



An Overview Of Migration In Darjeeling Hills: A Paradigm Shift

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Abstract: Darjeeling, the northernmost district of the state West Bengal, India is believed to be a colonial product. No wonder, Lt. General Goerge Alymer Lloyd, the British officer is considered as the discoverer of Darjeeling. The pre-colonial history of Darjeeling is shredded in referential notes as a contested land. It was only after the formation of nation states that the borders were aptly considered. Before that the feudal monarchy was least bothered with frontiers rather subject and revenues were the only concern. Therefore, right from the conquest, formation and to the early developments, Darjeeling owes a major chunk of tribute to British regime, irrespective of colonial objectives. Likewise, colonial designs would not have turned into reality without adequate human hands, which were those of migrants.

The study aims to understand the pattern of migration in Darjeeling hills over a period of almost two centuries, early nineteenth to early twenty first century. The very fact that Darjeeling was not just a colonial product but also a sum total of those laborious hands who worked for their masters, remains main consent of the study. Studies say economic factor remains the major force for driving migrants (Ullah, 2022). Seemingly, Darjeeling attracted thousands with a promise of better tomorrow. While few returned to their land of origin majority stayed back to give a drastic boon to the demography. In their language Darjeeling was referred to as 'Mughlan' a place where money sprouted out of tea leaves.

Today, almost after 200 years of discovery, 2 million inhabitants of Darjeeling are in search of a new 'Mughlan'. 'Two leaves and a bud' no longer sprout cash rather has become an undeniable agency of exploitation. Tea 'coolies' are crying every day for their rightful demands. Two hundred years back, the hill had dreams to offer but unfortunately today people chase their dreams in distant land. Hence, the study ahead aims to dwell into the story of this transition.

Keywords: Migration, Transition, Darjeeling hills, New Mughlan

1. Introducing Darjeeling:

Once a British summer resort, Darjeeling today is popular as 'Queen of Hills'. Its chilling weather, scenic mountains and tea gardens are not the only reason for its popularity but the very geographical dimension shaping its history. The unique terroir has earned her Geographical Indication for the brand 'Darjeeling Tea' (Besky, 2014). Darjeeling is inhabited by majority of Nepalese and lesser communities of Lepchas, Bhutias, Marwaris, Biharis and muslims. Hence, people here witness a diverse cultural harmony. As the history of the formation of Darjeeling hill begins with the colonial approach, so to mention tea as an undeniably important aspect of its society, economy and politics. Apart from that tourism is a growing industry in the hills today. Timber from the hills has always been an important source of income for the government.

The queen of hills surmounting the crown of Kunchanjungha bears an interesting history of its formation. Before the potential discovery of the land by colonial eyes, it was part of the Kingdom of Sikkim and Bhutan. Though for a short while it was occupied by Nepal as well, only to be returned to Sikkim after Anglo-Gorkha War of 1814-16. It came under British occupation in three phases (Dasgupta, 1999) In 1835, by the Deed of Grant, where the Rajah of Sikkim ceded a portion of Darjeeling Hills to the British for setting up a Sanatorium. In 1850, the rest of the Darjeeling Hills and the Terai area, west of Teesta river were annexed by the British. In the third phase, following a war with Bhutan in 1864, the east of the Teesta river comprising the present Kalimpong and Dooars area were annexed. Thus after annexation of the areas, the British tagged these areas to the then Bengal Presidency. However, these areas were kept scheduled district until 1919.

2. Demographic rise in the colonial Darjeeling:

Colonial historians strongly imprint the image of 1835 Darjeeling as an uninhabited hill tract mostly forested. The 138 square miles acquired from the Raja of Sikkim was roughly estimated to have abiding just hundred human souls (O'Malley, 1907). Dash mentions poor infrastructure and lack of proper livelihood patterns as the root cause for dwindling population of the hills. Eventually the decision of colonial government to develop the place provided an ample opportunity for immigrants. (Dash, 1947). The table below provides a statistical representation of the drastic demographic rise in the British era. Apart from natural means like fertility and mortality, migration has been considered as next leading consideration for instigating demographic alterations. (Rai & Lama, 2020 p.548)

Year	Total population in Darjeeling hills	Increase percentage
1829	100	*
1850	10000	*
1869	22000	120
1872	94712	330
1881	155179	64
1891	223314	44
1901	249117	12
1911	265550	7
1921	282748	6
1931	319635	13
1941	376369	18

Source: (Dash, 1947)

The above statistics can be rightly justified with some major achievements and ambitions of British government, the amount of work done and the immense force required for the task. Some of the major events that helped the early population boom in hills can be stated as follow- rampant felling of trees, growth of small scale industries and trade, construction of roadways (1839-42 & 60-70), railways (1881), bungalows, buildings, bridges, 204% increase in the number of educational institutions between 1895-1942, establishment of Eden sanatorium in 1883, 31% increase in the number of tea gardens between 1856- 1947, annexation of Siliguri and Dooars in 1950 and Kalimpong in 1965, large scale recruitment in British army with Jorebunglow as a base station in Darjeeling. (O'Malley, 1907 & Dash, 1947) All these tasks necessitated and could be possible only with the figures listed in the table.

3. Pull and Push factors of immigrants

Apart from the above mentioned series of activities demanding for more human resource, there are some major factors to understand the early immigration pattern in Darjeeling. Atis Dasgupta figures out three major factors which led to the sudden demographic alteration in colonial Darjeeling.

3.I. Push factor from Nepal: The conquest of Gorkha king Prithivi Narayan Shan from the west, his autocratic monarchial rule, the unreasonable taxes, cruel punishments and hindu dominance over tibeto-burman speaking tribes of the eastern Nepal, made it extremely impossible for Kiratis to sustain their livelihood in Nepal. To run away from the atrocities of the regime and live a prospectus future, there was no better option than Mughlan. Loss of *Kipat*, the community landholdings by Kiratis, series of repressive measures in order to maintain dominance of high caste hindu nepalis and severe punishments made the victims to opt for Darjeeling as “*a convenient and accessible place for settlement.*” (Dasgupta, 1999). Michael Hutt cites Kumar Pradhan with an estimate that “*between 12 and 15 per cent of the Kiranti population of the eastern hills of Nepal moved to Darjeeling between 1840 and 1860.*” (Hutt,1998)

3.II. Rise of demands of workers in the tea garden: The prospects of earning a better livelihood not only attracted thousands of opportunists them from Nepal but also those seeking for brighter days from the kingdom of Sikkim and Bhutan. Moreover, the facilities they were being offered was far better than their uncertain and insecure life back home. The housing allowances, medical security, ration arrangements, provisions of working tools and appliances were amongst them. The land in the east was no different than their own place where sun rose from the mountain, birds sang the same language, air breathed the same chills and rivers had the same sweetness. The rulers of the immigrants were utterly disappointed with the movement outside the kingdom, which eventually led to antagonism with British regime. Darjeeling also witnessed labour forces from plain lands of Bengal, Bihar, Chotanagpur and for this task sardars played a major role, which has rightly been compared with present day agents recruiting workers for foreign lands. (Pradhan, 2022). The table below provides a statistical representation of the growth in number of tea gardens and the labourers during colonial period.

Year	No. of tea gardens	Number of labourers employed
1861	22	2,534
1881	155	*
1891	177	*
1901	170	40,451
1911	156	39,561
1921	168	48,710
1931	169	63,665
1941	136	69,699
1951	138	69,590

Source: Mitra, A. Census 1951, West Bengal, District Handbook Darjeeling

3.III. Recruitment of Gorkha soldiers in the British Army: The unimaginable depiction of bravery and valour by the Gorkha soldiers in war kept British startled. With the war cry of Mahakali and naked 'Khukuri' they not only impressed the colonial masters but were recruited in the army of Maharaja Ranjit Singh earlier. And hence the term 'Lahurey', corrupted version of 'Lahore' is still used by nepalis for soldiers. "*The underlying idea of 'martial race' was elegantly outlines by Lieutenant- General Sir George MacMunn in his, the Armies of India (1911)*" (Golay, 2006). Paradoxically Gorkhas were the ones who won victory over nepalese. After being ruled by Gorkhas they were accordingly termed as Gorkhas. British generalized them under one umbrella but were specific about mongoloid features and particular ethnic communities during recruitment. Therefore, the mongoloid narrow eyes, flat nose and high cheekbones earned the title of Gorkhas with extraordinary bravery and loyalty during the British regime in India. However, the sardars here too played an important role. The vacant lands of Darjeeling hills still didn't have the potential to offer much to the British army. Nepal, already antagonized with tea industries and labour demands was in a no position to offer more. Therefore, recruitment outposts were centered along Darjeeling so as to facilitate the process.

History is full of chapters screaming of Gorkha loyalty for their colonial master. But the price of loyalty earned them enough hatred from rest of the country during freedom struggle. Their reputation was not only coloured with bravery and loyalty amongst the masters but also stained with cold bloodedness and stupidity amidst the fellow ruled.

The three factors highlighted above played a major role in providing heart and flesh to newly obtained British dominion, which instead provided supporting pillars. It was no benevolence of the colonial rulers that they were being such a strong pillar to the development of the hills. They had already envisioned a great deal of profit behind their investment, that would yield real gold not to the labourers but to the masters. It is beyond doubt that their intentions were imperialistic even though they were the creators of the land.

Mughlan: A Land of Hope

The term Mughlan has been used time and again by authors in different contexts to have separate understandings. First of all, it represents the land to the east of Nepal, beyond river Arun. It was used by Nepalese to symbolize the land ruled by Mughals. Secondly, the term is used to denote the idea of a place which is better than the existing one, a land of hope and possibilities. A land where one needs to migrate to make a better living. The earliest of the text references to the term can be found in the migration literatures of twentieth century. And the story line in every literature presents Mughlan as a place where tea bushes yielded gold. *“Lured by myths of gold growing on tea bushes, Kirantis used migration to Darjeeling as an escape from rural poverty and oppression.”* (Besky, 2007).

Period of Quest for belongingness: 20th century Identity Crisis

Usually the quiet and cold Darjeeling hills, famous for producing world renowned tea and proclaimed queen amongst the hills, has her own pathos to cry over. Bidhan Golay mentions that the crisis of identity is nothing new to the Gorkhas or Nepalis in India. (Golay, 2006 p.25) Right from the beginning of 20th century (1907), throughout the century and continuing into the 21st century, she has witnessed several cries of rightful treatment, legible demands, constitutional place and administrative security. It is not an unknown fact that the development of Darjeeling accelerated with the administrative takeover of the British, but it would be wrong to state that the history of Darjeeling starts with British. Company's rule manifested a large amount of immigrants from neighbouring regions which boosted the dwindling demography of Darjeeling. This completely altered the picture into an ethnically diverse province continuously trying to carve out a separate identity for themselves.

The statehood movement in Darjeeling has always been delegitimized by the state government on the basis that the migrants deserve none. Over the time this issue has caused both political and cultural disturbances in the hills and the mainland of Bengal. The situation further dilapidates with a very carefree casual belief that all nepalis are from Nepal. It sounds as simple as referring Indians from India but somewhere in this blank assumption nepalis from India are losing out their sense of belonging and security in India. It is not to deny, that to a larger extent population of Darjeeling hills are the progeny of those migrants, but to term them as migrants today would be a serious mishandling into the evolutionary history of mankind. It would be as

blank as terming all the humankind Africans. In 1970s when the people of Darjeeling hill were fighting for inclusion of Nepali language in the constitution of India, the remark of PM Morarji Desai on Nepali as ‘a foreign language spoken by foreigners in India’ added much fuel to the fire.

Colonial records present a very swift growth in the demography of Darjeeling during the period of its early formation i.e. mid-nineteenth century. ‘Majority of them were Nepalese’ (O’Malley 1907) of all tribes. They had their own pushing factors for moving towards east to what they called Mughlan (the land of Mughals). We can find the references of Mughlan in folk lore, oral narratives, nepali novels, local literatures and recent articles. M. Hutt’s “Going to Mugalan: Nepali Literary representations of migration to India and Bhutan” 1998 deals with the migration literatures upon the theme. Tea Industry as mentioned earlier was and is labour based. Plucking two leaves and a bud could not be done with machine. For various reasons and with a hope for better life people migrated to Darjeeling Hills. In those days working in tea garden was the best opportunity one could get. They were provided with house, land, food, medical assistance, education and various other facilities.

After, having carved out a place of a diverse ethnic community with a unifying language nepali, the people of Darjeeling hills were in a serious requirement of a separate identity. They no longer wanted to be referred as belonging to Nepal (Subba,2008). The only solution to their identity crisis was taking shape as a demand for separate state (Dasgupta, 1998)

Challenges of 21st century, A Globalized Era:

The century approached with a completely new wave of Liberalisation, Privatisation and Globalization (Rai & Lama, 2020). Seclusion or isolation was turning into chapters of history. Darjeeling hills having a historical testimony of cultural assimilation easily welcomed this new wave. But the early chapters of the century had something unpleasant for the hills. The political demands of the earlier century were only in need of a chance to demonstrate a fresh new upheaval. Accordingly, 2007 and 2017 brought the demand of separate statehood once again in the surface. Not repeating the mistakes of the past the fresh approach was non-violent and peaceful but couldn’t spare life of few souls, immense economic loss, educational disruption, peace at a heavy cost. It is true that hill people are in need of a separate state for pronounced identity as Indian nepalis but they are also looking for financial escape in the shape of Gorkhaland. Apart from tea garden which consists 70% of the hill population as workers, Darjeeling has nothing as strong to boost the local economy. Although tourism has opened a brand new horizon of possibilities but only for selective few. Moreover, the globalized world has its own costs which the minimum wages cannot afford. Therefore, hill people with a lost hope of Gorkhaland has no other alternative than to chase their dream in foreign land. They are “*leaving with the conviction that they are leaving behind a place much worse than the one their parents and grandparents knew.*” (Pradhan, 2022. p.35)

Factors of the emigrants:

“Migration is an age old response to variations in economic and opportunity differentials, as well as to security, social, and political factors.” (Ullah, 2022). With the turn of twenty first century a fresh wave of emigration stories also started to come in front. The hill subjects had every other reason to move away from their land, which held not enough for them. “Poverty, scarcity of employment opportunities, and lack of opportunities for upward career mobility are the main motivation for leaving such places.” (Pradhan, 2022). The economic structure of Darjeeling could no longer sustain the growing demands of a globalized mind and the living standards of the modern world. Therefore, emigration was the only answer to all the questions of hill people. Discussing further few undeniable forces behind such moves.

- a) **Tea Industry:** One of the major pull factor of nineteenth century hills has unfortunately turned adverse. However, this is obvious. If growth can attract, decline will surely repel. The glorious tea industry is the story of past already. Tea industry has only INR 232 to offer as a daily wage. Even a thought of living this expensive world with a monthly income of INR 5000 must be scary. Then what is the possibility of survival for 70% hill population and their dependents? The burning issues of tea garden and dilapidating condition is nowhere to be solved. The only method of dominance and exploitation reigns 87 tea estates in the hills. Vimal Khawas finds deplorable status of tea garden labourers in Darjeeling and concludes “..., *tea estates still operate in the colonial master-slave mode. The goal is to control the market and as much as possible squeeze the primary producer.*” (Khawas, 2006) There is no initiative from the owner’s side to move towards sustainable development as renovation costs are heavy and undesirable. Coolies have list of rightful demands to be heard but unanswered. Mona Chettri wrote in 2013 that “*the present day economic deprivation in Darjeeling has a historical precedent in the tea and cinchona plantation which has entrenched an ‘estate culture’ of poverty, dependency and subservience.*” (Chettri, 2013 p. 296)
- b) **Employment opportunities:** Apart from tea industries, people in the hills thrive upon multiple sources of income. But none has the potential to observe maximum human resource. Tourism is a growing industry but as mentioned earlier only for selective few. People with stable bank balance can only think of investing in tourism industry with obvious risks. Others are indirectly linked with the industry. Darjeeling hill has no other promises for a decent job to make a living. No major industries or factories to offer skilled or unskilled jobs. No arable lands to depend upon cultivation. No advanced opportunities to learn and grow. Trade and business is monopoly of few communities. Works in government sectors are limited and challenging. Youths have to limit themselves with limited pay and support their living. There is negligible amount of growth.

Nirvan Pradhan observes the decaying spaces of labor in Darjeeling has forced people to “*seek alternate spaces of labor, often in foreign nations*”. (Pradhan, 2022 p. 27) The only escape is to move out and look for better opportunities in plains. The pull factors are diverse and optional. They are selected according to affordability, capability, suitability, pay scale, tenure, terms and conditions, family responsibilities and more. Few sectors attracting increasing number of youths from the hills

are hospitality and hotels all over India especially southern states and neighbouring state Sikkim, call centers, teaching in Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, MNCs in gulf countries (Rai & Lama, 2020), care takers in middle-east and south-east Asia example Singapore (Koffman and Raghuram, 2022), cruise and aviation companies. Likewise, various skilled and unskilled labours are in a constant phase of outward movement.

c) **Lack of educational opportunities:** Although it is true that the high quality education of Darjeeling is another important feature to add to its scenic beauty. Heritage of colonial rule and selfless endeavour of missionaries earned her a quality in educational field. 2011 census presents a figure of 79.92 per cent literacy rate in Darjeeling. But the melancholic scene arises when a student craves for university education. With an excellent school education or after being a graduate, students are left with no option but to move to plains for university and higher education or any kind of vocational training. Darjeeling hills own not a single university to shelter all the finished products of the schools and colleges. Unfortunately, some families make it through these challenges some do not. Many potential students are left behind due to challenging situations faced away from home. They not only face financial shortcomings but social and cultural challenges as well. Instead of all these setbacks, students from the hills are thriving in the universities all over India and abroad. If only their place had provided for their needs, this part of emigration would have certainly decreased. (Rai & Lama, 2020)

d) **Social and Political factors:**

There are certain sections of the population who move out of the hills with a desire of new approach to life. This section of people sees no hope for growth or possibilities in the hills due to unstable political situations, backwardness in various sectors, lack of opportunities for potentials, cultural disparities or slow lifestyle. They are always on the positive side of preferring plains life and often complain about shortcomings in the hills. The city people find it very challenging to adapt and adjust with village or hill life after having tasted the colours of metropolitan lifestyle. At times their social standards and the responsibilities does not allow them to settle in the hills. The political uncertainties are another factor that compelled some families to abandon hills and look for peace somewhere away from hill politics. While some families prefer comparatively warmer weather rather than freezing cold also because of health issues.

The Transition

Hence, looking back the history of Darjeeling takes us to a land of possibilities. It had the promises for better life and potentials to turn dreams into reality. People from surrounding areas, administrative officials and their families looked up to the land amidst the mountain and clouds as an escape from tough challenges of life and scorching summer heat. A paradise in itself, a blooming flower ready to win the world. She had to offer every opportunity for growth and development. She attracted souls with a desire to live better. She was unexploited and pure.

But the very factors which provided strength for development of the hills wouldn't remain the same as always. The supporting pillars in the form of intellectual British, though not benevolent ones as mentioned earlier, are long gone. The job in their abandoned tea industry is no more lucrative and managed or mismanaged by private profit seeking owners. Although British left few parts of Gorkha regiment with India, but the prestige and patronage could never be the same. Nor the opportunity of recruitment in British army is limited outside Nepal. With the impermanence of this permanently changing patterns the air and soil breathed a different atmosphere after British.

Those once flourishing tea gardens producing the world's best quality tea earning GI for the land and the scenic beauty procuring the crown for the queen of hills seems to delude over the glory of time. People no longer refer Darjeeling as Mughlan nor its tea leaves gives gold to any labour, but that might still be true for owners. The scene in the latter half of twentieth century is rather contradictory in the hills. While British regimes showed all beautiful colours to the place, added flowers in its garden. Most importantly added to the infrastructure, education, culture and beauty of the hills, post British era witnessed the first ever bloodshed and devastation. Hearts were burning with uncompromising identity crisis, brothers were thirsty of each other blood for dominance, no longer hills flowered with its magnificence but smoked with the fires of bandhs and curfew.

The land which grew gold in its tea leaves were out of nourishment and the air which offered health sanatorium was being polluted by party politics. Clouded amongst the history of creation, migration and development and the settlements after the partition of the country, Darjeeling today cries for a separate state of their own. It no longer attracts migrants but the majority of its population has increasingly being transformed into migrant labours nationally and internationally. We can find enough work being done in the topic recently. But that is the story of this twenty-first century. By the end of twentieth century the scene was just in its formative stage.

Now after almost two centuries of exploitation and so called development, Darjeeling hills finds itself in a completely different paradigm. She no longer holds prestige of royalty and prosperity. Although, wearing a snow clad crown of Kunchanjungha she abodes the pristine serenity of mountains, hills, streams, clouds and rain but she can no longer meet the expectations of rapidly growing twenty first century world. She has her own pathos to cry over time and again.

Conclusion

History is the testimony of the fact that glorious eras end, followed by chaos and power vacuums. Even the strongest and the most beautiful cannot withstand the wrath of time. Time designs questions and answers them duly. Kingdoms and dynasties win over territories and treasures only to leave behind patterns to understand. Likewise, the paradigm shift of Darjeeling from a 'dreamy Mughlan' with motor vehicles and concrete buildings to a place left with exploitative tea industries and no opportunities in search of a 'New Mughlan' is a story in itself.

Just like mighty dynasties ruined by the wrath of time, the glorious era of ‘the queen of hills’ seems to be fading already. But with every decay new possibilities and fresh power structures sprouts right from the ruins. Rightly, Darjeeling hills is in need of a fresh outlook for sustainable growth and development. Political parties should learn from the mistakes of their predecessors and aim for an outlook to wisely handle the crisis together for the betterment of the hills. Selfish moves are only to lead towards doomed and dark future.

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