or a group..., or accepted by an individual for her own behavior” (Gert & Gert 2017). I here use it to signify people’s own imaginations of right or wrong behavior. This differs from a normative approach, which discusses on a more general level what good behavior *should* be like for all members of society.

Several authors working on “moral geographies” pointed out the intricate connections between space and morality (Olson 2017; Sack 1997; Smith 1999). Cutchin (2002: 661) for instance stated: “morality entails the reconstruction of self, community and place... As such, place becomes the basis of moral problems, the medium for their determination and

solution, and the moral and aesthetic end-in-view”. For Ermann and Redepenning (2010: 6) the “spatialization of moral” is a means to create order and to assign concrete places to moralities and immoralities where they rightly “belong” (Cresswell, 2005: 128). Thus, the moral reconstruction of the self goes hand-in-hand with a reconstruction of place. On a larger scale, this involves the drawing of physical boundaries that separate, exclude or include those elements regarded as “good” or “evil”.

Such “purification of space” (Sibley 1988) is also a political strategy to justify the exclusion of those tagged the “other” or “deviant”, be it in terms of different lifestyles (Sibley 1981), gender/sexuality (Bell & Valentine 1995), disease (Craddock 2000), or ethnicity (Hasbullah & Korf 2009). Moral geographies reflect the aim to construct homogeneous socio-territorial entities. They are shot through with power and ideology (Cresswell 2005: 28).

In the following I explicate how in my case study moral oppositions between good and evil are mirrored in the moral distinction between “politics” and “anti-politics” (Hansen 2001; Hasbullah & Korf 2013; Spencer 2007).

### Dirty politics and virtuous movements

Frequently, in South Asia – as elsewhere – politics is considered “dirty” (Ruud 2000), a domain of the “immoral” guided by selfishness, violence and corruption, in direct contradistinction to socially held virtues such as participation, representation, and collective interest (Byrne & Klem 2015; Spencer 2007). At the same time, however, idealist imaginations of virtuous political conduct persist. This renders politics also a domain of possibility and imagination that is evaluated along and in tension with moral values (Spencer 2007). Some authors use the term “anti-politics” to coin such moral critique at “dirty politics” (Hansen 2001; Hasbullah & Korf 2013; Spencer 2007).

Such moral oppositions between “politics” and “anti-politics” also reflects in the moral universe of Gorkhaland activists in Darjeeling. They become most visible in the distinction of two moral domains: the social movement for Gorkhaland and party politics. This became not only apparent in various interviews with activists or residents (such as plantation

workers, town dwellers), but also in public speeches and performances of political leaders.

For instance, when persons spoke about “politics” or *rajniti* (Nepali) they usually associated it with egoistic behavior, violence and deception. In their opinion, political parties and their leaders struggled for personal benefits and power, causing a division of society into different groups.

Further, in interviews, many respondents criticized the course the movement had taken after its revival in 2007 and the emergence of a new political party, the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha (GJM). While the party had initially promised a “democratic, non-violent and Gandhian” agitation, it soon became criticized for its alleged involvement in corruption and the violent repression of party-rivals. Especially the brutal murder of rival-party leader Madan Tamang by an alleged GJM activist in May 2010 at a public site in Darjeeling town served as proof that the GJM had descended the path of dirty politics.

In opposition to this stood a wishful imagination of what a “proper” or “true” “people’s movement” (*jana andolan*) for Gorkhaland should be like. Most considered it as a place beyond such political divisions and power-struggles. Only a united movement free from personal agendas, where leaders and followers alike sacrificed their personal wealth or safety, could succeed. Such necessity to dissociate party-politics from the movement is exemplarily mirrored in a 2017 call for participation in a “united rally by non-political youths”, where the initiators asked participants to exchange party-flags with the Indian one as a sign of unity and national belonging (see figure 1).

Accordingly, people criticized when the boundary between these domains, between the public and private, between the movement and politics, was breached so that the domain of dirty politics encroached upon the movement (cf. Parry 2000). Only a movement free of such politics could succeed. Only then, people would happily support their leaders.

Yet, in practice, movement and party politics often overlapped, for instance, when activists turned into party-leaders or the regional parties held separate demonstrations for Gorkhaland. Therefore, the movement and party-politics take the form of *idealized* domains that inspire and reflect ideals (and not the actual practice) of ethico-political conduct.

### Moral Purification – The Rise of the GJM

I now turn to the question of how political leaders mobilize these moral oppositions in their pursuit for authority and legitimacy. In doing so, I focus on a particular moment in time when the formerly ruling party in Darjeeling, the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF), lost its regional hegemony to the new party, the GJM in 2007 and 2008. The GNLF had led a violent movement for Gorkhaland in the 1980s and then headed an autonomous council in the region. During its reign, the party became increasingly per-

ceived as authoritarian and corrupt. In October 2007, the GJM capitalized on the lost belief in the GNLF’s willingness and ability to deliver Gorkhaland and subsequently emerged as the new government-recognized leader of the agitation.

**MASSIVE UNITED RALLY  
BY NON-POLITICAL YOUTHS**

Date : 16/07/2017 (Sunday)  
Venue : Salbari (Opp. of UBI)  
Time : 3:00PM

**AGENDAS FOR RALLY:**

- 1) Demand of GORKHALAND,**
- 2) Human Right Violations,**
- 3) UNITY in Terai Regions,**
- 4) CBI Probe on the deaths of Gorkha Activists.**

**Details of Rally:**

- 1) A Silent Non-Political Rally,
- 2) No Political Party flags to be used except “Indian Tricolor Flag”,
- 3) Rally Participants are requested to carry and tie black ribbon to condemn “THE SILENCE OF HUMAN RIGHTS COMMISSION” on the atrocities by the Government Officials on Gorkhas,
- 4) Placards can be brought by rally participants on the basis of above mentioned agendas,
- 5) Discipline and Solidarity behavior to be maintained through out the rally,
- 6) Route of the rally:  
Opp. of UBI to Panchanadai and back, and
- 7) Rally Participants are advised to carry drinking water and snacks for their personal convenience.

Figure 3: Keeping the movement out of politics. Call for participation in a rally (Facebook, 13.7.2017 Kurseong daily)

To garner public trust, GJM president Bimal Gurung – himself a former GNLF leader – actively tried to dissociate himself and the new party from what he termed *kutniti*, a word used in Darjeeling to describe a dirty kind of politics. Invoking the unity of the Gorkhas beyond party-political lines, he called at people to renounce different political affiliations and instead unite under the umbrella of the *jati*, or ethnic group, represented by the GJM. Accusing the GNLF for betraying people and selling the land of Darjeeling in return for personal benefits, he swore an oath on various religious books and promised to never betray the cause of the Gorkhas (Bimal Gurung, speeches 7.10.2007 Darjeeling, 7.5.2008 Siliguri). Equating the GNLF with “dirty politics”, the GJM drew on an “anti-political” rhetoric to emerge as the clean, honest and devoted contender of people’s dreams, leading a real people’s movement for Gorkhaland.

### Spatial Purification – The Eradication of “Politics”

Gurung not only mobilized morality in a struggle for political legitimacy and reputation. The rhetoric

purification was accompanied by a purification of space from “politics”. Morality hereby justified the expulsion and destruction of elements tagged “immoral” from the territorial confines of the GJM’s expanding turf and its replacement by the symbols of the new movement ethics. This included three ethico-spatial strategies: (i) the removal and replacement of GNLFF symbols such as party flags; (ii) the eviction of party-rivals from Darjeeling; and (iii) the re-endowment of places with an ethics of sacrifice. I now briefly describe these strategies.

### **Removal and Replacement of Symbols**

When the GJM began challenging the GNLFF, the party had to prove that it could dictate certain rules governing the contested territory. Besides the enforcement of general strikes (*bandhs*) the GJM also began replacing the spatial markers of the GNLFF’s hegemony by its own symbols. This concerned mainly party-flags. Tagged morally “bad”, the green GNLFF flags now came to embody the heart of dirty politics, while the yellow-white-green of the GJM provided a brighter anti-political ethics of unity. Often, the removal of GNLFF flags entailed violent clashes between the two contending groups but ultimately the GJM succeeded and the Darjeeling hills literally changed colors. Fearing violent repulsions from the new rulers, those GNLFF activists who did not switch sides to the GJM during this time, kept their flags hidden. Later, GJM activists also prevented scheduled public meetings of rival parties (e.g. by blocking the venues). This literally rendered those elements tagged morally undesirable invisible.

### **Eviction of Party-Rivals**

The GJM did not only replace symbols. In their drive to purify the hills from “politics”, the new party also targeted eminent leaders of the GNLFF, including its president Subhash Ghisingh. In early February 2008, activists blocked his passage back to Darjeeling town when returning from Delhi. After in July a GNLFF leader allegedly shot a GJM activist, Ghisingh had to flee the hills and did not return until 2011. Giving in to the public pressure, already by the end of February the West Bengal government had withdrawn its support from him. Also other leaders faced repulsions, some saw their houses burnt, and many sought refuge in the West Bengal plains. Only those regarded truly supportive of the new movement were regarded “good” and allowed to join the GJM.

### **Moral Re-endowment of Places**

One important aspect of the idealized imagination of a true movement concerns the belief that goals could only be achieved through sacrificing something. Such ethics of sacrifice became visible in public performances of hunger strikes by GJM activists in the early stages of the movement. Placed at central public sites, activists utilized this “non-violent” and “Gandhian” form of protest to press for the recognition of the GJM as the new movement leader for Gorkhaland. In this way, the ethics of sacrifice and non-violence were tied to specific places. Activists’ reconstruction of their self as a moral self was translated into a transformation of place from political to virtuous. This not only re-endowed the Darjeeling landscape with the stamp of the new movement but also rendered the GJM’s commitment and will to sacrifice highly visible to others.

### **Conclusion**

This paper explored the relations between morality, space and politics. It argued that especially the purification of space from elements tagged immoral is a major strategy of political actors to gain legitimacy and authority. Such purification connects both discursive and physical domains. It not only works through the drawing of idealized boundaries between moral domains (such as the movement and party-politics) but also translates into the (re-)placing of desired/undesired elements in form of expulsion and inclusion. Reflecting a distinction between politics and anti-politics, in the presented case, such moral oppositions were embodied in the idealized distinction between a virtuous social movement and dirty party-politics.

Paradoxically, however, the anti-political repertoire mobilized by the new ruler to contest the “politics” of the previous one itself draws on strategies considered “political” such as violence. Moral (or anti-political) registers are mobilized to justify and camouflage this inherent power, oppression, and violence, thereby rendering the moral “other” invisible and literally placeless. This underlines the need to take space more seriously in elaborations on morality and politics, in South Asia and elsewhere.

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