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Georgina Drew & Roshan P. Rai

## **Connection amidst disconnection: water struggles, social structures, and geographies of exclusion in Darjeeling**

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## 10 *Connection amidst Disconnection*

### *Water Struggles, Social Structures, and Geographies of Exclusion in Darjeeling*

Georgina Drew and Roshan P. Rai\*

It must be a relief for tourists visiting Darjeeling in the heat of the Indian summer to ease into the cooler temperatures of the former hill station. The lush green mountain landscape, fed by monsoon

\* Georgina Drew and Roshan P. Rai extend their gratitude to the *samaj* members of Jawahar Busty, Mul Dara, and Mangalpuri. We thank them for their generosity and inspirational stewardship, as well as for welcoming us into their homes. We are also grateful to the Darjeeling Municipality, especially the Water Works Department, whose staff enabled us to get insights into the complex dynamics of water management in Darjeeling. Lakpa Tamang, of the University of Calcutta, deepened our work with his demarcation and mapping of springs in Darjeeling. Georgina also acknowledges the support of the Australian Research Council (DE160101178).

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rains, is likely soothing to visitors' senses as they leave the parched earth of the plains behind. And it must be odd for new arrivals when, after checking into their hotel, they read a sign posted in the lobby or the bathroom announcing 'acute water scarcity'. This notice is invariably met by a plea that guests use water sparingly. To such a visitor, the question must arise: How bad can it really be? The confusion is likely made worse by the visibility of water moving through pipes and natural springs as one roams about Darjeeling. This chapter is an effort to partially explain this very basic question. It stresses attention on the pockets of the township where a resource lack is felt along with the social responses emerging to address Darjeeling's water access challenges.

If you have read anything about water stress in India or South Asia, you may be thinking that you know what is to come in this discussion. Many readers will likely be aware that access to water is patchy across this region of the world and that those with better access are often from higher socio-economic sectors of the population.<sup>1</sup> True enough. Should you choose to continue beyond an overview of how this plays out in Darjeeling, however, we will share an unexpected twist to the issue of inequitable water access as it plays out in the hill station. We will explain why, even within the overall context of water stress in Darjeeling, select people do not push for better access to municipal supplies. We will also share the specificity of the hydrological features and the ingenuity of the social structures, known as *samaj*, that enable these residents to take this curious position. *Samaj* are community organizations that are often made up of multi-ethnic residents living in close proximity to one another. These neighbourhood groups provide support networks that help mitigate a variety of resource vulnerabilities and economic struggles, as well as the shocks associated with life cycle events such as births, weddings, and funerals.

To explain the nuances of water access in Darjeeling, we need to examine several issues relating to the themes of connection and disconnection. In what follows, we discuss who is connected to municipal waters, who is not connected to them, and how a physical disconnection to municipal water supplies fosters social affinities that lead to productive adaptations. We also clarify the limits of those social connections and the difficulty of generalizing the examples we highlight, due to the particularities of the Darjeeling experience. Towards the end of this

<sup>1</sup> Lahiri-Dutt (2006); O'Leary (2016); Sultana (2009, 2010, 2011); Truelove (2011).

discussion, we additionally offer insights into the relevance of geographies of exclusion to our case study. Our contention is that geographies of exclusion do persist in contemporary Darjeeling, but that social structures such as the samaj counterbalance this tendency in ways that create geographies of inclusion. The effort is to show how Darjeeling is emblematic of the wider challenge of water inequity facing Indians across the country, while also affording a relatively unique glimpse into the power and promise of social collectives.

The arguments to follow are based on a mixed set of methods. As co-authors we have engaged in collaborative studies of water management in Darjeeling since 2011, with joint periods of investigation in 2013, 2014, and 2016 ranging from 10 to 20 days each time. In this work, we have met with officials of Darjeeling Municipality as well as community activists and a selection of leaders from Darjeeling's multiple samaj.<sup>2</sup> This involved focus group discussions with several samaj representatives from 2013 to 2016. We have also walked several of the water transmission and distribution lines that stretch across the length of Darjeeling Township to examine the ways that people are connected to, and/or disconnected from, the municipal supplies. Our efforts benefited from previous studies that pinpoint the location of Darjeeling's numerous springs.<sup>3</sup> Archival materials, historical documents, academic literature, and Roshan Rai's decades spent living in Darjeeling add to the data set from which our text draws.

## Municipal Connections and Colonial Legacies

Let us return momentarily to the signs posted in Darjeeling's hotels. They do not exaggerate: the lack of availability of water in Darjeeling can be acute.<sup>4</sup> As interlocutors pointed out when we started our discussions back in 2011, those signs also obscure the fact that tourists often have far more water at their disposal than residents. It is not uncommon in the dry season, for instance, for people in Darjeeling to get by with little more than a litre of water to wash their bodies with per day. Many such

<sup>2</sup> As of April 2016, we have met with three municipal representatives, two technical water experts, two senior NGO representatives, and 28 samaj leaders. This amounts to a total of 35 key interlocutors.

<sup>3</sup> Boer (2011).

<sup>4</sup> The water deficit is estimated at 1.33 million gallons per day (Darjeeling Waterworks Department n.d.).

people go to great lengths to reuse grey water, reduce the frequency of toilet flushing, and to refrain from washing clothes unnecessarily. One of the reasons that the situation is so dire is that the water infrastructure in Darjeeling is still heavily reliant on the system instituted by the British. To explain more, we share a brief history of Darjeeling's colonial era water management.

The water management system upon which Darjeeling relies was designed around the turn of the twentieth century. When finalized in the 1930s, it was originally meant to service 10,000 to 20,000 residents. It may well have been an appropriate model at the time that it was implemented, but the system has struggled to accommodate the growth in Darjeeling's population. From 1981 to 2011 alone, the population of Darjeeling doubled. By 2011, Census figures put the number of people living permanently in Darjeeling town at 120,000. Given the persistent appeal of the picturesque hill station, there is every indication that this number will continue to increase. In addition to the permanent residents are the 200,000 people who constitute a transitory population.<sup>5</sup> The visitors inhabiting Darjeeling on a part-time basis include students, tourists, and migrant workers. The system servicing the Darjeeling's water needs relies on a reservoir built by the British, which is located below the Senchel Wildlife Sanctuary some 15 kilometres upstream of Darjeeling. The system is now stretched to its limits. The two lakes that make up this reservoir were manufactured for the storage of 33 million gallons of water that is perennially recharged by 26 springs<sup>6</sup> and an average rainfall of roughly 3,000 millimetres.<sup>7</sup> Overseen by the Darjeeling Municipality, the system relies on a gravity-based design to move the water through a series of pipes, a filter house, and two distribution tanks before arriving in town.

According to the municipality, the water supply system for Darjeeling includes about 35 kilometres of pipes for the transmission of water from Senchel lakes, and 83 kilometres of pipes to distribute water within the

<sup>5</sup> Census of India (2011).

<sup>6</sup> The lakes are demarcated as North and South. The North Lake, constructed in 1910, can hold up to 20 million gallons. The South Lake, constructed in 1932, can hold up to 13 million gallons (Darjeeling Waterworks Department n.d.).

<sup>7</sup> The rainfall is concentrated in the monsoon months of May to September when the deluge flows quickly down the steep slopes of the Darjeeling hills. While most of this is lost, some precipitation infiltrates the system to emerge as springs.

municipality. A public report notes that 95 per cent of the existing pipeline and valves were laid by 1930. This system is in great need of repair, revitalization, and improvement. A 2012 report of the Waterworks Department of the Darjeeling Municipality makes this point clear. They note: 'Not a single work was done in the past to replace the old pipeline or leaking valves.'<sup>8</sup> The lack of maintenance is part of the reason that water leaks are prominent through the entire supply and distribution chain. According to a water engineer at the Waterworks Department, interviewed in early 2014, the loss of water in transmission from Senchel lakes to the township is about 30–5 per cent of the total water supplied. The employee commented that about as much could again be lost within the distribution main. This means that another 30–5 per cent of the water supply could be lost after 65–70 per cent of the town's water capacity reaches the distribution point.

Once the water from Senchel arrives in town, it follows a distribution network that prioritizes the settlement patterns of colonial era Darjeeling. This settlement zone, located at the top of the hill, is now Darjeeling's most coveted—and expensive—land. As one moves away from this central hub, the downhill areas are marked by settlements of increasingly lower income residents. These poorer residents often have significantly less access to municipal waters. This fact recalls the work of others who have persuasively argued that water is a conduit and symbol of power differentials.<sup>9</sup> The observation is historically accurate, as water works have been a vital engineering tool used for perpetuating hegemonic cultural and socio-political models since, at least, the period of India's colonial experience.<sup>10</sup>

The inefficiency and inequity of the municipal water network is a visible feature of everyday life in Darjeeling. As one walks through the township, one often sees massive bundles containing dozens of pipes meant to distribute water to those fortunate enough to have their own supply. This water can come from the main distribution line or from tapping into any one of Darjeeling's numerous springs. Not all pipes in the bundles that are scattered around Darjeeling are for single households, however, as some of those pipes go to neighbourhoods where the water

<sup>8</sup> Darjeeling Waterworks Department (2012).

<sup>9</sup> Donahue and Johnston (1998); Swyngedouw (2004).

<sup>10</sup> Chapman and Thompson (1995); Drew (2015); Gilmartin (1994); Stone (1984); Whitcombe (1972).

is shared. The visual result is impressively rhizomatic,<sup>11</sup> especially when the myriad water pipes on the ground are seen in conjunction with the numerous electrical wires hanging overhead.

With these observations in mind, we suggest that there are ecological factors that play into Darjeeling's water stress but that, to a large extent, the issue of inadequate water supply is in part a manufactured crisis.<sup>12</sup> In saying this, we assert that the resource management system in place has exacerbated a schism between those who have access to water and those who do not (Figure 10.1). Such schisms reflect the overall



**Figure 10.1** A Darjeeling Resident Manually Carrying Water while Walking Past Water Pipes

*Source:* Photograph by Georgina Drew (January 2014).

<sup>11</sup> In labelling it rhizomatic, we flag the seen and unseen networks discussed in philosophical detail by Deleuze and Guattari (1988).

<sup>12</sup> This observation draws on the work of Barbara Rose Johnston (2005). Her work encourages us to think about the ways that water stress is a feature of management and governance failures rather than merely a quantitative issue of overall water availability.

trajectory of development in Darjeeling.<sup>13</sup> It is within this manufactured crisis of water stress that Darjeeling's 'village societies' or *gau samaj* play an important intervening role. For ease of reference, we will henceforth refer to them simply as samaj.

## Municipal Disconnections and Samaj Affects

Darjeeling's samaj are geographically clustered collectives. These collectives are often multi-ethnic and based on residential patterns, rather than shared cultural or religious practices.<sup>14</sup> Given the diasporic population and the heterogeneous nature of Darjeeling's settlement patterns<sup>15</sup> the samaj are often a stand-in for kin and ethnic-based networks.<sup>16</sup> That said, residence alone is not enough to ensure samaj affiliation. A neighbourhood might have a samaj, but not all neighbours may belong to it in an official sense. Rather, people join samaj after a selection process is complete and a membership fee is paid. Once a person belongs to a samaj, he/she is entitled to emergency financial assistance as well as a considerable amount of social support. In a sense, they are akin to an informal insurance system that also serves as a social safety net. Members argue that the system simultaneously provides members 'self-reliance' as opposed to dependence on municipal or state governing bodies.

A driving concept of the samaj is the idea that they provide *kalyan*, a Nepali term that can be translated as 'welfare'. As a samaj member adamantly stated when asked, people join the samaj because they offer an 'invisible structure' that buffers the risks and insecurities associated with everyday life. By taking monthly fees, often of about Rs. 100 per member,

<sup>13</sup> Development, propelled by tourism and the need to accommodate increasing rates of rural to urban migration, has changed Darjeeling's landscape. The rise of quickly made and visually uninspiring cement buildings is a source of contention. When these buildings are constructed alongside historic and aesthetically pleasing colonial era structures, residents are apt to lament the loss of the city's former 'charm' and character (Scrase and Ganguly–Scrase [2015]).

<sup>14</sup> Shneiderman (2015: 210).

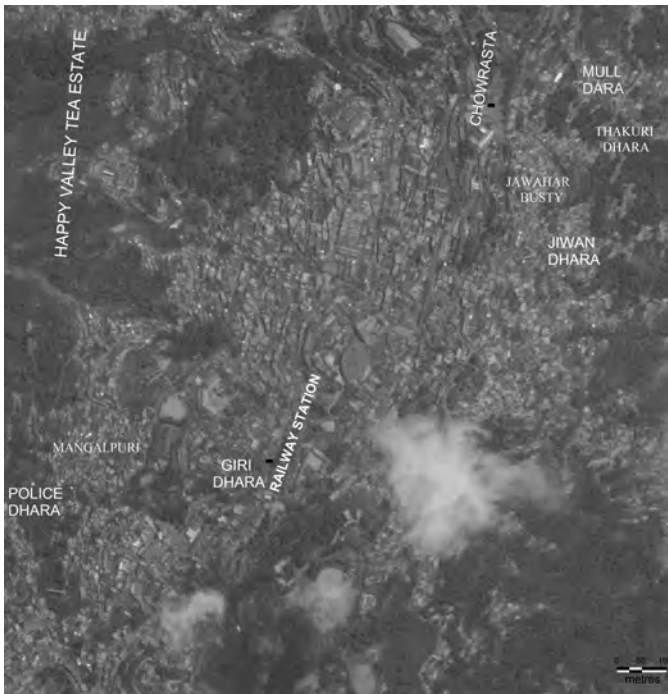
<sup>15</sup> Shneiderman (2015: xv–xvi); see also Middleton, this volume.

<sup>16</sup> As a result of this clustering, it is common to see ethnically diverse samaj members participating in the cultural or religious activities of their neighbours. By way of example, when the ethnic Thangmi host life-cycle rituals in Darjeeling, it is common for a large portion of attendees to come from non-Thangmi households (Shneiderman 2015: 210).



the samaj have a pool of resources to distribute in times of need, such as medical emergencies, weddings, funerals, and disasters. When needed, these funds are disbursed as a one-time grant, or as a loan. Additional funds can also be collected depending on the circumstances. In some samaj, for instance, each member is likely to give an additional ₹20–₹50 to a family that has experienced a trauma such as a medical emergency or a death. When pooled, these funds help cover hospital fees and the high costs that can be associated with funerals.

Important for our discussion, the samaj also fight for basic resource provisions for their members. In the formerly unplanned settlements, the samaj have been particularly active in the effort to access and manage water not provided by the municipality. Spring water features prominently in their provision strategies. In this chapter, we highlight three samaj that have been highly involved in securing water for their members. These are Muldara, Jawahar Busti, and Mangalpuri (Figure 10.2).



**Figure 10.2** Map of Muldara, Jawahar Busti, and Mangalpuri Samaj in Darjeeling

Source: Photograph by Georgina Drew.

The first two are located on the south–east, just downhill from Darjeeling’s iconic gathering point known as Chowrasta. The third is located on the south–west side of town, a section that is witnessing rapid residential expansion due to its proximity to a series of established and under-construction roads.

The three samaj that we emphasize are connected in varying degrees to municipal water supplies.<sup>17</sup> Yet in all cases, the samaj members and leaders we encountered were highly critical of the quality of these municipal waters. While the samaj members did not always know the details of how the water was managed, many had the impression that water supplied by the municipality was inferior to the spring water upon which many of them depend to a much greater extent. In a focus group with four Jawahar Busti samaj members in 2016, for instance, interlocutors used a barrage of adjectives including ‘rusty’, ‘muddy’, and ‘smelly’ to describe the municipal supplies. These descriptions were met with laughter as several members pinched their faces in disgust when speaking of the rancid materiality of that resource.<sup>18</sup> The spring water to which they have access was, in contrast, most often described as ‘sweet’ and enjoyable to drink.

Jawahar Busti has a continually evolving relationship to the municipality and its waters. Inhabited since at least the early 1960s, the enclave was called the Manpari Busti, which translates to the ‘do what you like colony’. This name was used primarily when it constituted unplanned residences built on Public Works Department land. Nowadays, the top 75 per cent of Jawahar Busti is zoned as municipal while the lower 25 per cent remains in a rural zone. With their municipal incorporation in 1997 came the expectation that Jawahar Busti residents pay a *dhuri* tax.<sup>19</sup> This is a temporary landholding tax that is paid up until the finalization of

<sup>17</sup> Jawahar Busti and Mangalpuri receive varying increments of municipal supplies whereas Muldara receives almost none.

<sup>18</sup> This was punctuated by a story, told with gusto, of a suicide at Senchel lake back in 2008. For three days after the event took place, the municipality let flow an uninterrupted supply of water to all municipal taps without telling the public the reason for their flushing activities. When it came to light that they were cleaning the lake after recovering a body, people were incensed to discover that they consumed contaminated resources.

<sup>19</sup> *Dhuri* is a Nepali word for that which is above you (such as the roof over one’s head). It also refers to the household unit, especially when written as *ghardhuri*.

ownership. The Jawahar Busti residents negotiated with the government for a municipal water line and seven hydrants after the incorporation. Even with these provisions, the samaj leaders of Jawahar Busti with whom we spoke did not see much benefit in being connected to the municipality. The incorporation had only resulted in a few more hydrants than they would have had otherwise; the municipal water quality was poor; and they did not necessarily enjoy paying the dhuri tax. At the time of our last meeting with samaj members, in April of 2016, their temporary solution was to try and lobby municipal officials for improved services.

The experience of Mangalpuri samaj further softens the expectation that being a part of the municipality brings with it improved water quality and water security. Located a short walk downhill from the Darjeeling train station, Mangalpuri samaj has been considered a part of the municipality since at least the 1970s. Samaj residents contend that they have long constituted an important vote bank for regional politicians. With 1,400 voters, their numbers are certainly sizeable and significant enough for close-call elections, especially that of the Municipal Commissioner. To court the votes of their samaj, politicians regularly make promises that hardly ever materialize. One woman wryly commented on this with the observation that, 'Up is up and down will always remain down.' Her point was that, despite performative efforts at inclusion within the municipality, the Mangalpuri samaj members seem to be unassociated with what happens uphill towards the administrative and political centre of town. As a part of this disconnected 'down', the Mangalpuri samaj members are often forgotten.

Other Mangalpuri residents echoed the claim that they receive few benefits from being a part of the municipality. Aside from the right to vote, the only provision was a single pipe leading to their enclave. Each member contributed their own money (roughly Rs. 300 each) in order to create five water points for distribution within the samaj. From each water point, a family can get between 10 and 20 litres of municipal water per week. This water, they complain, is yellow, foul-smelling, and not fit for even washing clothes. In recent years, in fact, they have threatened to secede from the municipality as a protest for their poor treatment. If they were no longer a part of the municipality, some quipped, they would not have to pay dhuri tax and they would no longer serve as pawns in Darjeeling's municipal politics. What's more, if they were part of the panchayat system, then they would be able to access government-sponsored rural livelihood schemes as well as provisions for water storage and pipe connectivity.

Several of these concerns were shared with us, while we were sitting in a small indigo-painted room in the middle of Mangalpuri with four gentlemen (and later, with three women). An old photo of Nepal's royal family, apparently taken months or years before the 2001 massacre, hung from an electrical wire, along with a portrait of a man in army uniform and several bouquets of plastic flowers, all of which were set in frames. The person speaking the most was the owner of the house in which we were convened. As we looked at the pile of letters for other Mangalpuri residents sitting on his desk and awaiting collection, he joked that he also serves as a *de facto* postman. His home's roadside location and the lack of accurate addresses for the other samaj members meant that his house was an ideal receiving point. This man, whom we shall call Naveen, spoke at length about the benefits of being in the samaj, stressing many of the points we made earlier. He also commented on how the quality of one's contributions to the samaj 'affects how people respond to your death'. As he explained in jest, a person's efforts to help others via the samaj impacts whether people feel sad when you die, or whether they nod and say with satisfaction, 'that is good' upon hearing the news.

Like the others, Naveen emphasized that despite their incorporation within the municipality's boundaries, Mangalpuri residents receive no 'benefits' from the municipal organizations that are supposed to provide services. In an attempt to get better provisions, they were briefly in touch with those campaigning for an independent federal state of Gorkhaland. In particular, they met with Subash Ghisingh, the chairperson of the DGHC to request help in acquiring more facilities and permanent land rights. In response, they got a terse reply, stating that all the samaj's problems would be solved 'as soon as Gorkhaland comes'. Because of such refusals of help from authorities in specific municipal organizations and in the DGHC, Naveen lamented, 'we feel like refugees in our own land.' As time went on, feelings of being a marginal population caught in a wider political game were elaborated by transitions and internal disputes within the local administration and the inception of the second Gorkhaland Movement. In 2007, the DGHC lost momentum after Ghisingh's position was usurped by his second-in-command, Bimal Gurung, who established the GJM (discussed elsewhere in this volume).<sup>20</sup> The DGHC was finally dissolved in 2012 and replaced by

<sup>20</sup> See also Besky (2013); Chettri (2013: 299); Shneiderman (2015: 25–6).

another semi-autonomous organizational body, the GTA.<sup>21</sup> For the samaj leaders with whom we spoke, these political twists and turns meant that their everyday concerns—including their worries for water provision—were overlooked amidst wider struggles for power.

When asked if the promise of Gorkhaland still held their hopes, a reply was initially given in the form of knowing chuckles from all the men gathered in the room. The verbal response that followed was that there are too many parties and no real unity to foster such a development. Rather, the demand for Gorkhaland has become like a ‘begging bowl’ for the political parties. Implied in these statements is an assertion that threats of further agitation for Gorkhaland are now used primarily to force payouts for specific programmes (and potentially to specific people). They use Gorkhaland, in other words, as a leveraging device to get funds instead of the actualization of an independent state. Regardless of the accuracy of this assessment, such impressions are a reflection of the widespread skepticism of political parties, and of Darjeeling politics.

### **Social Connections and Samaj Affects**

As self-described ‘ordinary people’, the Mangalpuri samaj members try to stay out of politics as much as possible. They focus instead on maintaining the spring pumping systems they set up to distribute water to each of the samaj households on a rotating, alternate day basis. Two employees maintain this system with precision and are paid ₹2,500 a month to look after the pumps and the distribution network. The programme is successful, and the samaj receives regular petitions from others to join so that they can benefit from this system. New applications for membership that the samaj feels are primarily aimed at acquiring more water (rather than more social connections) are put on indefinite hold. Still, they often help out neighbours in times of need, even when they are not samaj members. This willingness to help extends to other samaj. When a nearby samaj faces a crisis, the members of Mangalpuri samaj often share goods or offer donations.

Unlike the Jawahar Busti and Mangalpuri samaj, the Muldara samaj receives no municipal water supplies. In our conversations with

<sup>21</sup> The word semi-autonomous is used to describe the GTA because it has administrative, executive, and financial powers but it does not have legislative authority.

members, this was not often seen as a problem. In an impromptu focus group meeting by the main spring, located directly downhill from Chowrasta, three women and three men explained that the experiences of neighbouring samaj served as cautionary tales for being on the water grid. Two adjacent samaj, for instance, had recently received municipal connections, but these connections had taken nearly a year to materialize and brought with them new fees for the samaj and its members. Anyone wanting more than just access to a municipal tap—for instance, a piped connection to one's home—also has to pay a fixed price of Rs. 35,000. When contrasted with the low maintenance and low fee requirements of spring water collection, the municipal supply seems unnecessary. Some of the women with whom we spoke even declared that their trip to collect water offers a means of daily exercise and a chance to see neighbours. The main drawback is the limited amount of water that one can collect. Due to the physical limitations of what a person can carry and the rules for water collection, a samaj member can only take 30 litres of water at a time.

Set in contrast to the problems of quality resource provision associated with the municipality, our interlocutors expressed pride in what they have accomplished together. For many of these people, the samaj efforts did more than just help people access resources; they also created strong social cohesion. This is manifested in feelings of connectivity to one another, as well as feelings of belonging to their samaj.

Whether in Jawahar Busti, Mangalpuri, or Muldara, it was the regularity of interactions related to water that people most often cited as a source of robust connection to their samaj. There are pragmatic reasons for this. Whereas weddings, funerals, and emergencies are occasional events, water management is an everyday activity. Members see each other day-in and day-out when accessing water supplies at one of their communally managed spring sources and at communal hydrants.<sup>22</sup> Samaj members might help each other collect water on days when neighbours get sick or busy. They may even assist each other in carrying their heavy 20 to 30 litre loads of water up the mountainside. It is these banal acts of camaraderie to which people point when trying to explain their strong sense of samaj affiliation.

<sup>22</sup> Members in locations like Muldara also regulate one another to make sure they are only taking their due share. When they see others breaking the rules, they might opt to publicly chastise them. If that does not work, they might bring the matter to the samaj leaders and call for punishment.

It is possible, of course, that samaj members emphasized the everyday acts of water collection because that was our topic of study and the point of enquiry that we repeatedly stressed. Upon reflection, it is likely a range of affiliations and social interactions that contribute to feelings of belonging. So along with the salient component of resource sharing and resource management, some additional aspects of samaj belonging are important to note. These include statements about how samaj members see themselves, as well as how they are seen by others, especially when situated in lower socio-economic neighbourhoods. A more in-depth look at these factors helps to further explain the complexity of the samaj and the role they play in Darjeeling.

### **Added Layers of Samaj Belonging and Identity**

When asked about their sense of identity at focus group meetings, interlocutors declared that they most closely identified as samaj members rather than as residents of Darjeeling. In evidence of this, several interlocutors maintained that their feelings of belonging to the samaj were as strong as their feelings of affinity for their particular caste, ethnic group, or religion. For instance, a Muslim man in the Mangalpuri samaj stated that he feels just as connected to his fellow samaj members as to other Darjeeling residents who share his faith. And as another man in Jawahar Busti stated, he might tell others he is from Darjeeling when he is out of the region, but, when he is in the district, he uses geographic indicators and his samaj affiliation to situate himself in relation to others. To some, these sentiments may additionally reflect a strong sense of class solidarity since the samaj are geographic clusters of residents who often have similar socio-economic standing. The idea that class is more important than other caste, kin, or ethnic indicators is something that scholars like Liechty argue is occurring in places such as Kathmandu.<sup>23</sup> Brown et al. have noted a potentially similar trend in Darjeeling. They assert that class affiliations are now so prominent that during their period of research, 'no one was bothered about being a Nepali or a Bengali or a Marwari.'<sup>24</sup>

<sup>23</sup> Liechty (2002).

<sup>24</sup> Brown, Ganguly–Scrase, and Scrase (2016: 12). They also assert that class-based divisions are to blame for an increasing level of tension between middle class and lower class residents. Their study shows that the better off urban residents actively worked to maintain their own 'cosmopolitan' cultural



Three observations are worth noting in relation to the aforementioned statements and analyses about the importance of the samaj. First, many comments about samaj affinity were given when in the presence of other samaj members and there is likely a performative element to such assertions. Second, many samaj have been around since the 1970s, so several decades have allowed for the solidification of shared practices, and of a shared samaj identity. Scholars such as Holland and Lave argue that identities are shaped by the intersection between historical institutions (including social and governmental structures) and the lived experiences that help people understand who they are and where they belong.<sup>25</sup> The resulting identity formation is rarely singular; people can articulate multiple components of their identity and these may vary in place and time. After all, certain aspects of a person's identity become more prominent according to the circumstances, location, and company in which they find themselves (such as when they are home, at school, at work, or in a faith-based organization). The third point is related to the second. It includes the assertion that notions of belonging to a certain class, ethnic group, or religious following can still be important and influential to how residents see themselves and their neighbours. Co-author Rai of Darjeeling, for instance, connects to his samaj affiliation, his ethnic Rai heritage, and his Catholic faith. The aspect of his identity that is most prominent at any given time depends on the context in which he finds himself. To bring the point back to the samaj, therefore, we do not find it surprising that the primary identity that a person often asserts when situated within the geographical boundaries of the samaj is their samaj affiliation.

Notably, the feelings of samaj affinity were not without a touch of the 'anxious belongings' outlined by Middleton in his study of the embodied and affective dimensions of political life in Darjeeling.<sup>26</sup> In other words, the feelings of belonging within the samaj were not necessarily stable, and the prevailing sentiment of how samaj members relate to one another, as

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capital and habitus in ways that were derogatory towards lower class Darjeeling residents, and especially the ones that have recently migrated from the rural areas. Their arguments draw from the practice–theory work of Pierre Bourdieu (1977, 1984). His articulation of habitus emphasized the durable dispositions that are passed down across generations in ways that are susceptible to change yet are not frequently challenged due to assumptions of their naturalization.

<sup>25</sup> Holland and Lave (2001).

<sup>26</sup> Middleton (2013a).



well as to Darjeeling at large, could vary. The Jawahar Busti samaj members gave an indication of this. In a focus group meeting, four interlocutors were initially vocal in their expressions of pride for the ways that they have organized themselves as a cohesive collective. The men repeatedly called their samaj 'strong', using the English word, and said that they are able to effectively lobby administrators and politicians. They also elaborated on the nuanced rules and regulations that govern the use of spring and municipal waters in their samaj. Their system includes rotational family use of the springs at allocated hours publicly listed near several source points. They also oversee the upkeep of the springs, of which there are three public ones (and two that are privately owned). It was in light of their extensive efforts, and the high degree of social organization they have achieved, that they commented with dismay that the municipality ended up labelling them as a 'slum' when they were included in the municipality. This English term was used rather than a Nepali or Bengali translation. They found this nomenclature upsetting. When asked to describe how it felt to be classified as a slum, one interlocutor announced, 'it stinks'. In this example, we see the carefully constructed articulations of self-worth upset by an externally imposed label that tests the strength of the samaj's pride, and which potentially impacts notions of belonging to the municipality.

### **Resource Precarity and Social Vulnerabilities**

Despite the impressive ways that the samaj have worked to get water for their members, there are problems that persist, which may continue to grow. To start with, the energy, physical fortitude, and time required for spring water collection is considerable for some samaj members. Women in Jawahar Busti pointed to the long line of plastic containers surrounding one source point to indicate that, even when the spring is no less than five minutes from their home, they often have to spend one to two hours each day collecting water (Figure 10.3). This is particularly true on days in the dry season of March to May when the flow of water is reduced. In Jawahar Busti and Muldara, interlocutors similarly stated that the walk to the spring was nothing in comparison to how long it took to fill containers and carry them back up the hill. For those living close to the top, nearly within arm's reach of Chowrasta, yet still without access to tap water, the time needed to collect water was too great. One interlocutor, with two children and jobs as a lawyer and part-time shop owner, confessed to paying Rs. 600 a month to have others deliver spring



**Figure 10.3** Waiting for Water at Jawahar Busti

Source: Photograph by Georgina Drew (April 2016).

water to his doorstep. When these issues are taken into consideration, the two main upsides to the reliance on springs are the perceptions of the high quality of the water and the fact that they can be distributed efficiently within the samaj.

While the reliance on springs is presently adaptive, the nature of development in Darjeeling means that they may not be a source upon which residents can depend entirely in the long term. There are numerous reasons for this. The first is an indication that the springs are susceptible to cross-contamination with the waste and sewage that flows in drains alongside many of Darjeeling's springs. There may also be contamination that takes place along the spring lines at susceptible

points. Mystery illnesses are now rising. In Mangalpuri, residents worried about the safety of their spring water after five cases of cancer and 10 cases of tuberculosis (TB) were diagnosed in 2015. The cases of TB were cured—and the samaj helped to make sure that those suffering from TB had access to medications, and that they took them regularly—but worries persist about environmental conditions impacting overall public health.

Development is another key issue that raises concerns about the long-term viability of springs. A lot of the past development took place above the springs. But as the township continues to grow, buildings are emerging nearer to the downhill springs. On our last visit to Muldara, a house was being constructed just a 100 feet above the main source point for samaj members. Mud from the construction site was flowing down the sewage drains and there was concern that the digging for the foundations could put the spring in jeopardy by shifting the underground channels. Alongside these development practices is the threat of human-induced and natural disasters. Development activities uphill put pressure on the land and increase the chances of landslides when necessary guidelines are not followed. Aware of this connection, residents talked at length about their fears of landslides. Muldara samaj members pointed to an exposed and deforested patch of earth above their spring explaining their fear of being crushed under a landslide when the next monsoon arrives.

Our interlocutors were particularly adamant that the pace of development was too swift, and that not enough precautions were being taken. One samaj member declared the township to be overcrowded and he worried that the scarcity of development-eligible land near the market meant that people were building higher than they should. The development fears overlapped with concerns about what will happen when an earthquake strikes. A woman living at the bottom of Jawahar Busti wondered aloud why the residents above her couldn't see that they were putting the lives of those downhill in danger with all of the risky construction that could topple in a sizeable earthquake. In a heart-wrenching commentary, she declared that she and her family would not have time to say 'Aay-ya!' as the buildings fall on them, taking their homes and lives in a single blow. She and others recalled recent earthquakes that underscored their vulnerability. The 2015 earthquakes in Nepal were felt in Darjeeling, as was the 2011 quake in nearby Sikkim. The media images that followed these events showed in shocking detail the devastation that an earthquake can bring to poorly planned mountain habitats.

In addition to these concerns, there is also the worry that springs' plentitude will suffer as the landscape transforms, via a loss of green cover and forestry, and as the climate continues to change. Within the last 20 years in Muldara, the spring flow has slowed significantly. While the spring used to fill a 4-inch pipe, it now barely fills a 1-inch pipe. Before, residents could fill up a water container of 10–15 litres almost instantly. Now, it takes five minutes to fill up their containers. As the rate of water flow declines, the lines back up. This puts pressure on time schedules, making the act of water collection even more difficult and painstaking. To emphasize the significance of this point, it is important to realize that time spent collecting water is time that is not spent doing other tasks that are also important. Men and women, for instance, may experience a decrease in their ability to earn household income while students lose time to study.<sup>27</sup>



## Discussion and Comments on Geographies of Exclusion

The chapter highlights the resource challenges, as well as the social subjectivities, found within Darjeeling's diverse hydrological landscape. The subjectivities touched upon are influenced by varying degrees of connection to municipal waters, as well as the affinities that are produced through belonging to a samaj. In Darjeeling, the subjectivities associated with water arise in parallel to what some call 'geographies of exclusion'. Sibley's approach to geographies of exclusion contains the idea that space is always contested and that 'relatively trivial conflicts can provide clues about power relations and the role of space in social control'.<sup>28</sup> Put in other words, attention to geographies of exclusion helps illuminate how inequalities and identity-based conflicts are spread across spaces and places. While postcolonial water management schemas make clear how such geographies of exclusion operate in Darjeeling, we suggest that the samaj simultaneously create what we might call 'geographies of inclusion', especially within their locational clusters. Neither of these domains is pure, of course, so in saying this we do not mean to institute a binary that demonizes the municipality or overly sanctifies the work of the samaj. Rather, the two are on a relational continuum. The

<sup>27</sup> See also Joshi (2014).

<sup>28</sup> Sibley (1995: xiii).

extent of the exclusion or inclusion operating in either domain can vary over time.

Geographies of exclusion are known to produce feelings of abjection.<sup>29</sup> Anand's work demonstrates how abjection, or sentiments of unwantedness and otherness, arise in the slums of Mumbai when residents do not have access to adequate water supplies.<sup>30</sup> While we would not go so far as to discount the prevalence of abjection, the data on Darjeeling's samaj softens our ability to end this discussion with a focus on that sentiment alone. The reason for this is both biophysical as well as social.

On the biophysical side, the spring water that the samaj enjoy is perceived as clean, good, and sweet. It is far preferable to the dubious colonial legacy municipal water supply that appears less pure to the naked eye, is harder on the palate, and is likely carrying unwanted bacteria and heavy metals. While lower income Darjeeling residents who do not receive municipal waters might not have the same type of 'hydraulic citizenship'<sup>31</sup> as those on the water grid, the high quality and adequate quantity of the spring waters they receive help to offset the sentiments of abjection that this might inspire. On the social side, the samaj create means through which people are able to connect to one another in ways that are in direct response to municipal inadequacies and erstwhile exclusions. This has created social bonds that our interlocutors described as strong. The feelings of affinity and solidarity are forged through the structures that the samaj create, and they are reconstituted daily in practices of water collection and management. While there is animosity and anger over how the municipality treats the samaj, including labelling them as slums, the sentiments of abjection that might occur are therefore tempered, to restate the point, with feelings of social inclusion. These affinities are layered into varying degrees of association with the Gorkhaland Movement, which studies credit to communal efforts to fashion a common regional identity among people from diverse backgrounds sharing longstanding connections to one another and to the Darjeeling hills.<sup>32</sup>

To close the discussion, we stress again that our findings on the simultaneity of sentiments of connection and disconnection are possible because of the resilience of Darjeeling's samaj, along with their ability

<sup>29</sup> Sibley (1995: 8).

<sup>30</sup> Anand (2012).

<sup>31</sup> Anand (2011: 545).

<sup>32</sup> Chettri (2013).

to provide for themselves basic necessities such as water. The emplaced and location-specific attributes of the samaj are uniquely positioned to address the water struggles that emerge in and around the township. They do this in ways that capacitate the multi-lingual and multi-ethnic populations that have come to inhabit Darjeeling through decades of migration to an otherwise sparsely inhabited region. Put in other words, the story of connection amidst disconnection in Darjeeling shows how the experience of resource struggle in this postcolonial settlement is intricately tied to past and contemporary settlement patterns of an ethnically, culturally, and religiously heterogeneous population. Having said that, we celebrate this distinctiveness with a sentiment of caution. Should the viability of environmentally sensitive springs diminish, or should the cohesion of the samaj deteriorate, then future investigations may uphold arguments leaning more strongly towards the abject relations created through geographies of exclusion. Such studies might echo insights into the exclusionary urban water ecologies of Delhi,<sup>33</sup> Mumbai,<sup>34</sup> and Kathmandu.<sup>35</sup> Until the resource base or the level of social resilience deteriorates, Darjeeling's experience remains distinct and difficult to generalize due to the prevalence of vital support networks such as the samaj.

<sup>33</sup> Baviskar (2011); O'Leary (2016).

<sup>34</sup> Anand (2011, 2012).

<sup>35</sup> Rademacher (2011).