



# From Caravans To Colonialism: Trade And Road Networks In The Eastern Himalayas

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## **Abstract:**

The colonial overland trade routes connecting Tibet, Bengal, Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim were not just economic corridors but strategic instruments of British imperial policy. The British sought to consolidate their influence in the Eastern Himalayas, counter Russian expansion, and facilitate the movement of goods and intelligence. Treaties like the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention and the 1904 Treaty of Lhasa formalized British control over key trading posts. Infrastructure development, including roads, suspension bridges, and railways, enabled smoother commercial activity and military movement. The Bhutan-Bengal trade route functioned through the Duars, with Cooch Behar and Rangpur emerging as critical trade hubs. Indo-Nepal trade expanded via designated routes through Darjeeling, Purnea, and Champaran, benefiting from the Treaty of Titaliya (1817). The Indo-Tibet trade through Sikkim gained prominence after the Treaty of Tumlong (1861), with the Jelep-la route emerging as a crucial commercial link. British interventions, including the construction of metalled roads and railway expansions, transformed Himalayan trade patterns, integrating the region into global markets and reshaping its economic landscape.

**Index Terms:** Colonial Trade Routes, Eastern Himalayas, British Infrastructure, Indo-Tibet Trade, Treaty of Tumlong, Anglo-Chinese Convention 1890, Jelep-la Route

## **Introduction:**

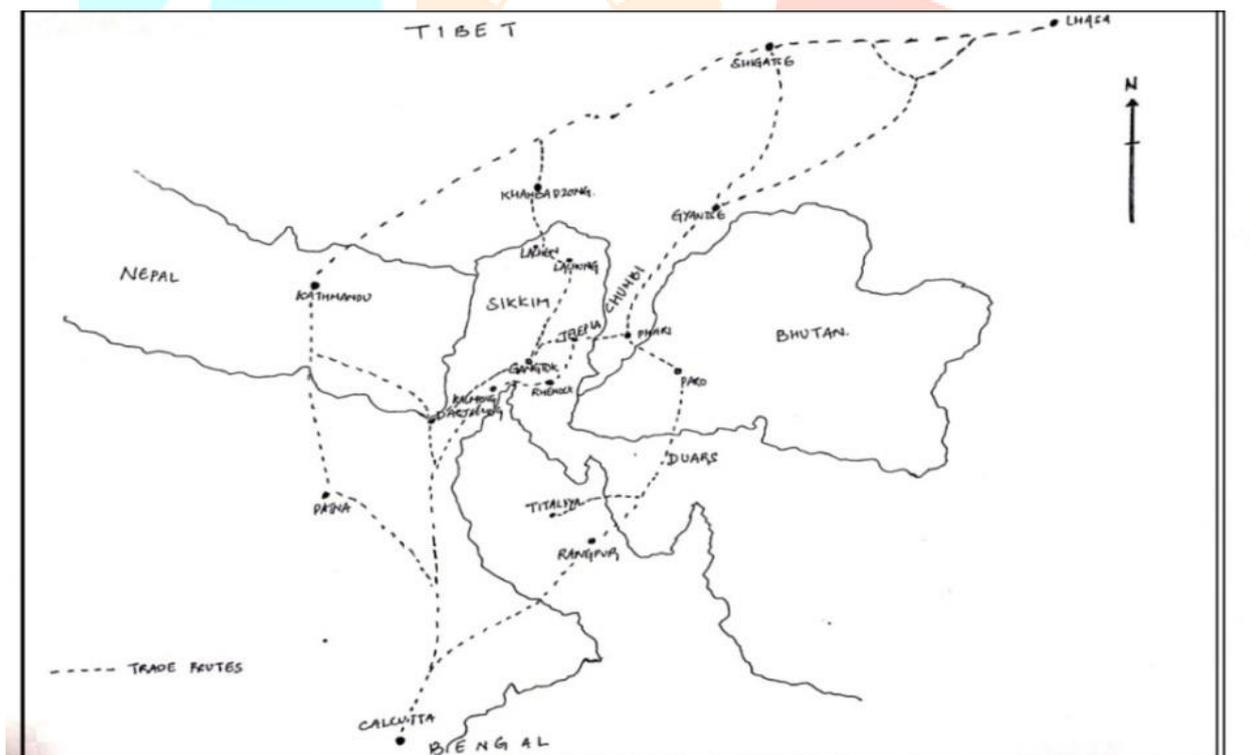
The Tibet-Bengal colonial trade was a strategically a significant enterprise, particularly from the perspective of British colonial administration. This trade route, which passed through Sikkim, Kalimpong, and Darjeeling, was not merely an economic venture but a crucial geopolitical strategy aimed at consolidating British influence in the Eastern Himalayan region.

During the late 19th and early 20th centuries, the British sought to expand their economic and political control over Tibet while simultaneously countering Russian imperialist ambitions in Central Asia: a phenomenon often referred to as the "Great Game." The British were concerned about potential Russian encroachment into Tibet, which could challenge their dominance in India. Consequently, establishing and securing trade links with Tibet became a key component of British foreign policy in the region.

The Tibet-Bengal trade was facilitated by treaties such as the 1890 Anglo-Chinese Convention and the 1904 Treaty of Lhasa, which followed the Younghusband Expedition to Tibet. These agreements allowed the British to establish trading posts and exert influence over Tibetan commerce. Beyond commerce, this trade route was instrumental in gathering intelligence and maintaining British supremacy in the Eastern Himalayan frontier. British political officers stationed in the region closely monitored Tibetan affairs and maintained diplomatic relations with Tibetan officials. Additionally, infrastructure development along the route, such as roads and rest houses, reinforced British presence and facilitated easier military movement if required. The Tibet-Bengal colonial trade was not just about economic gains but served as a crucial geopolitical strategy for the British Empire. By controlling trade, they effectively strengthened their position in the Himalayas and countered Russian advances, ensuring their dominance in the region during the height of colonial rivalries in Asia.

The Bengal-Tibet colonial trade was a strategic entrepot<sup>1</sup> trade through the kingdom of Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim. During the second half of the nineteenth century, trade routes, which intersected the entire Eastern Himalayas, were slowly institutionalized and their records were preserved in different Government offices. During the 19<sup>th</sup> and the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, the entire Eastern Himalayan trade was conducted through these routes, which were broadened, metalled and made into fair weathered roads using new construction methods and modern technology.

**Fig. 1 : Map showing trade routes in the Eastern Himalayas during the late eighteenth century**



## I. Indo-Bhutan Trade Route:

The earliest known European reference to Bhutan's commercial interactions with Bengal, Assam, and Tibet comes from Jesuit missionaries Father Cacella and Cabral in 1626. They noted that Hajo (Ajo) in Assam was a key trade center, serving as the terminus for two important routes through the Manas Valley and Tawang.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, Cooch Behar was recognized as a flourishing trade mart with a thriving population. These locations played a crucial role as focal points for Bhutanese trade with the plains of Bengal and Assam.<sup>3</sup>

The Bhutanese trade was primarily conducted through eleven designated entry points, known as the Duars, which means "doors" in English. These Duars extended along Bengal's northern frontier, spanning from the Teesta River in the west to the Manas River in the east.<sup>4</sup> By 1729, the appointment of two clerks at the frontier suggested a significant volume of commodity movement.<sup>5</sup> The establishment of the Jalpaiguri division in Bengal in 1869 further structured this trade, comprising five districts responsible for overseeing trade through five Duars.

Pemberton observed that Bhutanese merchants avoided the Buxa Duar route due to its steep and rugged terrain. Instead, they preferred an alternative route via Doona, which was easier to traverse compared to the road through Buxa Dooar.<sup>6</sup> Additionally, Bengali merchants frequently traveled through the Bengal-Bhutan route alongside Bhutanese and Tibetan traders. In 1774, George Bogle noted the substantial presence of Bengali merchants in Bhutan and their movement towards Tibet, which was not hindered by either the Bhutanese Deb Raja or Tibetan authorities.<sup>7</sup>

Following British intervention, the Bhutan-Bengal trade flourished, particularly during the winter months. Pemberton reported that Bhutanese caravans arrived in Rangpur between February and March, returning in May and June. Another significant trade route was through the Kumargram Duar, linking Kalikhola, where a major trade fair between Bengal, Bhutan, and Assam was held.<sup>8</sup>

The Bhutan-Bengal trade route originated in Paro, where caravans bound for Bengal traveled along the Pachu River. They often halted at Pakhu, a small hamlet near the border, or Essana village, known for its excellent connectivity with Tassisudon (Thimphu). From these stops, the caravans moved southward toward Bengal.

**Table 1. Key Trade Routes Between Bhutan and Bengal**

Route Segment	Key Locations	Notable Features
<b>Paro to Pakhu</b>	Paro, Pakhu, Essana	Important halting points with good road connectivity to Thimphu
<b>Pakhu to Buxa</b>	Chupcha, Chukha, Murichom, Jaigugu	Resting stations for merchants and pack animals
<b>Buxa to Cooch Behar</b>	Minagoung, Chichakotta	Safe accommodations for traders and animals
<b>Cooch Behar to Rangpur</b>	Ghiddilow, Pahargange, Badaldanga, Mangalhaut, Saftabarry, Calamatty	Final trade destinations with high traffic and trading facilities

Buxa was a critical commercial hub where merchants conducted trade in an environment strengthened by natural and artificial fortifications. Samuel Turner described Buxa as a strong frontier post with a spacious area accommodating large crowds and a strategic defense position.<sup>9</sup>

Cooch Behar, located 48 km from Buxa, was another vital commercial center. Bhutanese caravans and traders preferred resting at Minagoung and Chichakotta due to their safety and facilities. Griffiths noted that the descent from Buxa was steady, well-maintained, and frequently used by traders traveling through open forests.<sup>10</sup>

Most Bhutanese merchants concluded their trade at Cooch Behar and returned, but some extended their journey to Rangpur, covering an additional 82 km. Rangpur, being a major settlement, provided ample accommodations. Key stopping points included Ghiddilow, Pahargange, Badaldanga, Mangalhaut, Saftabarry, and Calamatty.<sup>11</sup> In contrast to the rugged Bhutan-Tibet trade routes, the Bhutan-Bengal route was more navigable as it mostly passed through plains, except for a few inclining stretches. The

accessibility and structured resting stations made it a favorable trade route with significant commercial traffic.<sup>12</sup>

## II. Indo-Nepal Trade Route

The Treaty of Sagauli (1816) halted Gurkha expansion, while the Treaty of Titaliya facilitated East India Company's commercial enterprises by exempting merchants from duties at several Nepalese trading marts.<sup>13</sup> Indo-Nepal trade primarily involved six Indian districts—Darjeeling, Purnea, Bhagalpur, Darbhanga, Muzaffarpur, and Champaran—along with seven Nepalese districts—Chitwan, Bara, Rautahat, Sarlahi, Mahottari, Janakpur, and Morang. Ancient trade routes were expanded under British rule, with registered trade between these districts referred to as "Bengal Trade." These routes connected Kathmandu Valley, eastern Nepal, and Tibet, transporting local Nepalese goods and British imports from Bengal and Bihar.<sup>14</sup>

### 2.1. Trade Routes in Darjeeling District

The annexation of Terai from Sikkim (1850) and Kalimpong subdivision from Bhutan (1866) extended Darjeeling's frontier, fostering trade growth. Census reports mention that early settlements were sparse but expanded after 1857, alongside the rise of tea cultivation. By the 1870s, Darjeeling became a bustling metropolis.<sup>15</sup> W.W. Hunter noted key roads under the Public Works Department and Local Fund Roads connecting Darjeeling to Siliguri and the Nepalese frontier.

WW Hunter based on the information furnished by the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling District, mentioned principal lines of roads in Darjeeling District; these were Imperial Roads under the Management of the Public Works Department and of Local Fund Roads whose funds for the construction and maintenance of the roads were the responsibility of the Deputy Commissioner. He submitted a list mentioning principal lines of roads connecting the district of Darjeeling with Siliguri and the Nepalese frontier to the Government in 1871 showing the following:

**Table 2: Imperial Roads under the Management of Public Works Department (Darjeeling District) in 1871**

Sl. No	Routes	Distance	Type
1.	Darjeeling Hill Cart Road (Darjeeling Station to Siliguri)	48 miles	Partly Metalled
2.	New Cart Road ( from the saddle to Jallapahar)	2 ½ miles	Un Metalled
3.	Pankhabari to Siliguri	16 miles	Un Metalled
4.	Cinchona plantation road from the saddle to Rangbi	7 miles	Un Metalled

Source: WW Hunter. *Statistical Account of Bengal. Vol X. London: Trubner & Company, 1876. pp. 127-128*

The total length of Public Works Department roads in 1871 was 93 miles, Local Fund Roads 234 miles, and Municipality roads approximately 100 miles. The Nepal Road, completed in 1876, extended towards Phalut and Singhali Tea Gardens. The Teesta Suspension Bridge and Naxalbari-Gaidhura roads were vital trade routes. Transport included coolies, ropeways, bullock carts, and railways. By the late 19th century, improved infrastructure boosted commerce.

JW Edgar who was the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling reported that in 1876 another important road that connected the Teesta suspension bridge to Darjeeling and Siliguri maintained by the Public Works Department and another which connected the Nepal frontier to Naxalbari to Gaidhuara were the two important roads in the district. The Teesta Suspension Bridge road and the Naxalbari-Gaidhuara road or the Cart road; were especially constructed for trading purpose. By the end of the nineteenth century the region developed into a prominent commercial division with proper roads facilitating trade with Nepal and the terai.<sup>16</sup>

The Coolies were the most important means of conveyance between Darjeeling and eastern Nepal as the routes were mostly hill paths, which were unsuitable for other means of conveyance. Goods were transported from Bejanbari to Darjeeling by coolies and from there via ropeway or via Palbazar by bridle path. In the *terai* or the foothills, railways were used via Sanicharia in Nepal to Naxalbari. Bullock carts were also used to transport goods. By the last quarter of the nineteenth century, communication system was developed in response to the commercial needs.

### 2.2. Trade Routes in Purnea District

Purnea shared a border with Nepal, conducting trade through eleven stations, five in Araria subdivision. Chief routes included Nawabganj to Dewanganj, Mirganj to Sahibganj, and Sikti to Rangeli. These cart roads primarily were suitable for dry-season travel. Additional major routes, such as Sahibganj to Bhopla-Tajpur (78 miles), facilitated Nepalese traders attending Rajshahi fairs.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3. Trade Routes in Bhagalpur District

The Ganges served as a primary trade route until the first steamer arrived in 1828. The Kosi Bridge (1,100 yards) was crucial for trade. Bhagalpur's railway network, operational since 1860, enhanced connectivity. Overland trade utilized the North and South Emigration Roads, linking the district to Nepalese frontiers at Supul, Pipra, and Birpur. New roads in Khandauli and Birpur connected Hanumannagar and Ameerpur.<sup>18</sup>

### 2.4. Trade Routes in Darbhanga District

Darbhanga handled substantial Indo-Nepal trade via roads linking sub-divisional towns to the frontier. Key roads connected Darbhanga to Sitamari, Narah, and Janakpore. Trade transport included bullock carts, coolies, and pony-drawn ekkas.<sup>19</sup>

### 2.5. Trade Routes in Muzaffarpur District

Muzaffarpur's trade routes linked Nepalese districts of Bara, Rautahat, Sarlahi, and Mahottari through six main roads, including Bairagnai to Semrounghur and Sursand to Jaleshwar.<sup>20</sup>

### 2.6. Trade Routes in Champaran District

Champaran's trade, primarily via Bettiah, Tribeni, Thori, and Raxaul, expanded post-Anglo-Nepalese War (1814-16). These routes were second in trade volume after Muzaffarpur's.<sup>21</sup>

## III. Indo Tibet/ Sikkim Trade Route

As mentioned previously, the Colonial Government was equally focused on the construction and maintenance of road to Lhasa through Sikkim. Following the Anglo-Sikkimese War/Treaty of Tumlong in 1861, Sikkim was compelled to offer aid for constructing a new trade route between Bengal and Tibet.

The Report prepared by W.B. Jackson of the Bengal Civil Service on 1854, argued that Bengal-Tibet trade from Darjeeling was considerable despite of duties imposed in Sikkim and Tibet. He mentioned that in the year 1854, the total value of trade on this road amounted to Rs 50,000 per annum and it could further increase if the trade was free of any restrictions. The road from Darjeeling to the Tibetan frontier through the Chola pass at 14,000 feet was open throughout the year was feasible for pack animals like ponies<sup>22</sup>

The Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling presented a report which was submitted to Ashley Eden, the then Secretary to the Government of Bengal in 1864. It reveals that Tibet-Sikkim trade was conducted primarily through four routes:

two via Namchee and Chadam to the Great Rangeet and two via Zeeme to Goke and Tramduc to Colbong.... the Tibetan merchants entered Darjeeling via Chola, Yekla, Nathey, Cumra and Dangsa. All these met in Sikkim through which they entered Darjeeling via Gangtok and Deekling.<sup>23</sup>

Similarly, Edgars Report shows how trade was conducted via these routes in Sikkim. His Report was thoroughly examined by the Bengal Government and accordingly the Deputy Commissioner was instructed to oversee the road to the Great Rungeet and Teesta, which was made by the British Forces in 1861.

On 25<sup>th</sup> April 1873, a delegation comprising of TT Cooper, Dr. Campbell, Lt.-Col Gawler, Dr. Joseph Hooker and BH Hodgson from the Society of Arts, London met with the Duke of Argyll, the Secretary of State for India for opening of trade with Chinese Turkestan and Tibet. They argued for an active British commercial policy in Central Asia and the urgency to establish a sound communication network. The Memorial stated that new routes through Nepal and Bhutan should be established and the existing routes in Sikkim should be extended to the Tibetan frontier along with completion of railways between Darjeeling and Calcutta. The Memorial also stressed that the best commercial approach to Tibet was through Sikkim through the Chumbi valley, which was about three hours from Gangtok. The town of Chumbi was a large market town with bazaars and good roads leading to Lhasa, this was the shortest and the most direct route between British territory and Lhasa.<sup>24</sup>

The Report submitted by JW Edgar 1874, also recommended, that a road with good bridges should be constructed from the Teesta Valley up to the Jelep-la.<sup>25</sup> A cart road to Jelep-la linking the plains of India was completed by 1879 after the signing of the Chefoo Convention in 1876. By 1881, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway a branch of the Eastern Bengal Railway opened a narrow gauge to traffic up to Darjeeling. It now took less than a week from Calcutta to reach to the Tibetan frontier.<sup>26</sup>

The Sikkim-Tibet Convention of 1890 and its supplementary Trade Regulation of 1893, was more of a settlement of a situation arising from the Tibetan advance to Lingtu made between British and China, the suzerain power in Tibet as discussed earlier. With the 1890 Convention the Sikkim-Tibetan frontier was regulated and by 1893 Regulation the British trade across the frontier commenced. A trading mart was opened at Yatung, at the Chumbi Valley on May 1894.<sup>27</sup>

The Jelep-la at the altitude of 13,999 feet linked Sikkim with the Tibetan frontier. The Gangtok and Kalimpong route were of outmost importance. The Gangtok route assimilated the towns of Singtam, Rangpo where as the Kalimpong route connected the business hamlets of Kupup, Rhenock, Pedong.

### **Conclusion:**

The foregoing clearly explains the trade pattern and commodity movement in the Eastern Himalayan region. The East India Company was able to intervene and influence the Eastern Himalayan market by means of war and colonialism from the beginning of the eighteenth century. The Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan, Nepal, and Sikkim were either with direct contact with the British territories or under the British sphere of influence. Improvements in communication and road network in the Himalayas meant opportunities for the Company to sell more British manufactured goods in the region. The growing awareness of the tea industry rapidly developing in Darjeeling, British Bhutan and Assam also created a fine possibility of a market among the tea drinkers of Tibet in competition with the brick tea of Szechuan.<sup>28</sup> The twentieth century saw the British development a strong colonial pattern of trade replacing the erstwhile network of trade and commerce in the Eastern Himalayas. The economy of the Himalayas underwent change when British mercantilism pumped European manufactured goods in great volumes.

Bengal now became the epicentre for the Himalayan trade and the self-assertion of the British through political conquest saw the resources of the Himalayas exported to the west through its ports in Calcutta. Trade however increased. Due to the inaccuracy of trade statistics of the foregoing years the Finance

Department of the Government of Bengal passed a resolution to register trade traffic between Bengal and the Eastern Himalayan Kingdom from 1875. As mentioned earlier these statistics were registered in the *Reports of the External Trade of Bengal with Nepal, Sikkim and Tibet, Bhutan and Nepal*. The Reports accounted the value of imports and exports, commodities on trade, custom duties levied, registering stations and also important trade routes and the trade roads.

By the end of the nineteenth century, the pattern of trade and the nature of the Eastern Himalayan market were completely transformed and by early twentieth century it was internationally connected. World politics now became a crucial factor in determining the regions market.

## Notes and References:

- <sup>1</sup> Entrepot trade refers to the practice of importing goods into a country or port for the purpose of re-exporting them to another destination without significant processing or modification. This type of trade is common in global commerce and is often facilitated by strategic trade hubs, with well developed infrastructure such as ports, free trade zones and logistical support.
- <sup>2</sup> Wessels, C. 1924. *Early Jesuit Travellers in Central Asia, 1603-1721*. Hague: Martinus Nijhoff,: 127-128
- <sup>3</sup> *Political Mission to Bhootan comprising the Reports of The Hon'ble Ashley Eden 1864; Capt. RB Pemberton 1837-1838, Dr. William Griffiths 1857-38 and Baboo Kishen Kant Bose 1815*. Varanasi: Pilgrims Publishing, 2005 (Reprint).
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>5</sup> Pommaret, Françoise. 2000. Ancient Trade Partners: Bhutan, Cooch Bihar and Assam (17<sup>th</sup> -19<sup>th</sup> centuries). *Journal of Bhutan Studies*, 2(1): 31.
- <sup>6</sup> *Political Mission to Bhootan*. op.cit: 197.
- <sup>7</sup> Markham, Clement, ed. 1876. *Narratives of the mission of George Bogle to Tibet and of the Journey of Thomas Manning to Lhasa*. London: Trubner and Co. Ludgate Hill: 53.
- <sup>8</sup> Sarkar, Ratna and Ray, Indrajit. 2006. Two Nineteenth century trade Routes in the Eastern Himalayas: The Bhutanese Trade with Tibet and Bengal. *Journal of Bhutan Studies*.15: 75.
- <sup>9</sup> Turner, Captain Samuel. 1800. *An Account of an Embassy to the Court of Teshoo Lama in Tibet*. London: Trubner and Co.Ludgate Hill: 39-40.
- <sup>10</sup> *Political Mission to Bhootan...*op.cit.: 302.
- <sup>11</sup> Bhutia, Jigme Wangchuk. 2024. *Imperial Footprints: British Imprint of the Eastern Himalayan Socio Economics 1774-1904*. BR Publishing Corporation, New Delhi: 215-217.
- <sup>12</sup> Sarkar and Ray. op.cit.: 80-81.
- <sup>13</sup> Moktan, R. 2004. *Sikkim: Darjeeling Compendium of Documents*. Darjeeling: 8-9.
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- <sup>15</sup> J G, Ritche. *Bengal Districts: Report on the census of the District of Darjeeling, 1891*. Bengal Secretariat Press, 1891.p. 19.
- <sup>16</sup> File No 120, Sl. No.2, Miscellaneous, General Department, August 1876, Government of Bengal, NAI, New Delhi.
- <sup>17</sup> File No 120, Sl. No.2, Miscellaneous, General Department, August 1876, Government of Bengal, NAI, New Delhi. Also see... LSS O' Malley. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Purnea*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press, 1911. p 123.....see WW Hunter. *Statistical Account of Bengal*. Vol XV. London: Trubner & Company, 1877: 351
- <sup>18</sup> Byrne, J. 1911. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Bhagalpur*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press: 131. Also see... File No 22, Revenue A, Foreign Department, Government of India, August 1877, NAI. New Delhi .....LSS Malley, O'. 1907. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Darbhanga*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press: 110.
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid: 111.
- <sup>19</sup> Malley, LSS O'. 1907. *Bengal District Gazetteer, Darbhanga*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press: 110.
- <sup>20</sup> File No.22, Revenue A, Foreign Department, Government of India, August 1877, NAI.
- <sup>21</sup> Malley, LSS O. 1907. *Bengal District Gazetteers, Champaran*. Calcutta: Bengal Secretariat Press: 120- 121.
- <sup>22</sup> Jackson, W B. *Report on Darjeeling. Selections from the Records of Bengal Government, No. XVII, Vol. IV Calcutta 1854*.
- <sup>23</sup> Letter from Ashley Eden, Secretary to the Government of Bengal to the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling., General, *Proceedings of Bengal Government, July 1864*. NAI, New Delhi.
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