British Forest Policy and Everyday Resistances of People: An Overview of Colonial Darjeeling

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Abstract*: A consideration of ecology, environment and the colonial interventions in the natural and socio-economic landscape, pattern of interaction between indigenous people, immigrated settlers and British colonizers invite us to rethink the landscape of Darjeeling hills not only in the standard evolving narratives of forest history but also on the ownership of natural resources and resource extraction under the aegis of colonialism. The history of forest administration and conservation in Darjeeling is closely linked with the conservancy efforts under the British Government of India. Most of the seminal writings on the colonial forest history of India have unfurled the mega and micro-narratives of resistance of indigenous people living inside or in the peripheral zones of forests that took place during the colonial regime. The Eastern Himalayan forests of which Darjeeling forms a part has remained an unexcavated zone in terms of its historicity to explore the nature of resistance of the indigenous forest dwellers and corresponding colonial encounters if any. To the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills, respect for Nature was reflected in their attitude to land. To them, the land was not a commodity but a gift of Nature. The British occupation of Darjeeling and their concomitant interventions in forests significantly altered the vision of life and mode of subsistence of the indigenous people and prevented them from natural inner transmigration which was essential both for shifting cultivation and cattle grazing. Unfortunately, any significant form of contestation in the form of resistance did never take shape. The indigenous people were gradually outnumbered by the growing number of exogenous people who migrated principally from the Eastern part of Nepal and failed to establish any social voice or consciousness to be created by sustained socio-religious, cultural and economic institutions. The indigenous resistance to colonial interventions in Darjeeling forests has been perceived here from a broader frame of Environmental History.*

Keywords: Interventions, Resistance, Natural Resources, Colonialism, Indigenous People, Landscape, Forest, Eastern Himalayas

The study attempts to unravel the impact of the 19th-century colonial interventions in the forests of Darjeeling Hills. It has been traced to seek how such interventions did affect her indigenous people and the resultant reactions, if any, to such colonial inroads. The indigenous resistance to colonial forestry in Darjeeling hills has been intended to be perceived from the broader frame of Environmental history. The study explores whether the Colonial Powerscape of Darjeeling Hills provided for a strong predicament to develop any subaltern consciousness of resistance

Without delving deep into the roots of epistemological and anthropological details, the phrase 'people' randomly used in this study refers to a group of people or a community having cultural distinctiveness, living in a defined space/ region, a sense of belonging together, having its knowledge production system which may be seen as an alternative to modern positivist knowledge system. Thus, indigeneity provides for a distinctive cultural system, a place and her people different from the place, people and culture system of the ' Other' [1].

Atul Saklani (1987)[2], Guha (1989)[3] Rangarajan (1992)[4] and many more other scholars have shown that the Himalayas perpetuated an established tradition of protests and agitations. Between 1817 and 1940, major peasant rebellions took place in the Western Himalayas. The Paik Rebellion of 1817 in Orissa, the Santhal Rebellion of Chotonagpur in 1855, the Gudden-Rampa Rebellion in1879, the Tribal rebellion of South Ranchi in 1899 led by Birsa Munda, the Garhwal hills protests and resistances during 1900 to 1924. Such subaltern rebellions or resistances to colonial rule were conspicuously absent in Darjeeling Himalayas throughout colonial dispensation. Here lies a strong argument for the study of historical conditions that prevailed thereof and to explore the uniqueness of geographical, political, economic, social, cultural and environmental settings as prevailed in Darjeeling. The study attempts to unravel the impact of colonial interventions on this maiden hilly tract which largely affected her indigenous people and her landscape. An attempt has been made here to understand the reaction of the indigenous people against such colonial inroads.

The British notion of Nature as indoctrinated in the mindscape of the colonial officials engaged initially in colonial Darjeeling was fundamentally different from the notion of Nature of the indigenous people who lived in and lived with Nature. Unlike Europeans, forest to the indigenous people was their natural abode and means of subsistence and was certainly not a source of profit extraction. The debate on the issue of ownership/entitlement of forests in India emerged only after the establishment of the Department of Forest.[5] Such a debate has been well analyzed in three broad categories,[6] the first of which they call "annexationist" implying absolute state control over forests. The second one is the "pragmatic" favouring arguably state management of ecologically sensitive and strategically valuable forests keeping apart the areas to remain under the communal system of management. The third category as they termed "populist" refers to the rejection of state intervention, holding that tribal and peasants must exercise sovereign rights over the woodlands. However, none of these categories can be well-founded when applied to colonial Darjeeling for an explanation.

The forests in Eastern Himalayas due to their distinctive climate, rainfall, soil, topography and other habitat factors give rise to tropical rain forests to mountain-temperate forests. As a part of the Eastern Himalaya, Darjeeling Himalaya is characterized not only by ecological fragility but also by a deep historical, demographic and geographical sensitivity. Darjeeling Himalayas never constituted a part of the Hindu or Mughal imperial complex. The demographic complexion in Darjeeling Hills is the product of a long and complex process of migration not only from Sikkim, Nepal, Tibet and Bhutan but also from countries of the South-East Asian region. Primordial people living in this area mostly held Mongoloid culture and civilization and remained far away from the Aryan/ Dravidian civilization/ cultural fold. All this has created a high degree of ethnic and cultural differentiation positing thereby a vital link between the subcontinent and those of South and South East Asia.

To the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills, respect for Nature was reflected in their attitude to land.[7] To them, the land was not a commodity but a gift of Nature and their allegiance to the King, the Raja of Sikkim, was without question. The proprietary right over land and forest was a concept traditionally alien to them. The traditional economy was run on a barter system and taxes due to the Sikkim Raja were paid in kind or through labour. Hope Namgyal informs us that the land was not assessed and the subject was only obliged to give a small share of his labour, or the result of his labour to the State.[8] This system of paying the government through labour was prevalent in all the Himalayan kingdoms throughout the nineteenth century.[9]

Till the Darjeeling tract was brought under colonial control, the indigenous people were continued to be governed by their customary rules, rituals and practices. The British occupation of Darjeeling and their concomitant interventions in forests significantly altered their vision of life and the pattern of subsistence of the indigenous people. The replacement of the barter economy by the monetary economy brought about fundamental changes in their life and pattern of livelihood. The imposed political boundary, fundamentally altered new system of economy prevented indigenous people from natural inner transmigration which was essential both for shifting cultivation and cattle grazing. The colonial notion of rights over forest land had been a contested issue between the indigenous people and the colonial state with its temporal powers as self-proclaimed guardian of Darjeeling and her forest. Col. Lloyd's Proclamation on 12 October 1838 is well apt to quote here while it reads, "the people settled on the Darjeeling tract were now subjects of the Company and the laws of Sikkim would not apply to them…"[10](Immediately in the next year Dr. Campbell's appointment as the Superintendent, Darjeeling in 1839 was not only the phase of officially asserting British political rights over Darjeeling but also ushered in a new phase of colonial state-making.

Unfortunately, however, such contestation[11] in the form of resistance did never take shape in Darjeeling Hills. This paper is a cursory attempt to respond to such why the question of the absence of resistance or rebellion to colonial absorption of Darjeeling and her forests and corresponding dispossession of the indigenous people and their consequent disruption due to economic changes that had ebbed and flowed across the landscape of Darjeeling since the middle of the nineteenth century. On the other end, the indigenous people were gradually outnumbered by the growing number of people who migrated principally from the Eastern part of Nepal. Resultantly, the outnumbered and marginalized indigenous people had failed to establish any social voice or consciousness to be created by sustained socio-religious, cultural and economic institutions. These material historical processes and their mutual intersections gave rise to a unique state-society relationship in Darjeeling Hills. The presence or absence of indigenous resistance to colonial interventions in Darjeeling in general and forests, in particular, has been intended to be perceived here from the broader frame of Environmental History.

The official correspondences of East India Company and thereafter those of the British India Government as the principal source of the historiography of colonial Darjeeling would have us take it that it was not forests of Darjeeling Hills which attracted the preliminary attention of the British. Poor accessibility and high cost of transportation might have discouraged them from commercially exploiting the forest timber of the Tract. Therefore, the primary intention was to create a social space in the physical space of Darjeeling equitable to the European environment wherein the company officials would take refuge and would feel at home. The strategic location of Darjeeling as a military space had received adequate attention too. The ceded part of Kalimpong Hills(once owned by Sikkim) from Bhutan at a later year (1865) reapproves the argument that it was not forested but the consideration of strategic location prompted the British to annex the entirely forested hilly part of Kalimpong with the District of Darjeeling.

The fact is well discernible from a letter of Lieutenant Colonel G.W.A. Lloyd dated 18th June 1829, addressed to Lord William Bentinck, Governor-General. H.V. Bayley in his Book "Dorje-ling",[12] claims that the stated letter has been "the first official record connected with "Dorje-ling". Lloyd writes, "I ... have little doubt the advantages it ("Old Goorka Station called Darjeeling") possesses as a Sanitarium". Lloyd's intention to establish a military installation in Darjeeling is well apparent when he further writes "this position would be a

check by commanding an entrance into Nepal and Bootan". Bayley tells us that Mr. Grant, the Commercial Resident at Maldah, had about the same period brought frequently to the notice of the Governor-General, the numerous advantages promised by the establishment of a Sanitarium at Darjeeling. On receipt of such correspondences, the Governor-General requested Captain Herbert, the Deputy Surveyor General to explore the tract of the Sikkim hills in company with Mr. Grant.

As Bayley reports us the journey was undertaken by them accordingly and they separately reported back to the Governor-General wherein Captain Herbert strongly advocated especially for the occupation of the track for a military position as the key of a pass into the Goorka territory. The EIC (East India Company) Court of Directors expressed hope to hear from the Reports and was convinced that the local Government had found it practicable and advisable to establish a Sanitarium at Dorjeling and to create a permanent Cantonment for a European Regiment. Accordingly, the instruction was issued to Colonel Lloyd to open a negotiation with the Raja of Sikkim for the Cession of Darjeeling to the British Government in return for an equivalent in land or money as might be deemed reasonable. Darjeeling was ultimately occupied by the British through a Deed of Grant issued by the Rajah of Sikkim during February 1835. The British occupation of 640 sq. miles area of Darjeeling from the Raja of Sikkim was made complete during 1850. The Daling sub-division of which Kalimpong was the headquarters together with Duars areas were annexed from Bhutan Raja under the Senchula Treaty on November 11th, 1865 and the Kalimpong hill areas were included in the District of Darjeeling, thereby increasing the area of the District from 640 to 1164 square miles.[13]

As reported in the British official records, the Darjeeling tract including Kalimpong had been sparsely populated if not "uninhabited".[14] Captain Herbert described Darjeeling as a place "completely clothed with forest from the top to the bottom". However, Lloyd reported that the spot so-identified as Darjeeling "was formerly occupied by a large village or town (unusual circumstances in the country) and some shops were set up in it; one of the principal Lepcha Karjees resided here, and the remains of his house, and also of a gombah or temple built of a stone are still extant; also several stone tombs or chaityas of different forms, Karjees and Lamas". Captain Herbert reapproves the fact that twelve hundred able-bodied Lepchas forming two-thirds of the population of Sikkim have been forced to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood, owing to the oppression of the Raja".[15]

There has been unanimity among the Historians, Anthropologists and Imperial Officers that Lepchas(originally called " Rong") are considered to be the most ancient of all communities and are the original people / indigenous tribe of Sikkim-Darjeeling. (Historians like Gorer, E.C. Dozey, G.B. Mainwaring, J.C. White, and many others have agreed to this argument. However, within a passage of few decades, Lepchas in Darjeeling presented themselves as a minority in the whole course of colonized phase. About the brisk transformation and the change of demography in Darjeeling, Risley writes in his "The Gazetteer of Sikkim, "The settlement of Darjeeling advanced rapidly, its population having risen from not more than 100 souls in 1839 to about 10,000 in 1849 chiefly by immigration from the neighbouring states of Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan...".[16]

It is to be noted that before 1891, there has been no recorded census for Darjeeling. The census of 1891 is a good pointer to the rate of Nepali Settlement under British patronage. The Census recorded a population of 30458 for Darjeeling of which 18814 were Nepali. The Lepchas became a minority in their place. By 1931, the Nepali population in Darjeeling

constituted 52 percent, 21 percent were of the Scheduled castes and Tribes from Indian Plains, Lepchas and Sikkimese Tibetans formed 4 percent, Bhutanese 1 percent and the rests were the upper caste Hindus, Muslims and non-tribal Christians. The census of 1941 further shows the steady growth of the Nepali population (67.6 percent) and the gradual decline of the Lepcha population (3.2 percent). Gorer observed that the "Lepchas are a dying race".[17]

L.A. Waddell informs us that the Mountainous tract of Darjeeling belonged to Lepchas.[18] It has been already referred that the whole tract of Darjeeling was covered under forest from the bottom to the top. The indigenous people had an intimate association with forest and forest played the most important role in their material and social life. Forest played an inclusively crucial role in their social, economic and religious life too. They had their religion which was a sort of animism or nature worship that was distinctively different from the religious practices of the people living in the plains. It has been claimed that Lepchas are agriculturist by nature. However the method of cultivation was not settled plough culture, instead, their method of cultivations was Jhuming (shifting cultivation) by burning down the forest. However, cultivation did not provide them with even a basic subsistence as they were found to subsist on wild roots, mountain spinach, fren tops, fings, etc.[19] To the indigenous people, Livestock husbandry was not an appendage to agriculture, but a significant component of their economy.[20] Lepchas and Bhutias used to rear animals to supplement agriculture like cows, buffaloes, pigs, goats, sheep, country chicken, etc.[21] Lepchas became familiar with the forest ecology from their childhood as they spent their life with the forest zone for shifting cultivation and grazing the cattle. Thus the indigenous people depended fully on forest and forest produce for their subsistence. This material linkage of life with forest came under strain with the advent of colonialism in Darjeeling Hills.

Immediately after the occupation of Darjeeling usually called 'British Sikkim', the entire tract was brought under the administrative control of the East India Company. The area was initially administered by following the tradition of large 'non-regulation provinces' in which political Agents/Superintendent/District Officials to be governed with tremendous executive discretion at the local level. To adumbrate, the nature of colonial governance in Darjeeling had been an admixture of two traditions of administration – the Bengal Tradition and the Punjab Tradition, while the former was based on the British Home Model of due process and the Punjab Tradition of non-regulation provinces in which political agents did have a predominant role to play.[22] In fact, Darjeeling Hills were kept under the control of the Bengal Presidency and was initially administered by a superintendent having tremendous executive discretionary powers within the broader legislative framework of Bengal Province and under the control of the Court of Directors chaired by the Governor-General. The advent of colonialism in British Sikkim and the application and implementation of the Rules and Procedure of the British Government did remain almost a hazard-free exercise. The reasons are not far to seek. Neither the whole tract of Darjeeling was predefined as Zamindari Khas (self-cultivated holdings) or under Raiyati (predefined occupancy rights of the cultivating tenants). Both the Darjeeling tract and her indigenous people did not hear the arrangement of land under Permanent Settlement, 1793 nor did the Bengal Tenancy Act 1885 ever operate in Darjeeling. Consequentially, the British administrative march and establishment of rules and procedures in Darjeeling went unabated. For building sanitarium, military station, civic system, construction of roads and bridges, tea plantation and cinchona plantation, the establishment of tourist resort required significant forest clearance and the import of labour from neighbouring zones, where the reservation of forests was underway, forest conservancy received prominence at this juncture.

The British held absolute proprietary rights over forests. The Forest Act of 1865 reads, "the local government may from time to time constitute any forest land or wasteland which is the property of the government, or over which the government has proprietary rights, or to the whole or any part of forest produce of which the government is entitled, a reserved forest." The provisions of the said Act provided for the management and preservation of forests and regulated the exploitation of forest resources. Regulations were imposed on the dwellers of forests on the collection of forest produce. The Act provided for a series of prohibitions but nothing was there regarding the principles of managing the forests. The Forest Act of 1878 was more comprehensive than the 1865 Act and divided the forests into (a) Reserved; (b) Protected; (c) Village Forests. Local Governments were given the right to notify any forest or land as a protected forest. The Forest Act of 1927 consolidated further the state control over forest. Duties were levied or transit and forest produce such as timber and other forest products. The Forest Act of 1878 was more stringent and ruthlessly restricted the users of the forest. Grazing, pasturing of cattle, shifting cultivation by burning woods was also strictly prohibited in the Reserved forests. The Government held unfettered rights of ownership in reserved forests and their products were not to be used by forest dwellers unless specifically permitted by way of grant of privilege and not as a matter of entitlement. In the meanwhile cattle-trespass Act, 1871 prohibited pasturing of cattle in the reserved forests.

The British forester E.P. Stebbing informs us that the forest conservancy in Bengal was first initiated in British Sikkim[23] forest conservancy began in Darjeeling in 1864 when Dr. T. Anderson was appointed temporarily as Conservator of Forests, Lower Provinces (which included Darjeeling Hilly Track). The Forest Act of 1865 provided an impetus to the British local authority in Darjeeling. Under the newly appointed Conservator, a hierarchical bureaucratic structure was established for the proper management and conservancy works. Till 1870, Darjeeling forest was kept under Bhagalpur Division. From 1870 to 1876, it was administered under Cooch – Behar Forest Division. In 1877, the Darjeeling Forest Division was established with three subdivisions as Darjeeling, Teesta and Kurseong. In 1879, the Teesta Division was reconstituted as Kalimpong Division (No.124F, dated Calcutta, 1st February 1879, B.43 PR, NAI, New Delhi). In all these three sub-divisions forest conservancy was initiated with the help of working plans having ten years in perspective. Since 1892, such working plans began to operate in Darjeeling Forest Divisions with the help of a structured forest bureaucracy having enormous powers of discretion at its hand.

The most serious consequence of colonial forestry was the diminution of customary rights as well as the decline in traditional conservation and management systems. The curtailment of communitarian ownership of forests of Darjeeling by the colonial state had severely undermined the subsistence economy of the indigenous Lepchas. Collection of Bamboos, Wax and Lac from the Darjeeling forest was prohibited by the issuance of licenses. Like all other British Indian forests, Jhuming or shifting cultivation was discouraged without providing appropriate alternative arrangements or land to the Lepchas for settled agriculture. As a consequence, there had been the displacement of Lepchas from their natural forest land habitats. Restrictions on the collection of forest produce imposition of prohibitionary norms on grazing and gradual dwindling of grazing grounds of different seasons affected badly the indigenous people of Darjeeling hills. Nowhere in the British forest policy or the colonial Acts, had the rights of the indigenous Lepchas been specifically mentioned. Ultimately Lepchas had to leave Reserved Forest of Darjeeling and they were instructed to move south-west part of the District, between the hilly tract and the plains.[24] Again during the 1920s Lepcha tenants were evacuated and resettled. For their resettlement due to the expansion and

construction of Kalimpong as an urban area, deforestation of 999 acres of forest land in Lolegaon Reserved Forest was proposed and sanction for such deforestation was granted by the colonial government.[25] As a consequence the Lepchas became refugees in their land.

No official records on Colonial Darjeeling or oral narratives would have us believe that there had been forest conflicts or intensive local opposition to the colonial state-sponsored forest conservancy at the one end and forest clearance on the other in the name of scientific forest management in surface and tea garden expansion in sublime. What the indigenous people of Darjeeling Hills had to witness as a dormant spectator was the expanding power play of the colonial state in reorganizing and reshaping the landscape by way of infusion of the colonial capital. Tea Plantation, Cinchona Plantation, Forest Management, Military Installation and Civic Urban formation of Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong and few other localities, Roads and Railways constructions impacted heavily on the flora, fauna and human land use in particular and on the environment in general. Curbing of local access to forests brought fundamental changes in the traditional pattern of resource use and resulted from the diminution of the rights of indigenous people of Darjeeling. The absence of any intensified conflict in the form of protest, resistance, or rebellion between the colonial state and the indigenous people was perhaps due to the incapacity of the indigenous people to make their presence felt in a meaningful manner.

Prohibitory rules in the name of forest conservancy, prohibitions on the use of forest resources and grazing were randomly imposed by the local forest government. Rules relating to Grazing were modified time and again in Darjeeling Forest Division from 1913 to 1925. All these put the indigenous Lepchas in an extremely pitiable condition and they were destined to be displaced. The letter of A.A. Wace, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, addressed to Commissioner of Rajshahi Division, bears the testimony of such plights. The letter reads, "Anxious as I am to secure permanently the interest of Lepchas in this district, I cannot shut my eyes to the fact that, as they exist in our unsettled tract, they are an obstacle to all improvement cultivation or increase of revenue. They settle in a forest, clear a bit and sow it, and then pass on to cut down new forests, without giving in return for the valuable timbers destroyed. What we should aim at is to see them as they can afford to pay an easy rent for. As a regards the Lepchas on the tract under reference, I would give them the option of building on 15 to 20 acres each where they now are, securing their interests by giving them one of our Kalimpong Leases, or moving to the Lepcha blocks north of Kalimpong on payment by Planter of a liberal compensation for removal [26]

In response to the above official communication, the Government ordered the local authority at Darjeeling to take action. Accordingly, the Lepchas were driven to the Kalimpong range of the Hills. Ultimately, there was displacement time and again in the face of growing Tea Plantation in that area. Lepchas were sent again to the lower elevation of the Kalimpong tract where they lost both of their life and livelihood. Lepcha resettlement issue in Darjeeling hills was left much to be desired. Lepcha displacement was indeed by colonial capitalist development unknown to the indigenous people. Despite such displacement and destitution, the Lepchas could not go beyond memorandum, and submission of petitions. The numerical stream of the Lepchas, demographic changes in the process of colonial state making in Darjeeling which made them minority, the social and economic incapacity of the indigenous people to raise voice against the overarching colonial power structure, the omnipresence of British military installations are some of the fundamental historically corroborated reasons behind the absence of resistance and rebellion in Darjeeling hills during the colonial phase. At least discontents were never brought to the public surface. On the other the beginning of the

monetary economy and infusion of the colonial capital, forest policies forced Lepchas to change their traditional forest-based lifestyle based on Jhum cultivation and natural forest produce. The imperatives of colonial state making in Darjeeling were comparatively so large and huge that the small indigenous people were not at all in a position to intensify any resistance against the colonial order except in few cases of occasional negligible breaches of the forest law in some areas.

The experience of colonization of Darjeeling Hills largely transformed the socio-economic profile of this sparsely populated hill tract. The fundamental change replaced the primordial pre-capitalist traditional production relations and had brought forward a modern capital-based production relation economy. The old clan-based communities, traditional class hierarchies got dismantled in the process of material landscape transformation. Darjeeling witnessed fundamental ecological changes too due to growing tea plantations, roads and railways construction, making of towns and military institutions. All these development-induced transformations resulted in a strong colonial political regime, colonial ecological regime, colonial planters regime, installation-based military regime, Christian missionary led neo-cultural regime and newly in migrated middle-class regime in Darjeeling Hills. The imported labourers principally Nepalis, Bhutias and Sikkimese from the neighbouring areas as wage earners forming a new working-class could not form any meaningful voice. The new eco-imperialist order drastically replaced the indigenous ecosophical order and attempted to invest the idea of "difference" in the minds of the inhabitants of Darjeeling(cutting across religion, sect and culture) through all possible channels of social engineering. The "natural" difference between the hills and the plains was purposively indoctrinated through the system of colonial governability that distinguished Darjeeling as a unique socio-economic and cultural zone and finally as a separate ecological region as a whole.[27] Such a colonially articulated socio-cultural and politico-administrative power scope of colonial Darjeeling provided for a strong predicament to develop any subaltern consciousness of resistance against the overarching colonial state.

The nineteenth-century colonial state-making and the unquestionable colonial right over the colonized forest were powerfully influenced by the emergence of modernity, a constellation of ideas and institutions, as a worldwide phenomenon.[28] But the generalization of the impact of such notion of modernity can never be similar over every space and region. Variegated regions/local spaces and patterns of environmental and landscape change suggest qualifications that have serious implications. Academically customized discourses of Nationalist Political Economy School or Nostalgic Idealist School on colonial deforestation and concomitant resistance of the indigenous people often lack explanatory power when applied to Darjeeling case. A close look at the colonizing process of forested hills would have us believe that colonized Darjeeling had been a unique experience of environmental landscape transformation devoid of any indigenous resistance and could have never been qualified as a "landscape of resistance" in the colonial period.

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