

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway and the Untold Story of its Extension

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The UNESCO's inscription mentions the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR) in the following words: - "The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is the first, and still the most outstanding, example of a hill passenger railway. Opened in 1881, it applied bold and ingenious engineering solution to the problem of establishing an effective rail link across a mountainous terrain of great beauty. It is still fully operational and retains most of its original features intact."^{1a}

The Tiny, name of the first engine of the DHR, connected the sweaty plains with the cool and serene Hills for the first time in 1880.² On March 4 of that year, the then Viceroy of India, Robert I, Earl of Lytton inaugurated the line from Siliguri to Kurseong as steam tramway. From August 1880, the tramway was opened for the public use. It was only on July 4, 1881, the line was completed up to Darjeeling and the name was changed from Darjeeling Steam Tramway Company to Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company on 15th of September. It is amazing to know that this small size locomotive, running on a narrow gauge of 2 feet wide covering a total distance of 52 km, had its branches as well. The fact of its two branches i.e. the Kishengunj Branch and the Teesta Valley Extension is common to all. However, few are familiar about its unfulfilled plans of extensions. This article is indeed to highlight such untold facts of DHR extension.

The importance and vitality of Darjeeling can be understood when we come across the view of Alastair Lamb, who says, 'the cession of Darjeeling was an event of the greatest importance in the history of northern frontier of India.' He further suggests that as the hill station of Shimla 'was destined to play a part in the history of Anglo-Tibetan relations, comparable to that played later by another hill station, Darjeeling.'³ Even Joseph Hooker in

a. The proposal for DHR as a World Heritage site was submitted by the National Rail Museum on 29 June 1998 to the UNESCO. Many inquiry and evaluations were made for the heritage criteria and the DHR was sanctioned the status of the World Heritage. Criteria: (i) Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is an outstanding example of the influence of an innovative transportation system on the social and economic development of a multi-cultural region, which was to serve as a model for similar developments in many parts of the world. (ii) The development of railways in the 19th century had a profound influence on social and economic developments in many parts of the world. This process is illustrated in an exceptional and seminal fashion by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway. 2. The Eastern Indian Railway workshop situated at Jamalpore (Jamalpur) was assigned to construct the first engine of the DHR & due to its size instantly christened as 'Tiny'.

1850 in his *Himalayan Journal* recorded that the prospects of Darjeeling itself are neither doubtful nor insignificant. The location of the place is a nature's gift in itself. It has the mighty, magnificent peaks and mountain ranges, soothing climate enriched with flora, and fauna, leaves one's heart singing and mesmerizing. Surrounded by Sikkim, Nepal and Bhutan, Darjeeling therefore, occupies an important place in terms of strategy and commerce. 'Trade' consisted a chief feature of the British administration. Reflection of which could be gathered from the Calcutta Review of 1857 that Darjeeling was the gate^b through which commerce and culture of the west could reach central Asia. Similarly in 1861, Sir Ashley Eden expressed his view to the Government of Bengal that 'a very considerable trade will spring up between Lhasa and Darjeeling. The Tibetans will only be too glad to exchange gold dust, musk, borax, wool and wait for English cloth, tobacco etc. and the people of Sikkim will gain as carriers of this trade, and their government will raise a considerable revenue from the transit duties.' By 1864, the Government of Bengal was convinced that Darjeeling could develop as a center of Indo-Tibetan trade as evident from Table 1 and Table 2.

Table 1: Imports from and exports to (in Rs.) Tibet and Sikkim

From & to	Years	Imports	Exports
Tibet	1862-63	64,005	43,700
Sikkim	1860-63	89,535	19,450

Source: Sen, J., *Darjeeling: A Favoured Retreat*, Indus Publishing Company, New Delhi, 1989, p.25.

Table 2: Imports from and exports to (in Lakhs of Rs.) Sikkim

Years	Imports	Exports
1880-81	1.68	0.81
1900-01	4.21	2.46

Source: Banerjee, A.K., *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, 1980.

From Nepal food- grains, cotton piece goods, manufactured wool and hides, potatoes, sheep, goats, cattle and poultry were imported in return for European piece-goods and cotton twist, salt, kerosene-oil, tobacco and food-grains.⁴ The trade with Sikkim was of same kind. In addition, that of Bhutan was in small scale since most of the Bhutanese trade passed through the district of Jalpaiguri.

There was already the public demand for a good cart road for trade purpose much before the coming of the DHR. The Indo-Tibetan trade was in a flourishing condition. The opening of the DHR in 1881 has been jotted down by Sarat Chandra Das that 'By the opening of the Darjeeling railway, Calcutta where most of the Chinese articles valued in Tibet may be easily and chiefly procured, will be brought within three weeks' journey of

b. In the early eighties of the last century frontier trade with Nepal was registered at Naksalbari, Ghum and Kanjilia. 'Report on the External Trade of Bengal, with Nepal, Sikkim and Bhutan for the year 1880-81', Government of Bengal, Calcutta, 1881, pp. II-III.

Lhasa... The Tibetans thoroughly appreciate these facilities, and every Tibetan who has ever visited Darjeeling warmly praises our government for making the Jelep la Road. The Chinese government naturally fear that with the opening of free intercourse between Tibet and India, China will be a great loser so far as her commercial interest are concerned.⁵

The success of DHR in the hill station and the profitable return on the dividend of 8% to the investors in 1886 (Table 3) gave Franklin Prestage, Chairman of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company, the idea of an extension line to Nepal (Fig.1). 'The bait of Tibetan wool, inter alia, led to the proposal of a big leap to reach the heart of Central Asia through the extension of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway'.⁶

Table 3: Dividend return to the investors

Year	Percentage
1886	8
1895	10-12
1909-10	8
1914-15	15-16
1919-20	8

Source: From different records of the DHR

He was serious about his scheme and submitted the same to the Government of India. He, in the same year unofficially communicated to the Resident of the Nepali Durbar about the possibility of a shorter distance for the Central Asian trade via Nepal. Since the trade between China and Tibet was carried on through the Arun valley and if the scheme of the extension line materializes, India would procure the benefits. The distance of the Tingri

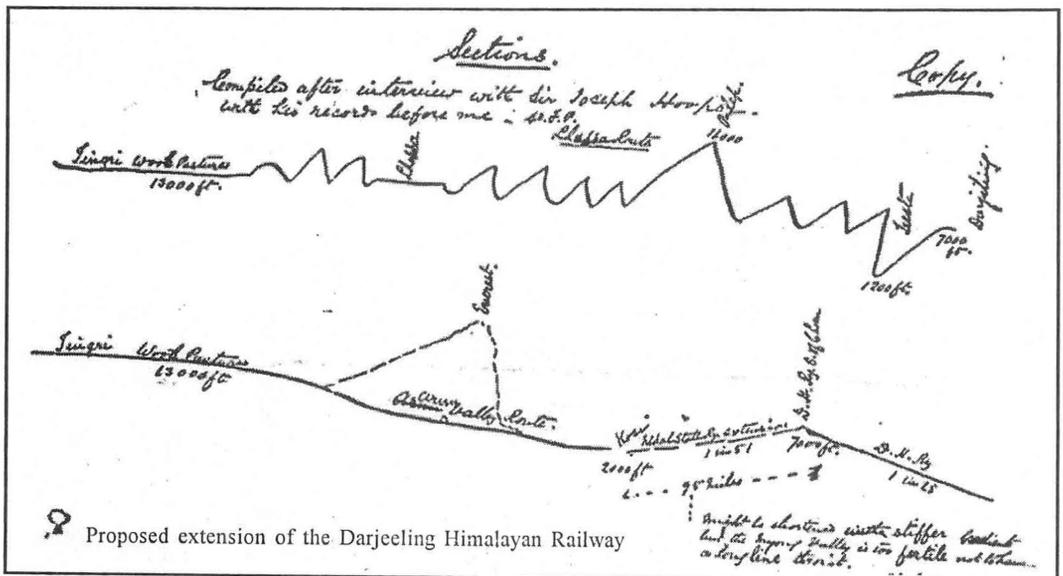


Fig. 1: Sketch of the proposed extension of DHR to Nepal by Prestage

Source: Sen, J., *Darjeeling: A Favoured Retreat.*

Maidan, the pasture and wool producing center of Tibet, was only 262 miles away from the terminus of DHR via Tamakote, the proposed terminus for Nepal extension. It was only 180 miles from Tamakote with a continuous descent of Arun Valley from 12,500 ft. to 2,900ft. Whereas, the existing distance via Lhasa was 770 miles. Franklin Prestage's plan was the inclusion of a bridle track across the frontier into Nepal, by Ilam or by the best route into the Tambur Valley to Dhankota, an important market at the confluence of the Kosi, the Arun and the Tambur rivers as well as Arun Valley and Kathmandu roads.

The official effort of Prestage noticed in the correspondence to the Resident on 25 June 1889 that the Directors of the DHR Co. might approach the Nepal Durbar with the proposal of an extension line starting from the terminus of the Kosi and Arun on the east end of Kathmandu Valley, about 82 miles in length. Further, it will be extended along the Singalila Range to the most suitable point. In a letter dated 20 September 1889 Prestage got the green signal from the Secretary to the Government of India on the condition that he should consult the Resident. To make sure of its execution Prestage integrated certain beneficiary points for both the countries.⁷ He cited for Nepal the advantages like:

- i. Cheaper and faster rail transport
- ii. Availability of surplus food grains from Rangpur, Dinajpore and other districts of North Bengal at low rates in times of scarcity or famine
- iii. Easy availability of nearest market for surplus produce or imports of goods
- iv. The prospects of Tea gardens at an elevation from 3000 ft to 5000 ft.
- v. Even if 5 miles on each side of the line is brought under cultivation, it will bring Rs. 3,60,000 per annum.
- vi. Permanent revenue may be incurred from the fertile valley of Myong and Tambur.
- vii. Trade in the Arun Valley with Tibet would benefit the Nepal govt.
- viii. Job opportunity for surplus labour is guaranteed
- ix. The forest trees on the Myong ridges may be supplied as charcoal, tea chests etc. which otherwise was brought from Japan etc.

Advantages for India:

- i. Easy availability of Tibetan wool, the cost of transport would be 1/3 than that of Lhasa and Sikkim route
- ii. Availability of fuel midway on the line
- iii. Increase of wood and wool exports to Calcutta
- iv. Recruitment of Gurkha soldiers
- v. To procure skilled and intelligent labour for railway in the plains
- vi. Free use of waste land for the construction purpose (if permitted by the Durbar) etc.

However, on 9th October, 1889 the Resident of Nepal Durbar reported Prestage about the refusal of the proposal. Finally, on 4th November, 1892 it was officially confirmed when the Secretary to the Government of Nepal wrote of Durbar's inability to comply with the proposal for the construction of the railway in the country. The proposal of Prestage was much calculated and planned just like the DHR. His many attempts were foiled by the Durbar and his dream were never meted. He died in October 1897.⁸ Nepal, in the present context enjoys very little scope of railway network. Perhaps the acceptance might have given Nepal the needed economic benefits in terms of tourist and natural resources. However, Nepal must have her own reason for the refusal. Moreover, a peep into the governmental

papers and reports reflects the uncertainty of the peaceful relations. There were always doubts and precautions on any developments on either side of the boundary. For instance according to Darjeeling district records, in 1839, when the Nepal durbar pleaded for a passage of its troops through sikkim for the conquest of Bhutan; Hodgson was convinced of Nepal's expansion towards the east. According to a letter dated 14th November, 1854 Edmonstone informed that the preparation of Jung Bahadur were directed against Tibet even though the Government may see reason for watchfulness.¹⁰

The letter dated 5th December, 1872 reveals that Colonel Houghton, the then Commissioner of Cooch Behar, expressed his deep concern on the proposed visit of Jung Bahadur to Darjeeling. 'The mere idea of his visit is a cause of much alarm to the inhabitants. I have this day received a report that the inhabitants of Dooars are burying their valuable and preparing to flee. Bhootea Durbar regards his movement with suspicion and an intimation that he was coming to the neighborhood of the chief pass into the country would increase this feeling. My own subjects, I am told, believed that his visit has a reference to some common projects hostile to themselves connected between Sir Jung Bahadur and the Bhooteas.'¹¹ Another instance was the news of strong garrisons along the Darjeeling frontier in 1878. Bengal was instructed 'to maintain an effective check upon attempts of the Nepal Durbar to import arms through India.'¹² Ultimately in 1888-89, Bengal accepted the proposal of A.W. Paul, Deputy Commissioner of Darjeeling, for a strong force at Tonglu, Sandakphu -Phalut range.¹³ From these extracts, it is understandable that the relation was always skeptical. Hence, the rejection of the DHR Extension to Nepal is not that complicated. The victory of Muglan (India was referred as Muglan i.e. the land of the Mughals by the inhabitants of Nepal) by the English might have opened their eyes.

Moreover, the Durbar itself had tasted the bitterness of the losses during the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-16. This was how the long effort and failure for the DHR extension to Nepal ended in a fiasco.

Other proposals for extension

As early as 1909, the Directors of the DHR Company thought of additional lines to meet the need of growing traffic (Table 4).

Table 4: Growing traffic for passenger and goods

Year	No. of Passenger	Freight (in tons)
1881	8,000	380
1884	36,500	16,730
1896-97	30,000 (approx.)	15,510
1909-10	174,000	47,000
1914-15	250,000	60,000
1917	239,696	59,740
1919-20	263,000	62,000

Source: *The Iron Sherpa*, Vol. 1, Martin Terry, 2006, U.K., pp. 63, 70, 173.

Hence to meet the requirement, in September 1909 proposals were made for three extension lines—one for Kishengunj, second for Kalimpong and the third one towards the Lebong spur. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Extensions Company (DHRE) was formed in 1913.¹⁴ The estimated return for the first two lines was Rs. 552,000. Out of which half would be used as working expense and a return of 5% be given as dividend to the investors. The DHRE Co. was authorized to construct a line from Panchanai to Kishengunj in the plains and another from the Sevoke to the Kalimpong respectively (Fig.2). The Kishengunj Branch of 67 miles and Teesta Valley Branch of only 26 miles were opened for traffic by 1915. However, after partition in 1947, the former was converted to meter gauge with further extension to Barsoi and Teesta Valley was converted to mixed 2 ft and meter gauge, which, too, was extended further. Unfortunately, in 1951 the line was abandoned after it was washed away the previous year.¹⁴

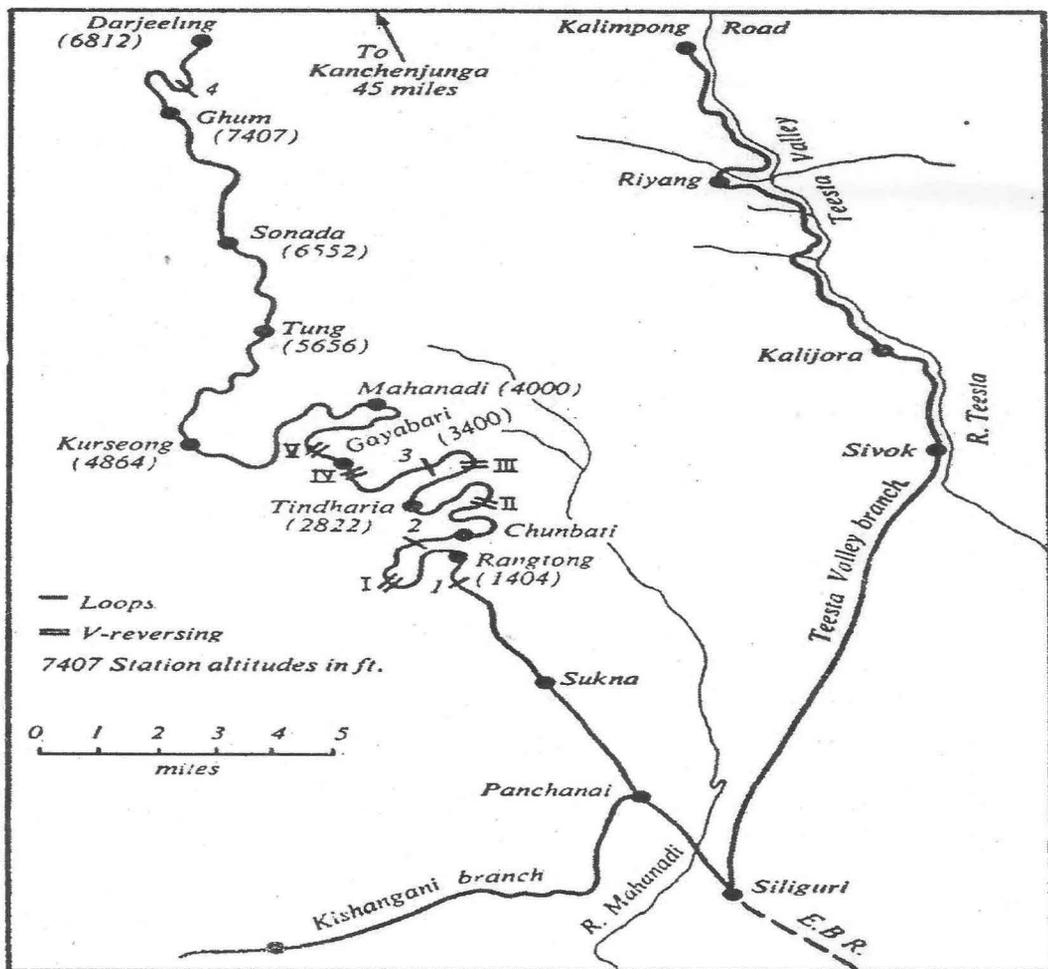


Fig. 2. Map of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway for which DHRE Co. was authorised to construct rail lines

Source: Bhandari R.R., Darjeeling Himalayan Railway

The third scheme to lay an outlay towards the Lebong spur, which is only 4½ miles from the Darjeeling town, was not sanctioned. The place was a military barrack and long before it, Prestage had already made an understanding with the army for transporting the troops at a reasonable price and comfort.*

Another such half-hearted steps were taken for an extension to the Mirik from Naxalbari. In the year, 1916-17 statistics were collected for the purpose. This was welcomed by the authorities of Behar and Orissa govt. for a summer resort but was inconclusive. Mirik, located at an altitude of 5,300ft attracted the attention of the DHR Co. and a fresh survey was made from Naxalbari via Panighatta and Namsu to Mirik, which again went in the obscurity.

During the same years of 1916-18, a plan was formulated for a further extension of the Teesta Valley line at 34½ miles, to Gangtok via cart road and Rangpu. Based on survey the scheme was first to construct a girder –bridge instead of existing suspension bridge on the river Teesta near its junction with Rangeet. The bridge was to be of 300 ft in length and few changes were to be done to avoid slips from hindering the regularity of the traffic. Altogether five stations were to complete the route –Melli at 3rd mile, Tarkhola at 9th mile, Rangpu at 14½ mile, Sankokhola at 24½ mile and lastly Gangtok. Rangpu would be serving as a siding for railway stock. The Sikkim line was to be constructed for tapping the resources of the country in general. This too, could not assume its fulfillment.

However, time has always emphasized the need and viability of such endeavors of extension attested to by the fact that the Railway Ministry is again reconsidering extensions to Mirik and Sikkim. If materialized such an act would definitely bring these areas under the flow of development and integration and will mark a new beginning in the glorious history of DHR.

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