

Trans-Himalayan Trade and Emergence of Darjeeling as A Hill Station

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Abstract—Until 1835, the time of the Deed of Grantⁱ hills of Darjeeling was ‘terra incognita’. Formation of the district of Darjeeling completed only in 1865 when present areas of Kalimpong district were incorporated into Darjeeling as a result of the treaty of Sinchulaⁱⁱ signed between the East India Company and Bhutan.

The making of Darjeeling as a hill station was a cumulative result of many historical events involved with neighboring countries of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan. Prior to the arrival of the British, the entire area of Darjeeling hills were secluded with lack of proper communication of and hence there were no significant trade relations with the mainland of India. Contrarily, in absence of domestic trade, the trans-Himalayan trade of Darjeeling with Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet flourished during this period. The trans-Himalayan trail trudge facilitated this trade across frontiers of Darjeeling.

With the arrival of the East India Company the volume of trans-Himalayan trade of Darjeeling increased manifold. The colonial venture of the occupation of Darjeeling in the first half of the 19th century was significant as because the climatic consideration only was not the sole motive of occupying Darjeeling but strategic and commercial interests were also the determining factors. The climatic, strategic and commercial interests of the British over the terrain shaped the socio-economic growths of the Darjeeling hills.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Sikkim, Tibet, Nepal, Bhutan, Trans- Himalayan, Trade, Import, Export, East India Company.

I. INTRODUCTION

Trans-Himalayan trade of Darjeeling, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal and Tibet is not a new phenomenon. Even in the past, at least two ancient trade routes connecting South Asia with Central Asia passed through Sikkim and then Tibetⁱⁱⁱ. On the eve of the arrival of the East India Company, the trade in the trans –Himalayan Darjeeling was in operation with exchange of goods. The appearance of the British in Darjeeling and gradual progression of infrastructural works increased the volume of trade and thereby established a new hill station Darjeeling.

The area of Darjeeling hills originally belonged to Sikkim. The Sikkimese and the Nepalese engaged themselves on prolonged skirmishes in regard to the territorial possession of Darjeeling hills following the unequal settlement of the Treaty of Sugawli^{iv} made by the East India Company after Anglo-Gorkha War of 1815.

In 1828 the two Company representatives Capt. Lloyd and Mr. J. W. Grant were the first Europeans to enter Darjeeling on a ‘Peace Mission’ to settle dispute between the Sikkimese and the Nepalese over possession of Darjeeling territory. The representative visitors were quick to notice the establishment of sanatorium because of its cool climate and also the strategic position, providing ready access to Nepal, Bhutan and through Sikkim, Tibet. The trans-Himalayan regions could offer good commercial opportunities for the East India Company. Economic interest of the British attributed by possible trade and commerce across the boundaries of the Himalayan countries played pivotal role to the emergence of Darjeeling as a new town. The interest of the Company over the trans-Himalayan states through Sikkim was reflected in the article 8 of the Treaty of Titalia wherein stated that the Raja of Sikkim will afford protection to merchants and traders from the Company’s province and he engages that no duty shall be levied on the transit of merchandise beyond the established custom at the several golah or marts^v. Hence, the deep desire of the Company representatives to take possession of Darjeeling resulted to the ‘Deed of Grant’.

A negotiation opened by the Company with the Maharaja of Sikkim and on 1st February, 1835 ‘Deed of Grant’ was signed by the Sikkimputti Raja to handover to the Company a small tract of Darjeeling land. Though the tract of land was remote and the population was scarce the scope of development was seen as promising and the British quickly began to exploit their acquisition^{vi}. The acquired tract of Darjeeling was appropriately placed in the right track for it to witness modern socio-cultural and infrastructural development.

II. DARJEELING BEFORE AND AFTER COMPANY OCCUPATION

Until 1835 Darjeeling was relatively isolated with no proper means of transportation like modern roads and railways connecting it to mainland India. The least population was not uniformly distributed across the terrain. Remote hilly hamlets, situated in the middle of the dense forest were sparsely inhabited by the Lepcha, Limbu and Nepali tribes. Agriculture and cattle rearing were the principal occupation of the population, beside small trade. There were trade relations among the trans-Himalayan people but with limited volume of exchange of goods. Trade and trade routes developed due to the needs of various goods like rock salt, horses, musk, spices, wool and medicinal herbs.

In 1839 Dr. Campbell was appointed the Superintendent and bestowed upon him to establish a new hill township, and his energy and diligence put Darjeeling on the map of India. By 1849 the population of the new town rose to 10000 from 100 in 1839. Within a very short span of time Darjeeling town adorned with the facilities of a hotel, holiday bungalows, a bazaar, a hospital and even a jail^{vii}. Plantations of tea and its commercialization proved to be the famous the world over for the tips of their tea bushes that attracted the planters all the way from Europe.

After acquiring Darjeeling the Company promptly started infrastructural development of the area. Comfortable means of transportation connected Darjeeling more closely with Calcutta and facilitated trade and commerce with foreign countries through the mainland India. In 1878 Northern Bengal State Railway and in 1881 Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the construction of Old Military Road in 1841 and the Hill Cart Road in 1880 facilitated transporting Darjeeling tea to the outer world.

The Treaty of Sinchula in 1865 between Bhutan and the Company brought Kalimpong under British control. The treaty brought peace and stability in this region and set it on the development of and progress through internal and cross border trade with Tibet via Kalimpong.

To facilitate the import export trade of Kalimpong the construction of the Teesta Valley Branch of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway commenced in 1912. The first Teesta Valley Railway line was opened in 1914. This branch of the Railways commenced at the Siliguri, where a new station was built up to meet and depart the two branches of the Himalayan Railways called Siliguri Road Station and popularly known as Siliguri Junction. The extensive trading materials to Tibet trade via Kalimpong center was carried through this branch of the Teesta Valley Railways.

The construction of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway from the plains of Siliguri up to Darjeeling Bazar greatly helped to flourish the trade of Darjeeling. To provide opportunity of easy transport for the export-import of goods with Nepal and West Sikkim, the Darjeeling –Bijanbari Ropeway opened in 1939. Establishment of Bijanbari Bazar was due to its direct connectivity to Darjeeling town through this ropeway. Before ropeway Pulbazar, adjacent to Bijanbari, happened to be the oldest and busiest trade center of the area. Several private ropeways established in many tea gardens of Darjeeling such as Rungbull, Liza Hill, Gopaldhara, Thurboo, Phuguri, Singbulli, Gayabari, Peshok Namring estates helped to develop local transport of commodities particularly tea leaves, necessary provisions of the inhabitants and tea garden equipments.

The nature of trade of Darjeeling assumed to its new dimensions, when the trans-Himalayan trade items including tea began to export to European markets for its equivalent imports of colonial goods. The growing importance of Darjeeling was acknowledged in 1857, when it became the official summer seat of the Bengal Government^{viii}. Many government bungalows, residential houses, government offices and the Raj Bhawan of Darjeeling were established. Alongside administrative summer headquarter; Darjeeling became the center of trade to Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet.

III. NATURE OF DARJEELING TRADE

Salt was an important item of both the import and export trade of Darjeeling. Halite (Rock Salt) used to be imported to Darjeeling^{ix} from Olangchung Gola, Takpe of east Nepal and from Tibet. The rock salt imported through the routes of Olangchung, Gola, Gunsa, Takpe, Panchthar (places in Nepal) to via Singhalila, Maneybhanjyang, Relling, Pulbazar and Darjeeling or Singhalila Rimbick, Lodhoma, Jhepi, Kainjalay, Pulbazar and Darjeeling.

Interestingly, when the Cart Road and the Railways constructed in Darjeeling and also the British Government relieved tax on normal sea salt, the comparatively cheap and good quality salt became one of the principal export items of Darjeeling to cross border villages of Nepal and Sikkim. Reverse supply (export) of items especially salt from Darjeeling to Nepal and south western part of Sikkim began.

Apart from rock salt, horses, cattle, hides, musk, butter, grease, spices, fruits, wool, medicinal herbs, and silver coins etc. were the import items of Darjeeling. The export goods were apparel, yarn, piece goods, tobacco, silk, fabrics, oil, salt, silks, lubricants, sugar, wax, woolen fabrics etc.

The important trade centers of Darjeeling hills then were Lodhoma, Kainjalay, Pulbazar, Singla, Sukhaypokheri, Lepchajagat, Ghum, Gundri Bazar, Pedong, Lava, Rungeet Hat, Melli Hat, and Kalimpong.

The traditional cross border trade of Darjeeling remained continued even after the construction of Old Military Road in 1839 and subsequently the Hill Cart Road in 1880 and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in 1881. Now, after the development of communication system, the trade activity of Darjeeling became Calcutta centric. However, the ongoing traditional trade with Nepal and Tibet remained continued and food grains, cotton piece goods, manufactured wool was imported in exchange of European Piece goods, Cotton Twist, Salt, Kerosene Oil, Tobacco and Food Grains etc.

During the colonial period the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway had a monopoly over the import and export trade of Kurseong, Sonada, Ghum, Darjeeling town and other parts of the hill areas. The principal commodities imported through the Railway to the hills were food grain, rice, wheat, miscellaneous items, and salt, tobacco, coal, and kerosene oil, construction materials such as cement, iron, and building materials. The items of export carried away by the Railway from the hills were tea, timber, cardamoms, potatoes, oranges, butter, medicinal herbs, and animal hides.

One of the sub-divisions of Darjeeling district, Kalimpong was once the very important Indo-Tibetan trading center till 1960s. Its strategic location near the Himalayan passes of Jalep-La and Nathu-La made it crucial point for cross border trade between Tibet and India. The passes gave relatively accessible routes across formidable Himalayan barrier, making possible for the movement of goods and people.

Kalimpong served important centre of Anglo-Tibetan trading activities. The Lhasa Convention of 1904 opened up trade routes and markets allowing British commodities to enter Tibet and Tibetan goods to flow back into British occupied territories. Tibetan trade of the Company carried via Kalimpong centre during later part of the 19th and 20th century contributed to the Hill station for its all round development. Darjeeling served as a leisure retreat for the British administrative officials, creating demands for various commodities and services that could be supplied through Kalimpong business centre.

Kalimpong became well-known for its wool trade. Here in Kalimpong wool from Tibet was collected, sorted and baled before being sent to Calcutta. From Calcutta, these goods were further exported to Europe and other parts of the world, highlighting Kalimpong's role as a crucial link in the trans- Himalayan colonial trade network.

IV. THE INFLUENCE OF TRADE

The establishment of Hill town Darjeeling and her material development was possible due to this trans-Himalayan trade. Apart from this there were exchange of ideas, thoughts, culture and religious beliefs between the countries and its people.

Cross border migration of people for the reason to trade, changed the demographic pattern of Darjeeling hills. The establishment of industry of the world famous Darjeeling tea also became possible which brought a new dimension to the export trade of India during colonial and post colonial period.

Beyond economic growth and transactions trade centers of the hills particularly Darjeeling town and Kalimpong served as melting pot of cultures due to its role in facilitating trade and interactions between diverse ethnic groups from the local, regional, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and beyond. This exchange of diverse cultures influenced not only trade practices but also culinary, religious practices and demographic patterns in the terrain giving birth to a unique and diverse culture of Darjeeling hills.

The Darjeeling centric trans- Himalayan trade flourished during colonial period came to an end when China in early 1960s closed the borders of Tibet to trade with India followed by Sino-Indian War of 1962. The closer of cross border trade with Tibet drastically altered the dynamics of Trans- Himalayan trade. The trade of Darjeeling is reduced to a small local business, apart from the export trade of tea. But the economic significance and cultural impact of the Trans-Himalayan trade have undergone as part of the rich fabric of this hill station Darjeeling.

The development of Darjeeling as hill station from an isolated territory to a thriving district was intricately tied to its trans-Himalayan trade networks with Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, and Tibet. These trade routes not only shaped its economy but also played a crucial role in its social and cultural development over the centuries. Splitting the territories of Darjeeling district, Kalimpong as 21st district of West Bengal was created on 14th February 2017. This is an instance of administrative development resulted by the past historical events and the glorious trans- Himalayan trade.

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