

Colonization of the Highlands: The Rise and Growth of Hill Stations in Bengal Province (1828-1947)

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Abstract:

The origin and the development of the hills station of the British Raj were closely associated with the climatic factors of alluvial plains of the Bengal. Vertical sun on the equator became quite unbearable for the ruling class who ‘were born and bred in the cool maritime climate of British island’. The colonial official documents, travel guides, memoirs and the contemporary British medical journals are the major sources to study the fact that how the fear of the climate and deadly diseases directly contributed to the development of the major hill stations in colonial Bengal province. This paper is aimed to study the ways through which the colonizers observed and conceptualized the climatic condition of the entire Bengal plains and started the urbanization in the hills.

Keywords: Colonialism, Climate, Urbanization, demography

In early nineteenth century, India commonly appeared in the European perception as a land of encircling death.ⁱ Many diseases prevalent in India were believed to draw their distinctive character, and their exceptional potency, from the particularities of Indian climate and landscape.....ⁱⁱ The evergreen fertile Indo-Gangitic plains, also known as North Indian River plain was the major commercial zone of the subcontinent. The medical topography of the colonial period also epitomizes it as a diseases laden and deadly landscape of the country. James Johnson, a surgeon of British Royal navy noted in 1815 ‘*there is no unmixed good in the world. The inundation of the Ganges scattered fertility in the plains of Bengal, sow with a liberal hand, and at the same time, the seeds of the deadfull diseases!*’ⁱⁱⁱ. He believed that the contaminated water of the Ganges and its tributary rivers and the dirty habits of the natives had largely been responsible for the deadly epidemics in the Indian plains. Dr. Bryden who was a medical officer in Bengal, believed that there were certain districts in Bengal which generated cholera germs and time to time it spread into the country by the moist air where it had a permanent abiding place, but died after a varying time.^{iv}

The fear of the tropical diseases and climate much more intensified along with the increasing number of mortality of the Europeans in Bengal. Sir James Ranald Martin (1796- 1874) who joined the Bengal Medical Service in 1817 and faced the fatal effect of the cholera and malignant fever in the Gangetic plains and Orissa, wrote that the mortality rate of the British soldiers increased due to their disability to acclimatize in the tropical environment. He further mentions the surrounding atmosphere of the military barracks as ‘a world of wretchedness and misery, moral and physical.’^v Fanny Parks (1794-1875) who

had a burning love for India, elaborately discussed about the Indian fever when her husband was attacked by it and also expressed her fear about the deadly diseases.^{vi}

The climatic condition of the Indian plain had a deep psychological impact on the mercantile communities like the British as their job led to a long and distant separation from their family and the near ones, lived in back home. So the British officials realized that the establishment of the hills stations might have reduced the anxiety of the Europeans. Because most of them believed that the Indian sub continent was not a safe place for their families. The foundation of the hill stations in India became a part of the public interests of the European civilian in India which was inextricably related to the Bentham's theory of happiness.^{vii}

Some of the colonial official records suggested that the early British administrators like Robert Clive, Warren Hastings, Wellington and Munro were in favour of the occupation of the Indian uplands. Prior to the foundation of hill resorts, the invalid British soldiers and civilians were compelled to take shelter in the coastal enclaves for leisure and recreation. Cool sea breeze provided some relief from the warm humid climate of the deadly plains. Sometime during the summer months they even sailed to the ports of South Africa or to the Mauritius to get rid of the 'burning climate of Asia'. The first practical step towards the foundation of hill station was taken by Lord William Bentinck in 1819. Due to his initiative Simla appeared as the first hill station of British India, after this the number of the hills station increased gradually. In the first phase some hill station were developed as military cantonments or sanatorium in the sensitive border areas of the British India but later transformed into an imperial summer residence.

In the early 19th century, few societies were formed to investigate the climatic condition of Bengal, within a short distance of Calcutta, where the range of the temperature was almost similar to the England and the Northern France i.e. the temperature is about 55° with occasional snowfall in the months of January, February and March. An experimental station for ailing troops was opened at Cherrapunji in Assam, but it proved to be a wash-out literary- as it turned out to be one of the wettest places in the world.^{viii} In this hunt of cooler place in the subcontinent the Himalayas proved to be a perfect place.

In 1825 a group of Lepchas from Darjeeling escaped to the Nepal to get rid of the increasing oppression of the Raja of Sikkim, Colonel Lloyd, the commercial residence of the Maldah following the instruction of the British Government came to Darjeeling in 1828 to enquire into the matter.^{ix} After observing the prospect of the Darjeeling as the sanatorium for the British soldiers, he wrote a letter to the Lord William Bentinck to inform him about the place. Ultimately due to the initiative of the colonial officials, the raja of Sikkim granted the land of Darjeeling to the British government in 1835 at a nominal amount. The grant of Darjeeling in 1835 begins an era of urbanization of the forested slopes of the Eastern Himalayan.

The 'European masters' compared the environmental and meteorological condition of Darjeeling hills with the other summer stations of the Indian subcontinent. In general the persons who have visited Darjeeling prior to the urbanization of the hills opined that Darjeeling was far better than the Simla in terms of natural beauty and magnificent forests. The grand view of the hot and dusty Indian plains in the horizon gave the colonizers so much relief as they felt they are now far away from the plains and at the same time when they looked at the eternal snows of the mount Kanchanjungha they felt that they are now really at the top of the world.

In Victorian era, the perception about the external world of the ruling class is shaped by their heritage and culture. Because the culture, tradition and beliefs have power to shape the imagination of a community. The accumulation of enormous wealth from the subcontinent could not overshadow the

memories of their home land. As the colonial official reached the mountain, they minutely watched and studied the climate of the place. They selected Darjeeling as because climatologically its temperature was similar to the England and south France. So in the course of colonial expansion in the orient, the imperial authorities were to some extent guided by their emotion and nostalgia and transformed the hills as a home away home. While they compare the places of the Orient that's means they consciously or unconsciously always remain connected to their own country.

Darjeeling was developed in the heart of Sub-Himalayas.^x During the formative period of the hills station, the 'European masters' compared the Darjeeling with other hill stations and the hunt for the cooler climate in the profitable Indian sub-continent enforce them to do so. In general, the persons who have visited Darjeeling prior to the urbanization of the hills opined that Darjeeling was far better than the Simla in terms of 'natural beauty and magnificent forests'. The weather of Darjeeling was drier than that of Landour, Mussoorie and Cheera Poonjee.^{xi} In general the persons who have visited Darjeeling prior to the urbanization of the hills opined that Darjeeling was far better than the Simla in terms of natural beauty and magnificent forests. The grand view of the hot and dusty Indian plains in the horizon gave them so much relief as they fill they were far away from the diseases, dust and hot climate when they looked at the eternal snows of the mount Kanchanjungha they feel that they were now really at the top of the world.

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In this high elevation, the glorious panorama of the snowy mountain peaks, the deep valleys containing evergreen forest and silver line of threads like rivers mesmerized the British rulers and guided them to establish a convalescent depot in Darjeeling. The non-official Europeans and business classes stationed at Calcutta was not very sure about the prospect of the hill station in Darjeeling. In contrary that a group of British official started proclaiming that the climate of the oriental mountains had a remarkable positive and beneficial impact on the European children. After observing the climate of Darjeeling in 1849, J. D. Hooker described it as 'paradise for European children'.^{xiii}

The mass migration to the hills during the hot streaming summer months was viewed as medical necessity during the colonial period. They looked at Darjeeling as an appropriate place for the Europeans in the summer month as the oriental epidemic diseases: Cholera, measles and chicken pox was less prevalent in the hills. The climate of the Darjeeling, freshen up their memories of the home which inextricably related to the cold and pleasant summer. The resemblance of the winter season between

Europe and Darjeeling attracted the attention of the colonizers to build a pleasant holiday home at Darjeeling.

When the first group of the British officials reached Darjeeling, the place was totally unclear and the whole road from Pankhabari surrounded by dense forest with an almost impenetrable growth of the under wood broken in some hilly slopes by the Lepchas for jhum cultivation. The Moss hangs in filaments and the festoons from the trees, and oaks, maples, ferns, strawberries, raspberries along with the streams rippling and sparkling along the stones and the change in temperature gave the English travelers a unique European sensation. The majestic forest was virgin and was not connected to the colonial commercial exploitation.^{xiv} The detachment from the outer world provided the nature an opportunity to blossom in its own mood. In 1835 Darjeeling was a collection of about 20 huts with a population of 100 peoples. The place was transformed into an embryonic settlement with a few stony paths, a few wattle and daub huts, and hundreds of people milling about like ants, reducing the Jungle to building plots.^{xv} Within first five years, the forests were cleared for the construction of Kutchary and about thirty other buildings. A significant step was taken to construct a European settlement, during the governor-generalship of Lord Auckland in 1838. By the end of this year, thirty grants were made to the Europeans, a corps of army sappers formed for clearing operations and buildings were to commence with vigour after the rains.^{xvi} In 1839 the growth of the settlement was further stimulated after the appointment of Dr. A. Campbell, the British residence in Nepal, as the Superintendent of Darjeeling. Soon he encouraged the new settlers by granting them free forest lands.^{xvii}

Sir W. W. Hunter mentioned that the majestic forests which clothed the mountains of the British Sikkim were narrowly cleared to construct the residence of the British officials.^{xviii} The urbanization in Darjeeling and growth of the human settlements introduced a new beginning of the colonial intervention in the natural world of the Orient. Most of the European sanatoriums in the Himalayas were surrounded by their unique flora and faunas, but as the European constructions overflow the landscapes of the mountains, it disrupted the natural growth of the wildlife. The urban morphology of the Darjeeling and the other European hills stations in India were quite different from the towns and the cities of the Indian Subcontinent.

By the end of 1930s, the demand for land rapidly increased, which enforced the government to introduce the rules for the land grant in Darjeeling on 4th September; 1839. Major E. Garstin, the Chief Executive Engineer of Lower Province, suggested in his report: ‘the condition on which the ground should be given, is the clearing it of the thick forest which now covers it’.^{xix} In 1841 a new lease rule was issued by the government to cope up with the emerging demand for the land. But in many cases the leaseholders violated the Rules of 1841 and illegally captured more land, they were entitled to hold according to their title-deeds.^{xx} But after almost twenty-two years in 1863, the revenue board noticed some irregularities. As a result submitted a report to the district office but beyond this, no steps were taken. Within 1841 to 1863, a large portion of the forested land of Darjeeling were encroached by the property holders of the old hill territory. Holding a property and building European cottages in the hills in the early years proved to be a profitable business for the colonizers as they collected all the building materials from the surrounding forest or even from their own property.

To attract the British businessmen, 42 acres of forest land was cleared for Bazaar and 47 acres of land was reserved for the new settlers in Darjeeling.^{xxi} The same process of deforestation also followed in Pankhabari, Kurseong and Mahaldiram to construct commercial places. The British authority wanted to epitomize Darjeeling as a profitable and fully equipped modern European settlement in the verge of the

disease ridden alluvial plains of Bengal. So they encouraged the both the European entrepreneurs and the outsider labours to settle down in the hill tracks and at the same time bring the non-arable forest land under cultivation and gather commercial profits through in the form of revenue. The impact of colonial rule had great environmental ramifications on Darjeeling. When the Bhutias colonized this area they remained aloof and they were not intended to use the natural resources for the commercial purpose. But as a colonizer the British were much more sophisticated, precise and well organized for extracting the natural resources of the colony by using the men power of conquered areas. They wanted to build Darjeeling as a commercial center which resulted in the growth of the enormous amount of employment opportunity and a huge demand for manual labour. So Dr. A. Campbell, the first superintendent of Darjeeling encourage the neighboring Nepalese to settle down in the British territory and thousand of poverty stricken people of south Nepal started entering in the British territory.

The land grant rules and its statistics revealed the fast expansion of the human settlements in Darjeeling changed the eternal landscape of the Darjeeling hills. Mr. J. Ware Edgar, the Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, in his report dated 26th September, 1874, divided the District into five revenue tracts, viz. 1. The old hill territory stretched between Sikkim frontiers to the foothills south of Pankhabari. 2. The 115 square miles of land situated in the north west of the district. 3. The two strips of land almost 253 square miles, annexed with Darjeeling in 1850. One lying to the west of old hill territory upto the frontier of Nepal and the other lying to the east of the old hill territory upto the Tista River. 4. The 271 square miles of *Terai*. 5. The 485 square miles of tract placed in the east of Tista also known as Daling sub division, annexed after Bhutan war in 1864.^{xxii} All these parts of the district faced distinct types of colonial exploitation.

Like all over the planet the colonial expansion in the Darjeeling hills inseparably connected with the massive expansion of the infrastructures to maximise the resource exploitation in the untouched remote areas and to connect them with the greater capitalist market. Prior to the coming of the British colonizer, the area was dominated by the Tibetan, Bhutanese and Sikkimese and for centuries the region was involved in the trans-Himalayan trade. When the Tibetan control established in the Darjeeling Himalayas, they bring with them their culture, religion, medicinal practices etc and imposed it over the autochthons living in the mountain slopes of the Himalayas. The large scale denudation of the forested lands increased the amount of the land slide hazard in the hill slopes of the Himalayas. The growth of tea plantation resulted in large scale migration, settlement and colonization in the hills. Within the last three decades of the 19th century the

They came to the hills because of the dangers and the dilemmas they faced in the plains as the rulers of an alien land and people, and they sought to make the hill stations special enclaves set apart from the "real" India. In the model of the ' garden of Eden' they 'reshaped the world they found'. They transformed the surrounding of the hills by introducing plantations, constringing European models and dominating the aborigines and turned it to a perfect home for the colonizers in tropics.

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8. Fred Pinn ; 1986; p. 1
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10. Sub-Himalayas means all the Great Himalayas chain not including the snowy ranges.
11. The colonial authority realized that the Landour, Mussoorie and Cheera Poonjee were not suitable for the construction of the hill station because of the excessive rainfall.
12. *Darjeeling guide*, 1854, p. 28
13. Hooker, Joseph, *op.cit*, p. 120
14. The exploitation of the forests of Western Dooars was started prior to the coming of the British colonizers in the hills. According to the report of Dr. Buchanan- Hamilton (1809) the timbers of the Sub-Himalayan regions was used to built the canoe which were sold in the markets of Deviganj in Rangpur, Kangtapukuri in Nattor (Rajshahi).
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