

Christian Missionary Education and Cultural Hegemony: A Study of Darjeeling Hills (1841 To 1947).

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Abstract:

Christian missionaries played a significant role in shaping education, healthcare, and aspects of cultural life in colonial India. Their influence was particularly strong among tribal communities and socially marginalized groups. Following the Charter Act of 1833, missionary activities in India expanded considerably. Although their primary objective was the propagation of Christianity, their work also aligned with contemporary imperial ideologies such as the “White Man’s Burden,” associated with Rudyard Kipling, which framed colonial intervention as a civilizing mission. In colonial Darjeeling, missionaries exerted notable influence on the indigenous hill communities. Through the establishment of schools and educational initiatives, they became key agents in disseminating colonial values and cultural norms. Their educational efforts not only expanded literacy and institutional learning but also contributed to the formation of cultural hegemony among the hill population. This article therefore examines the role of Christian missionaries in the development of Darjeeling’s educational system and analyzes how missionary education functioned as a vehicle for cultural dominance.

Keywords: Christianity, Colonial Darjeeling, missionary education, Hegemony.

INTRODUCTION:

The Christian missionaries came to India largely to fulfil their religious zeal and evangelizing mission. According to tradition, early Christian influence in southern India dates back to 52 AD. However, missionary activity expanded significantly in the colonial period, especially after the Charter Act of 1813, which officially permitted missionaries to operate more freely in British India. During this time, missionaries played an important role in disseminating imperial culture, the Christian faith, and Western education. They established numerous schools, colleges, and hospitals, while also engaging in various forms of social service across the country. Their influence was particularly strong in remote hill regions and among socially marginalized communities. In a similar pattern, Christian missionaries entered the Darjeeling hills in 1841 and founded several educational institutions there. Through the spread of Western-style education, they also propagated Christian teachings among indigenous populations. As a result, many local inhabitants converted to Christianity and gradually adopted aspects of Western culture and education.

Ideology of the Christian Missionaries:

Christian missionaries played a significant role in the expansion of British colonial influence across the globe. Throughout the history of imperial expansion, missionary proselytization offered the British public a model of “civilized” expansion and colonial governance, often recasting imperial projects in moral and humanitarian terms. At the same time, missionary activity was closely associated, whether implicitly or explicitly with processes of cultural transformation. Through Western Christian philosophies, missionaries sought to reshape indigenous societies by remoulding the individual, the community, and the state according to imperial ideals of civility and modernity. Within the British Empire, particularly during the so-called second phase of British imperialism (c. 1784–1867), missionary work frequently accompanied the early stages of imperial penetration. Only in recent decades have social scientists begun to examine the independent and long-term political and developmental consequences of missionary activity. Studies from different regions highlight this complexity: in Latin America, research by Trejo suggests that Christian missions could stimulate social mobilization among indigenous groups; Bolt and Bezemer argue that missionary promotion of vernacular literacy in Africa contributed to long-term economic outcomes; Woodberry’s cross-national work links missionary presence to later democratic development; and Posner shows how missionary language codification reshaped postcolonial linguistic landscapes. In the Indian context, scholars such as Getachew and Lankina have explored the relationship between missionaries and female education in both colonial and postcolonial periods. The broader colonial project placed heavy emphasis on cultural assimilation, and education became a key instrument of governance used to legitimize imperial authority and stabilize political control. In this regard, Louis Althusser’s concept of the “ideological state apparatus” is particularly illuminating: he argued that institutions like schools reproduce dominant ideologies and thereby sustain existing relations of production.¹ Antonio Gramsci similarly emphasized the political role of education, contending in his Prison Notebooks that “every relationship of hegemony is necessarily an educative relationship.” From this perspective, educational institutions functioned as important sites for the production and maintenance of ruling-class hegemony.² In India, colonial rule often relied more on persuasion and cultural influence than on overt coercion, especially when compared with some regions of Africa and Latin America.³ Missionary education thus played a catalytic role in stabilizing British authority over the subcontinent for an extended period. Under the rhetoric of a “civilizing mission,” the colonial state permitted and sometimes facilitated missionary activity, which promoted Christian values and Western education while also helping to cultivate a class of intermediaries sympathetic to colonial rule. A similar pattern can be observed in the Darjeeling Hills. Missionaries initially arrived to serve the educational needs of European officials’ children, but they soon expanded their efforts toward indigenous populations. Through both direct and indirect proselytization, they positioned themselves as agents of uplift and reform. As K. M. Panikkar observed, colonialism often attempted to project itself not as a destroyer of indigenous culture but as its protector and benefactor.⁴ In this sense, Christian missionaries were frequently described by critics and observers alike as the “workhorses of empire” or the “precursors of the flag,” highlighting their complex and deeply entangled relationship with colonial power.⁵

Arrival and Expansion of Christian Missionaries in India:

After several decades of expansion, the East India Company grew increasingly concerned about the persistent though often weak and disorganized resistance of Indian rulers. In response, it gradually

transformed itself from a purely commercial body into a territorial power. Colonial authorities soon recognized that education could serve as an effective instrument for consolidating imperial control in India. Influenced by the ideological climate later articulated in Rudyard Kipling's poem *The White Man's Burden* (1899), British policymakers and missionaries promoted the idea of a civilizing mission.⁶ Christian missionaries were encouraged to spread Western education alongside Christian teachings. Although missionaries and colonial officials did not always share identical objectives, both supported the broader project of Westernization through education. The colonial administration increasingly viewed education as a means of cultural imperialism, an instrument to reshape Indian society along English lines and to secure acceptance of British rule. At a practical level, colonial education policy aimed to produce a class of low-cost clerks, translators, and subordinate officials for the expanding machinery of the British Raj. Missionaries, however, often hoped that education would eventually lead to mass conversion to Christianity. The Charter Act of 1813, passed at a time when missionary influence over education in England was strong, formally opened British Indian territories to missionary activity. It is difficult to imagine the educational provisions of the Charter without missionary support. The later Charter Act of 1833 removed most remaining restrictions on missionary entry, further expanding their field of work. This educational project was also part of a broader process of political socialization. In his famous Minute of 1835, Thomas Babington Macaulay argued that the colonial state should strive to create "a class of persons Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect," who would serve as intermediaries between rulers and the masses. His statement clearly reveals the ideological intent behind colonial education policy.⁷ The roots of Christian missionary activity in India, however, predate the colonial period. According to long-standing tradition, one of the twelve apostles of Jesus Christ, St. Thomas, arrived in South India in 52 CE, landing at Cranganore (Kodungallur) in present-day Kerala. He is believed to have preached Christianity at centres such as Quilon, Palayur, and Cranganore, later moving toward the Madras region, where he is said to have been martyred near Little Mount, Mylapore. His tomb remains an important Christian shrine.⁸ In Bengal, the arrival of William Carey in 1793 is generally regarded as the beginning of organized Protestant missionary activity.⁹ Although Carey began his work earlier, it was only after the Charter Act of 1813 that missionaries were officially permitted to operate within East India Company territories. By the time the Charter Act of 1833 fully liberalized missionary access, major missionary societies from England and Scotland had already established several centres in Bengal. Missionary influence became increasingly visible in Bengali society during the early nineteenth century. Reformist measures such as the abolition of sati in 1829, the liberalization of the press in 1835, and the growth of English and vernacular print culture unfolded within this broader climate of intellectual and cultural change—though these developments also involved significant contributions from Indian reformers and colonial administrators.¹⁰ Western ideas challenged many established customs and beliefs, contributing to the emergence of a new, Western-educated intelligentsia. Particularly notable was the group of young radicals influenced by Henry Vivian Derozio at Hindu College (founded in 1817). During the period roughly between 1830 and 1855 often described as the "age of the mission schools" missionaries established numerous educational institutions across Bengal.¹¹ For them, education functioned as the principal vehicle of evangelization as well as social transformation. Through schools and colleges, they sought not only to impart Western knowledge but also to reshape religious and cultural attitudes among sections of the Indian population.¹²

History of The Colonial Darjeeling:

Darjeeling emerged as one of India's most important hill stations because of its strategic position between China, Bhutan, Sikkim, Tibet, and Nepal, as well as its considerable economic potential. These advantages attracted the ambitious designs of the colonial capitalist state.¹³ Geographically, Darjeeling district lies between 26°31'05" and 27°27'10" north latitude and 87°59'30" and 88°53'00" east longitude. The plains portion of the district is situated between 26°30' and 26°45' north latitude and between 88° and 88°30' east longitude. The total area of the district is about 3,254.7 sq. km., of which the hilly region covers approximately 2,320 sq. km. The district constitutes about 3.68 percent of the total area of West Bengal. Of the 943.6 sq. km. comprising the Terai and plains, around 837.4 sq. km. falls under the Siliguri subdivision.¹⁴ Darjeeling shares international boundaries with Nepal in the west and Bhutan in the east. The River Teesta separates Sikkim from the Darjeeling hills and forms the district's northern boundary, while Jalpaiguri and Purnea (in Bihar) constitute its southern boundary. Under British rule, the mist-covered hill station of Darjeeling developed into a major colonial centre.¹⁵ It functioned as a military cantonment, a summer administrative headquarters, a social and recreational retreat for British officials and their families, and an educational hub for British and Eurasian children. In this respect, Darjeeling became a significant colonial stronghold comparable to other hill stations such as Simla, Mussoorie, Almora, and Kodaikanal.¹⁶ As noted by the historian Dane Kennedy, hill stations like Darjeeling provided spaces where Europeans could temporarily relax the rigidities of imperial authority and recreate aspects of home life, in contrast to the disease-ridden plains where strict racial and social distance was maintained between rulers and subjects.¹⁷ Historically, the territory of Darjeeling was acquired by the British Indian Government from the neighbouring states of Sikkim and Bhutan. Until 1835, the area formed part of Sikkim. Captain Lloyd, impressed by Darjeeling's climate and scenic beauty, recommended the site for a sanatorium and urged the British authorities to secure control over this strategically vital location commanding routes toward Nepal and Bhutan, and lying on one of the closest approaches from British India to Lhasa.¹⁸ Captain Herbert, the Deputy Surveyor General, supported Lloyd's proposal, and the Court of Directors approved the plan to establish a sanatorium at Darjeeling. Acting under the orders of Governor-General Lord William Bentinck, Lloyd met the Raja of Sikkim on 23 January 1835 and conveyed that the British required Darjeeling solely for sanatorium purposes. Through this process the foundation of the Darjeeling district was laid.¹⁹ Later, in 1886, Kalimpong was incorporated into Darjeeling district, completing its administrative formation.

Education as Medium of Religious Conversion:

Education is a crucial element in the development of any society; however, the educational landscape of colonial India presented a markedly different picture. Literacy rates among tribal communities in remote hill regions were extremely low, and these populations remained educationally, economically, and culturally marginalized compared to the rest of the country. In the Darjeeling hills, education gradually emerged as a major concern for both the colonial government and Christian missionaries. Superintendent Dr. Campbell himself drew attention to the government's neglect of hill education, highlighting the urgent need for intervention.²⁰ Before 1835, the people of Darjeeling largely maintained indigenous systems of learning. Education was conducted mainly in monastic settings where myths, legends, and religious narratives formed the core curriculum. Meanwhile, rapid Hinduisation and Sanskritisation were transforming Nepali society in Nepal, but in the Eastern Himalayas the Lamaist Buddhist political-religious structure of Sikkim and Bhutan prevented similar developments. Darjeeling thus remained a

relatively open cultural space where neither Hinduism nor Lamaist Buddhism exercised firm control, creating conditions that Christian missionaries would later exploit. The first significant missionary intervention came in 1841 when William Start, an independent missionary, established the Darjeeling Mission. His work focused primarily on the Nepalis, Bhutias, and Lepchas. He was later joined by the German missionary Reverend Carl Niebel. Together they translated the Gospel of St. Matthew into Lepcha in 1846, produced Lepcha primers, and opened a primary school. Despite these efforts, Hindi initially remained the main language of instruction. Niebel continued his work until his death in 1865 (having retired earlier in 1852), and additional portions of the Bible—including the Gospels of Matthew and John, Genesis, and part of Exodus—were translated into Lepcha.²¹ A more systematic phase of educational expansion began with the arrival of William Macfarlane of the Church of Scotland Mission. Originally posted to Gaya, he soon realized the difficulty of engaging local populations there and persuaded the Foreign Mission Committee to shift the mission focus to Darjeeling. He arrived on 10 June 1870 and soon established a school in a rented cottage above the Ging tea plantation with twenty Nepali and Lepcha orphans.²² Macfarlane adopted the Monitorial (Bell) System to expand mass education, and his network spread rapidly across the district. By 1873, twenty-five primary schools with 615 students were in operation.²³ Missionaries quickly recognized that educational expansion required trained teachers. Consequently, a training school was established in Darjeeling where Lepcha, Nepali, and Bhutia students studied mathematics, geography, history, grammar, and other standard subjects. During Macfarlane's furlough in 1881, his speeches in Scotland inspired the missionary circles of the universities of St Andrews, Aberdeen, Glasgow, and Edinburgh to establish the Scottish Universities Mission (SUM). Independent Sikkim was identified as a potential field, with Kalimpong proposed as the headquarters and training centre for teachers and catechists serving Kalimpong, Sikkim, and Darjeeling. The evangelical objective of missionary education became visible when local conversions began, notably the baptism of Bhim Lal Dewan in 1874. Among the most influential converts was Ganga Prasad Pradhan—the first ordained Nepali pastor, founder of the first Nepali press, pioneer of Nepali literature, and translator of the Nepali Bible, completed in 1914 after forty years of labour.²⁴ Roman Catholic initiatives also contributed significantly. Mother M. Teresa Mons and Sister Gabriel founded the Loreto Convent on 10 October 1846 at Snowy View, later shifting to its present site.²⁵ Another major institution, St. Paul's School at Jalapahar, was opened in 1864 through the efforts of Bishop Cotton. Missionary activity also gradually transformed female education, though progress was slow. Economic insecurity and limited employment prospects made many parents reluctant to educate their daughters. As W. W. Homwell observed, parents showed little enthusiasm for girls' education unless it included industrial training that promised economic independence.²⁶ Statistical evidence reflects this hesitation: in 1872–73 only 56 girls were enrolled in school out of a population of about 95,000, rising modestly to 80 by 1877–78.²⁷

Female education developed more vigorously in Kalimpong than in Darjeeling proper. By 1889, nine schools—including those at Chibbo, Bong Bustee, Pudung, Samtharig Mangzhing, Mangwa, Mongpu, and Sitong—served 274 pupils through day and evening classes. Mission expansion was aided by twenty-three catechists and three ordained native ministers: Padre Ganga Prasad Pradhan, Pastor Dyongsi Lepcha, and Namthak Ronggong.²⁸ Yet attendance often remained irregular due to financial constraints; for example, in Kalimpong Girls' School in 1893, enrolment stood at forty, but average attendance was much lower. The Church of Scotland also pioneered education among tea-garden labourers by opening schools at Soom, Takdah, and Lebong in 1872.²⁹ Meanwhile, the Young Men's

Guild—founded in Scotland in 1881 by Professor A. H. Charteris—sent Dr. John Anderson Graham as its first overseas missionary, who arrived in Kalimpong on 13 January 1889 and significantly strengthened missionary educational work.³⁰ Recognizing earlier neglect, the colonial government gradually expanded its own educational efforts. It established the Victoria Boys' School at Kurseong in 1897 and the Dow Hill Girls' School in 1898, primarily to provide quality education up to the eighth standard for the children of government employees. Industrial and orphan education also received attention with the founding of the St. Agnes Industrial Orphan Home in 1880 by Mrs. F. C. Fooks of Toong, who is widely regarded as a pioneer in industrial and technical training in the hills.³¹ Meanwhile, the government-aided St. Helen's Convent at Kurseong offered instruction up to the Senior Cambridge level. Founded in February 1890, the institution initially had a relatively small enrolment of around 160 students. The Dow Hill Girls' School continued to function mainly as an institution for the daughters of Europeans employed in government service. Missionary expansion continued through other agencies. The Belgian Jesuit Fathers of the Bengal Mission established St. Mary's Training College in 1889 to prepare candidates of the Madura Mission and the Society of Jesus of Bengal for ordination. The Scandinavian Alliance Mission (SAM) entered Darjeeling in 1892. Although its broader aim was to gain access to Tibet, repeated failures led the mission to establish its headquarters at Ghoom, near Darjeeling town. Following an agreement with the Scottish Mission, the SAM confined its work largely to the Bhutia and Tibetan populations. While a few smaller independent missionary groups also appeared in the hills, their influence remained limited and short-lived compared to the more sustained work of the Eastern Himalayan missions.³² By the turn of the twentieth century, the Darjeeling district occupied a comparatively advanced position in education within the Bengal Province. The 1901 Census, which classified literacy based on the ability to read and write in any language, reveals this clearly. In Bengal as a whole, only one male in ten and one female in two hundred were literate. In contrast, Darjeeling recorded significantly better ratios—one literate male in eight and one literate female in seventy-one—figures that surpassed many districts of eastern Bengal outside Calcutta. During the final decade of the nineteenth century, school enrolment in the district reached 38.1 percent for boys and 5.9 percent for girls.³³ From the standpoint of education and culture in Bengal, Darjeeling thus emerged as an important regional centre. Missionary education had a profound impact on the indigenous communities of the hills, rapidly transforming the cultural landscape. Through schools, training institutions, and evangelization, Christian missions established a strong cultural presence among the Lepchas, Bhutias, and Nepalis. Missionary education in the Darjeeling hills during the colonial period must be understood as a dual process. It undeniably expanded literacy, created new elites, and integrated the hills into wider intellectual networks. At the same time, it functioned as a powerful instrument of cultural hegemony that reshaped indigenous identities and social structures in line with colonial-Christian norms. The legacy of this encounter remains visible in the region's educational institutions, linguistic development, and religious demography even today

Conclusion:

Education has played a transformative role in shaping the socio-cultural condition of societies. In colonial India, Christian missionaries acted as important agents in disseminating Western education and imperial cultural values through institutional learning. A central objective of missionary activity was the propagation of Christianity among colonial populations. Before 1841, Christianity had little presence in Darjeeling. The indigenous hill communities largely depended on monastic forms of education, where

learning revolved around myths, legends, and religious instruction. This cultural and educational pattern began to change gradually with the arrival and expansion of missionary activity in the hills. Missionaries established schools, colleges, industrial training centres, and agricultural programmes, which opened new avenues of learning for the local population. Alongside education, conversion to Christianity also increased among sections of the hill communities. The impact of missionary education was significant. Many graduates of these institutions went on to become teachers, catechists, social workers, and employees in various sectors, thereby extending the influence of the new educational system. Over time, literacy rates in the remote hill areas improved noticeably, and Darjeeling emerged as one of the more educationally and culturally developed regions of Bengal. The legacy of this historical process remains visible today, as elements of European cultural influence and Western-style education continue to shape the social and educational landscape of Darjeeling.

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