

Khemraj Sharma. (2023). *Kalebung Ka Garve Katha: Shodhparak Alekh Haruko Sangalo*. Graphic Printers.

Kalebung Ka Garve Katha (KKGK), which translates to, *The Hidden Stories of Kalebung* happens to be the maiden work of sociologist Khemraj Sharma published in Nepali. The term, *Garve* in Nepali means ‘womb’ or a ‘pregnant woman’. It also has a deeper connotation alluding to anything within, hidden, secret, unknown, and unexplained. In the same context, the book’s title gives its readers an impression that the author intends to decipher hidden episodes of Kalebung or Kalenpong’s past. But, the wider reader is left wondering about the place the author is talking about. Is it Kalebung or Kalenpong or Kalimpong? Over time, the name of the place has also shifted phonetically. The name Kalebung is the corrupted form of the word Kalenpong. The latter term in the Lepcha language denotes “hillock of assemblage” or “ridges where we play” or “assembly of kings and Ministers.” Natives prefer the term Kalebung over the anglicized name Kalimpong, which is further a degenerated version of Kalenpong and is used as an official name for the place (Tamsang, 1998). After the arrival of Nepalis, the area got the new name Kalebung. As a prominent trading hub in the Eastern Himalaya, Kalebung was administered by both Sikkim and Bhutan in different periods of history until the British annexed it following the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864. Since then, Kalebung was made a part of the Darjeeling district and remained a subsidiary until it was granted the status of a separate district in 2017.

The reviewer too uses Kalebung, since that is the title of the book. *KKGK* is written in a popular narrative mode, and altogether, the book is organized into twenty-six brief chapters that collectively cover the region’s history, land, agricultural practices, economics, taxation, and the story of the Gorkhas’ arrival. Among them, I have only chosen a few chapters to discuss, not all of which are on the history of Kalebung’s settlement and are mostly concerned with the Indian Nepali community, which the author refers to as “Gorkhas,” and their contributions to the region’s trade, agriculture, labor, and the overall history.

In a popular historical style, the introduction too captivates those readers, who are not very familiar with this region and desire to know more about its social, cultural, and political history and human geography. In the introduction section, the author clearly stated that the book is simply a collection of his articles published in local newspapers. Following the introduction, Chapter One (pp. 13-17) depicts Gorkhas’ land retention, while showcasing their relationship with the colonial British government. The author emphasizes that the land the Gorkhas obtained was a result of their struggles, not the British government’s sympathy. Similar to the land related issue, Chapter Five highlights the land taxation system in the region during the colonial time (pp. 33-37). The author argues that the Gorkhas had a phenomenal role in cultivating Kalebung’s land. Drawing from

Philpot's 1925 report¹ the author too reaffirms that the Gorkhas were the highest taxpayers to the British administration, in contrast to the Bhutias and Lepchas, who lived there.

When did the Gorkhas arrive and settle themselves here? What were the circumstances and their struggle? The whole process of mobility and migration is what this inquiry and its response depend on. In this light, Chapter Ten provides the early waves of Gorkha settlers by encapsulating their hardships and struggles in domiciling within the area. Interestingly, the chapter weaves together the background of the British land policy at the time, along with the challenges in their settlement history within the context of contested power relations (pp. 61-66). The migration dynamics continue in Chapter Eleven as well, where the subtleties of the underlying complexities, alongside the contradictions manifested with this settlement dynamics are brought to light. Besides detailing the challenges, the author also describes the first Gorkha settlement in Kalebung (pp. 67-73).

Likewise, Chapter Fifteen acclaims the services rendered to the British by the people of Kalebung. Relying upon the documents of Charles Bell² and Philpot, this Chapter (pp. 90-97) also delineates the various categories of land available in Kalebung and the author urges the necessity of rewriting the history of Gorkhas and their place. Similarly, the tradition of farming, animal husbandry, livelihood, and trade with Tibet are pinpointed in Chapter Sixteen (pp. 97-103, 107-118). However, the social history of agricultural structure chiefly appears in chapter Twenty Four, where Gorkhas were credited for shaping the agro-landscape of the region (pp. 143-150) and contributing to the region's economy. Just following this section is the explanation of the local governance system (pp. 151-156) that particularly functioned in the rural Kalebung called the Mandal system, which was an important unit or medium of British administration in Darjeeling.

With this quick summary of the book, the reviewer now likes to point out the gaps that the author has not given enough thought to in the section that follows. The intent of the author of *KKGK* seems to present his readers that he has tried to uncover the unique nuances of the veiled and lost past, which he believes is still unknown and buried (*Garve*), giving the impression that he is trying to provide some kind of oblivious Gorkha history of Kalebung. This being said the book's content and the historical sources the author uses are predicated on the colonial records that were already in existence.

The author's image of *Garve* just whets one's appetite without offering any novelty. For instance, he brings up and discusses the land-related issues from

1 Final Report on Survey and Settlement of Kalimpong Government State, 1919-1921 (1925) by H. C. V. Philpot.

2 Final Report on the Survey and the Settlement of the Kalimpong Government Estate in the District of Darjeeling, 1901-1903 (1905) by Charles Bell.

the very first chapter and goes into further detail in the subsequent chapters. All of his illustrated tables, however, are derived from previously published materials. Based on these colonial records, the author asserts that the Gorkhas toiled to make the terrains of Kalebung cultivable (pp. 33-37) and also were regular taxpayers.

Similarly, the Gorkha stories in chapter Twenty Three present the romanticized picture of the Gorkhas, ignoring the other members, who were equally as much a part of the past as they were, and whose contributions were as important to the Kalebung's life. Additionally, here too, the author heavily relies on unfolding his cases from the reports of the British surveyors Marindin (1882) and Ritche (1892).³ To substantiate this further, I quote from the chapter itself, "First, when the government tried to establish a permanent settlement with the local Lepchas, the Lepchas often turned away and mostly the Christian Lepchas migrated to places like Maria Basti, Suruk, Samthar, etc., as they lacked the psychological need and skills or competence to establish a permanent settlement" (pp. 138). However, the author does not focus on the historical differences these communities bear. Lepchas and Bhutias due to their practice of shifting cultivation and pre-feudal life forms were unable to calibrate with the abrupt change that had happened after the entry of the British Raj. On the other hand, Gorkhas were able to do the same.

Are they "Gorkha" or "Gurkha" or "Gorkhali" that make up the Nepali community he speaks of? Also, does it include all the Nepali communities residing in Kalebung or only those communities that speak Khas Bhasa. This contested term has not been specifically specified in the text.⁴ However, the author simply states in Chapter Six, without specifying any sources that the name Gorkha, originated from cow herders, who protected the cows and eventually gained popularity as a martial race. Again, the use of various exhilarating dictums like *Gorkhe Ragat*, and *Gorkhe Santan* may stimulate the author's expected readers, but it sounds empty in the absence of the other hill communities, which make up the larger Gorkha consciousness in the present-day Darjeeling and Kalebung. Refraining from bringing these lexicons up in conversation leads to the faint portrayal of the members belonging to these groups.

3 Settlement Reports of Marindin (1882) and Ritche (1892) on Kalimpong Government Estate.

4 These are the terms romantically popularized and that still revolve within the ambit of political and cultural realms. While in Nepal it is believed that the term Gorkha is specifically associated with the rise of King from the house of Gorkha and Gorkhali refers to those countrymen who served in the King's military campaign. However, Gurkha is the title given by the British to those cheap mercenary soldiers who served in the British armed forces since 1815. But, in Darjeeling hills (including Kalimpong, Kurseong, and Mirik) the word has a different socio-political connotation. The term Gorkha in the Darjeeling hills has been used to connote the collective identity of the Nepalis of Indian origin.

Despite the stories in *KKGK* intending to highlight the sufferings of the Gorkha community, I could not locate similar concerns of the author towards the non-Gorkhas. The author in a chapter titled “Deceived by History” emphasizes that the lingua franca of Kalebung was once Khas Bhasa, and Lepchas and Bhutias constituted the ruling class (p. 14). It raises questions about how the Khas, unlike the Lepchas and Bhutias, were not considered as tribes, while the Lepchas and Bhutias despite being the ruling class were considered as tribes. What were the factors that might have led the colonizers to take into consideration only these two communities as tribes, while leaving many others? This appears to be reasonable because in the eyes of the colonial rulers, the entire population of Kalebung was native but the question is how and why this categorization of natives was put into force.

These questions create an anomaly with the overall narrative that the book has tried to deliver. As a seasoned sociologist, the author shows his unwillingness to approach the issue from a theoretical standpoint in identifying the people on the fringes, both inside and outside the Gorkhas. Despite its ambitious title, the narratives remain confined to straight forward historical descriptions and rosy rhetoric, missing the opportunity to explore the complexities of hill communities from diverse perspectives, which may invite readers to question, deconstruct, and ultimately appreciate the diverse nature and collective oral histories of the other hill communities.

Finally yet importantly, the compilation of authors’ pre-published op-eds into *KKGK*, while being informative, falls short of adapting to the contemporary socio-political discourse within the Indo-Nepali community. The absence of continuity leaves the reader yearning for a more interconnected exploration of the past in the present time. This time the author missed this opportunity, ensuring the relevance of the content to the ongoing socio-political dynamics prevalent among the Indo-Nepali community. Nonetheless, he can yet get better though.

Of course, *KKGK* illustrates the history of the Nepali migrants in this area through vignettes of their stories of settlement. Indeed, the book is valuable for all the researchers, who are curious about Kalebung’s past, and for whom settlement reports are not easily accessible. In conclusion, it may be said that *KKGK* serves as a testament to the ongoing historical search for the Gorkha identity by revisiting its history. It also presents several significant challenges and issues that require further exploration and resolution. Readers hoping for an exhaustive picture with refined details of Kalebung, its people and the overall politics at large will have to wait for the second edition of *KKGK*.

Reference

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