

## Vision through a Democratic Lens of Darjeeling: A Critical Reading of *Democracy in Darjeeling* by George Thadathil

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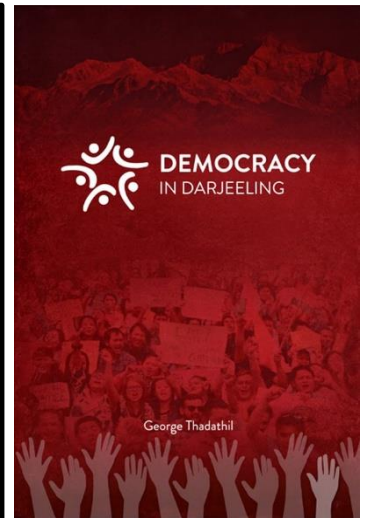
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### Abstract

It is a review of the book *Democracy in Darjeeling* that is about the socio-political, philosophical, religious, and institutional growth in Darjeeling over the years. It is a careful study of the numerous educational patterns, community and cultural processes that define the plurality of the place, as well as retain the individual essence all throughout. Darjeeling is an integral metaphor in North Bengal, and it is not just a space, but a palpable entity in itself. Democracy, Pluralism and Globalisation have their own effects on Darjeeling and that is what the author has tried to enliven through his work.

**Keywords:** Democracy, Darjeeling Hills, Darjeeling Hill University, Society in Darjeeling, Darjeeling Religion, Pluralism.

In the introductory chapter 'Defining Democracy' in his book *Democracy*, writer and Reader in Politics at the University of Sheffield, Anthony Arblaster says,

"This perspective on democracy starts from the assumption that democracy is something which 'we' (in the West) already have, but are generously and idealistically anxious to export to less fortunate parts of the globe. To give an account of democracy will therefore be largely an exercise in description of current Western realities, coupled, perhaps, with some account of how this happy state of affairs came about." (Arblaster 2)

The Western concept of democracy has often been undermined and generalized as essentially a concept that bears a close resemblance to autonomy. It is imperative to understand how Democracy as a conceptualized and theoretical framework is deciphered, implemented, and interpreted according to the spatial, temporal, geo-political, and regional discourses. The current book that is under discussion, George Thadathil's *Democracy in Darjeeling* is both an inquiry and a repository of research-based outcomes that highlight give fresh insights about Darjeeling's society, history, culture, democratic ideals, and religious pluralism. The lucid description and cogent arguments about National aspirations and regional autonomy in Darjeeling remain at the core of discussion in the introductory segment of the book. The writer analyzes the socio-philosophical perspectives that drive political and community goals and try to generate a universal streak of indigenous rationality. Since the impact of imperialism and cultural colonization has been extremely strong in Darjeeling for a long time, nurturing and fortifying the community tools of autonomy becomes indispensable for larger sustenance. As Thadathil examines the concept of autonomy, identity, and equality, he points out:

"Underlying the aspirations of autonomy is first the desire for equality. The lurking memories of past inequality, which continue in different forms even in the present, fire the imagination of a people. Autonomy is therefore a political expression arising from a psychological, social perception of right individually and collectively." (Thadathil 7)

What defines the underlying currents and redistribution of the theory of democracy among the people of the hills? What about the dominant communities and the marginalized ones? How does one dissect the demand for autonomy by the hill people and the small associations that are formed? Do these associations spearhead the course of further movement to ensure democracy in Darjeeling? There can be these and myriad other questions about the designation and enjoyment of autonomy by an individual and a large community of people. As the discussion moves further, the author enumerates the different modes of language in which the people speak, and how there was a clarion call to introduce 'Nepali' as a type of communicative tool first as a medium of instruction in schools and then as an official language of the hills. It is true that the purity, efficacy, and singularity of any language get sandpapered over the course of time, as there are new discursive formations, various layers of dialect, and indigenous formation that make the entire concept of democracy multilayered. If it is a talk about globalization on a larger aspect, with far-reaching consequences of national and

regional trajectories that flourish on multiplicity and cultural binaries even for the smallest of communities, then we understand that purity of language over a period of time becomes mythical. The author narrates very skillfully the affective and political ramifications of language for the hill communities. Since Darjeeling has expanded over the years in terms of tourism, tea, and timber business, the influx of regional, national, and foreign tourists has also affected the passage of language. The author's sharp tone, descriptive articulation and clarity of expression kindles the reader's interest to know more about the cultural and affective aspects of a generation best represented in literary modes of expression:

“The construct of identity through literature has a past of its own. Every generation as it were, depicted the affectivity surrounding oneself and the collective self in poetic or prose articulations, in novels or in short stories, in dance, music and folk songs and these communicated to a distant land, people and time a sense of self identity, a people's sense of 'who they are' and it is this sensibility we try to define and pigeon-hole as social identity.” (Thadathil 21)

The author does not mince words, the objective dissemination of knowledge and resourceful findings collaborate with the idea of what Darjeeling was, how it has advanced over the years, and what the present situation of Darjeeling is. Oralities, written documentation, and fresher insights into the realms of Darjeeling are well-expressed by the author. The progress of postcoloniality has segregated regional monotony in writing, diasporic requirements have given birth to newer settlements that the new generations in Darjeeling are constantly trying to discover. In spite of that, the authenticity of the mother tongue by retaining the traditional norms, rituals, family practices, cultural phenomena, and literary outputs helped Darjeeling to grow in its own rights and measures. In this connection, one chapter of *Democracy in Darjeeling* definitely needs a special mention here, as the author has discussed. Chapter 5, titled 'Darjeeling Hill University: Emergence of a People' is a study takes into account the precise background idea of what a university is, what were the prerequisites to establish European universities, and Darjeeling as an ideal place to set up a university as there is a presence of a native 'polish', 'finesse' and 'wisdom' in the hills, that has developed over time. The impact of the colonial legacy and the proximity to the British had expedited the process of developing this fine, refined sensibility among the people of Darjeeling and adjoining areas. The dissemination of knowledge in schools, colleges, and universities is different. Christianity was also a major force, rather advocate for the advancement of English education in Darjeeling. Basic access to schools, colleges, and universities is one essential factor that needs to be taken into consideration. And with the passage of time, it is also about the utility and accessibility of education in terms of technology. Employees, buildings, funding, hostels, libraries, laboratories, modes of communication and conveyance and other such rational factors have to be kept in mind before the establishment of any educational set-up. The author writes:

“A college is local, like a school, whereas, a university has an inherent element of universality about it. it is universal (open to all) in the sense of welcoming people/ students and staff from all

over the world. This is indeed what characterizes the best universities of the world or of the country.” ( Thadathil 71)

It is true that the concept of *vidya* and *vidya kshetra* in Oriental terms has much to do with the overall cultural assimilation of several factors. A university is not just a building made of brick and mortar, but it is a constant effort to expand the horizons of practical knowledge. As the author writes very adroitly, there are several stakeholders in the smooth functioning of the process. If the government sanctions a certain amount for establishing the university, the work does not end there. Rather, it is about the educated parents, students, management, academics and the culturally enriched groups, and individuals who must affirm ‘why’ they need a university in the first place. The ‘why’, ‘how’, ‘when’ triumvirate should form the pivot of discussion in this connection. If there is unnecessary sloganeering and hooliganism and excess of political unrest in a university, that results in nothing but utter chaos and defamation for an academic system, and consequentially, instead of a sane representative of education, a Frankenstein is born whose actions are detrimental to any sort of academic accomplishment. Darjeeling has the complete set-up to kindle and inculcate a holistic goal among the students, helping them not just in class, but also in literary activities (setting up literary clubs), musical bonanzas, sports activities, and so on. This is a pluralistic approach, of course, retaining the individual essence of quality education in all its aspects.

American political scientist Theodore J. Lowi identifies the basic concept of pluralism in his discussion of the ‘Pluralism Matrix’ (‘Plural Forms of Pluralism’) as part of the edited volume *Pluralism: Developments in the Theory and Practice of Democracy*:

“Pluralism exists in the identities people develop out of the places, positions and cleavages they occupy. Pluralism *is* civil society wherever the separate identities are allowed to develop and express themselves.” (Eisfeld 25)

Pluralism indicates diversity, and it is evident in the identities of the people and includes the fundamental right both to agree and dissent. Chapter 6 of *Democracy in Darjeeling* is titled ‘Democratic Pluralism or Pluralistic Democracy: Colonial Legacies and Pos-colonial Possibilities’ deals with a methodical approach and then a fundamental analysis of the multi-layered trajectory of Indian democracy, postcolonial identities, and the effect of pluralism. The post-independence scenario in the country was marked by a representation of the Bahujan and the Dalit parties, large-scale privatization, and liberalization of the economy and even the non-party groups occupying a place of prominence. The author diagnoses the plausible structures and implications of a pluralistic democracy, and how the preparatory ground for the amplification of the regional and national goals was made. The recognition of several languages, communities, and tribes in the hill areas also commingled with the recognition of their identities and through cultural patterns that were naturally practiced and that were not thrust by an external force. Along with that, the author also reflects upon the tectonic shifts that occurred in the Hindu and Christian beliefs of the ‘good life’:

“For the Christian, ‘good life’ is in the future, to be attained, worked for and striven after. For the Hindu, the good life is a pre-given an ordained position in society, not to be challenged or trampled upon. Therefore for one freedom consists in preserving the patrimony, tradition already given.” (Thadathil 100)

The next few chapters are about the process of democratization through civil society institutions in Darjeeling, history, culture, environment and development, a socio-religious description, and philosophical reading of *Dhajia*, the environment as a matrix for enabling cultural identity, the role of social sciences in the promotion of science, religion in Darjeeling, protest masks, religious pluralism, and movements. Each and every chapter highlights the forms of democratization that are a dominant force in cementing the cultural and religious legacies of Darjeeling. There is no abstract meandering that the author does, nor does he raise blatant political questions or insinuating remarks that might kindle religious fury. The book is a collector’s item in its own swift flow and expressional luminosity. The author has woven a fine tapestry with facts, insights, and philosophical reflections, free from didactic jargon and obscure educational rendering. The condition of the tea-garden workers, plantations covering a large area of Darjeeling, religious practices, and socially-sanctioned goals are not historically mundane, as the author corroborates. This book itself is a process, a process that emanates from an in-depth study of Darjeeling as a democratic entity, and not just a geopolitical ‘space’ in the strictest sense of the term. The role of the missionaries in the past and present, combined with the infringement of modern ideas that affect the dreams and aspirations of the youth of Darjeeling are bound to give rise to both cohabitation and competition. Arguments, and counter-arguments keep on resurfacing, but Darjeeling remains a Leviathan in its own dynamism, penning down its own stories relentlessly, projecting a unique identity and not hegemonized, petrified, or desiccated by the spectre of foreign invasion or globalization. Perhaps, therein lies the success of any true democracy, and Thadathil has expounded upon this truth with extreme flair and diligence.

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**Reviewer's details:**

Sreetanwi Chakraborty is an Assistant Professor in Amity Institute of English Studies and Research, Amity University, Kolkata. She graduated from Presidency College Kolkata, did her Postgraduation from the University of Calcutta, and obtained her M. Phil from Rabindra Bharati University on *The Sleeping Beauty Wakes Up: A Feminist Interpretation of Fairy Tales*. This was published as a book in 2019, and it received the "Rising Star" Award for non-fiction category at New Town Book Fair, Kolkata. She has been the recipient of the "Charuchandra Ghosh Memorial Award" for securing the highest marks from Calcutta University. At present she is pursuing her Ph. D from Ranchi University. She is the Chief Editor of a bilingual biannual academic journal *Litinfinitive*. Apart from academic publications in reputed national and international journals, her translations and literary articles have been published in Bengali and notable English journals and magazines in India, Bangladesh, and South Africa. Her areas of interest include Indian English poetry, Indian English drama, Feminism and cultural politics, and South Asian Diasporic Studies. She has passed 5th year in Rabindra Sangeet, with distinction and 4th year in classical music from Prayag Sangeet Samiti, Allahabad. She is a trained painter in oil, acrylic, water colour and charcoal. Her novel "*Rhododendrons*" published by Penprints Publication received a huge response in the International Kolkata Book Fair, 2023.