

Understanding the Transformation of Colonial Darjeeling Hills Through the Study of South Asian Environmental History

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Abstract: While initiating the search for a causal relation between human society and nature, scholars have been able to establish environmental history as an enticing field of academic enquiry. Within the general historiographical discourse on environmental history, two broad trends seem discernable: the American tradition and the French tradition. While the former thrusts upon the dialectics of environmental destruction/degradation and conservation, with a focus on 'deep' ecology observing nature as possessing intrinsic value in itself which alone entitles it to be preserved and 'shallow' ecology, emphasizing preservation of nature because of its potential as a 'resource' for the use of humans the latter, represented by the Annales School of France, contradicts the American tradition of perennial changes occurring in the environment. The Annalists attempted to explain social and economic changes in an environmental setting that was subject to slow pace of observable change or no change.¹

Section I

A Brief Sketch of South Asian Environmental History

Placed between these two 'grand traditions', the environmental historians of South Asia have benefited from both ends. For instance, Richard Grove and John MacKenzie have seen India as one of the tropical regions of the colonial world where the efforts of conservation received initial impetus.² On the other hand, the influence of the notion of *longue durée*³ can be viewed from the work of Chetan Singh, for instance, who found the fixed, almost eternal Himalayas to be informing social and economic relations. Yet, South Asia's particular place in the field of environmental history perhaps rests on a set of unique and diverse ecological regimes with which American or French landscape may not be compared.⁴

Readings in Environmental History of South Asia is important for a number of reasons. Firstly, the field of environmental history has grown enormously over the past few decades in Europe, North America, and more recently in South Asia, particularly; there has been significant contribution to this emerging field in India. Secondly, an environmental perspective on South Asia is important for asserting environmentalism in

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the context of its identical experience of colonial ecological regime providing a general framework for studying its history. Thirdly, contemporary debates on environmental history in South Asia dwell on broad range of issues without adequate appreciation of many contemporary problems in its historical context. An environmental-historical perspective may substantially inform many of today's efforts towards attaining sustainability and well-being.⁵

Finally, this paper, however, is not an attempt to provide a broader framework for understanding the intricate historical events for a longer period rather it provides an outline of how did colonial material transformations bring change in the landscape and how did production relations and mode of resource use in the colonial period make marks on the society, economy and politics of the region with special reference to Darjeeling hills forming part of the Eastern Himalayas, located partly in South Asia. More precisely, this article is a humble academic search for historical palimpsest of colonial Darjeeling hills.

Section II

Understanding Transformations, Landscapes, and History of Palimpsests

Few landscapes in India have attracted as much least attention by the post-colonial scholarship in terms of material transformations and environmental enquiry as Darjeeling Himalaya. Taking the idea of transformation into consideration, it may be argued that from the beginning to the end of colonial Darjeeling, the process of transformation belonged to history of the period duly cushioned by the then contemporary factors and forces. Such process of history had taken two closely related forms. In the first, the courses of mediations and military conquests had brought British East India Company to power in Darjeeling hills. In the second variant, a group of European Tea Planters, administrators, traders, and timber merchants drew riches from mercantile activities and from commercial tea cultivation. In both versions of the subordination process of the local/settled people, critical mechanisms inhibited direct political and administrative control over the supply of resources required for the reproduction of British rule in Darjeeling.⁶

The material transformation of the landscape of colonized Darjeeling needs to be reviewed from this point of view along with two principal methodological tools of cultural biography and path-development approaches to landscape, such as (i) Landscape biographical approach and (ii) the Path-dependency approach.⁷ First, there is the physical dimension of the landscape. The immediately tangible landscape around us is called 'matterscape'. Second, there is the social dimension of landscape which may be called 'socioscape' or 'powerscape' comprising all the invisible norms, values, meanings and attitudes which surround the physical landscape or matterscape. Third is the individual

dimension, the 'mindscape' in which individual perception of the landscape is the key. It is reflected through art, literatures, music and such other forms of creative expression of the human mind.⁸

While dealing with the landscape of the Darjeeling hills, one has to consider the colonial imprint in such landscape. Landscape thus consists of different time layers that are separated by time barriers. In order to understand the functioning of a particular layer one has to rely on the political situations of the time that created the very landscape. Lotman calls these borders or boundaries – a 'cultural explosion'.⁹ Another way to look to landscape change is the path-dependency approach.¹⁰ Path dependency "*describes the stability of landscape in relation to changes, its development in accordance with the continuing traditions of previous generations, inherited meanings and the creations of a similar social geographical space*".¹¹ Viewed in this perspective, a historical palimpsest of colonial Darjeeling has been attempted.

Darjeeling has had a primordial/feudal history of material landscape in pre-change, pre-explosion and pre-transformation period. We have lack of information what had been happening in the vast mountain ridges that surround Darjeeling during the long pre-historic period and obscured pre-colonial past. In such a landscape, the system of land use must have been involved in the agricultural politics of the tribal chieftains of the kingdoms of the Eastern Himalayas. Colonial interventions brought radical changes, with new regimes, and kinds of explosions that created new meaning system for Darjeeling Hills.

The material linkage of life with forest came under complete strain with the advent of colonialism in the landscape of Darjeeling. Agrarian changes, concomitant state making and institution building, clearance of forests for making connecting roads and rails with the plains, commercial plantation of tea through British capitalist investments, invitation to the aristocracy of the neighboring plains for investment in making summer resorts by providing land at a concessional rate, private and state sponsored cinchona plantation, establishment of sanatoriums, resorts, military installations, introduction of scientific forestry, commercialization of natural resources, and etc, had been the economic and social changes that had ebbed and flowed across Darjeeling territory under colonial control.

Section III

Unique Material Transformations of Colonial Darjeeling

The motive of the British East India Company to occupy Darjeeling tract from the Rajah of Sikkim was not an accident of history, rather such occupation was a calculative move for strategic and political interests, as well as for resource extraction and revenue generation of the British Empire from the colonial periphery. The colonial

scientific forestry in India, as a matter of coincidence, was first initiated in Darjeeling during early sixties of the nineteenth century. By then, Darjeeling forests were started depleting for extension of colonial development activities, valuable timber extractions and expansion of commercial tea plantations. As a corollary, scientific conservation of forests was meshed with imperial agenda of extraction of resources out of forest resources. However, in materializing the principal objectives of scientific forest policies, both the forest officials and revenue officials in Darjeeling worked hand in hand where the forest officials had to play a subordinate role in relation to revenue administrative officials being the Superintendent at the helm of all affairs of Darjeeling who was bestowed with huge discretionary powers.¹² In order to usher in scientific forest conservation in Darjeeling, the colonial forest policy had been pursued with the primary objective for the dispossession of land, the restriction of use and access to resources, the imposition of codified rules ignoring traditional customs, the prohibition of local trade in forest produce for the purpose of basic sustenance by indigenous populations, imposition of levies and taxes, prohibitory rules for grazing and cattle raising, and prohibition of shifting cultivation. In view of the absence of any legally documented proprietary hold of the native population over forested lands of the Darjeeling tract, the British established unquestionable proprietary hold and supremacy over such forested tract. Thus for colonialists, lands became nature's prizes.¹³

The imperatives of colonial forestry in the Darjeeling hills were essentially commercial. Broader social and environmental considerations were subjugated by the commercial and strategic utility of the colonizers. However, such a statement from the point of view of academic objectivity may be half-truth. Despite their imperial utilitarian ethos, the British Indian forest administrators had equal concern for long term environmental effects of deforestation caused by illegal and indiscriminate logging by the local contractors and mafias and shifting cultivation practiced by indigenous population. This concern of the British foresters and officials would prompt us to the other part of truth that environmentalism and British imperialism have a shared past.¹⁴

The massive expansion of commercial tea plantations and urbanization had greatly impinged on the lives of indigenous people and migrant labour force settled permanently in Darjeeling. Colonial capital investment in tea plantation had fundamentally altered the edifice of the subsistence based traditional pre-colonial economy of Darjeeling. Such interventions had certainly disturbed, destroyed and reconstructed both the natural landscape and matterscape of Darjeeling tract as existed in pre-colonial situation, but such pre-colonial situation, for Darjeeling, has not been revealed by our study as "golden age of equilibrium" which was destroyed by the colonizers. Our study runs counter to the established arguments treating the environment as either static or the existence of pre-colonial natural harmony which experienced dramatic rupture under colonial interventions. Our study establishes the fact that under

the aegis of colonialism, the witnessed ecological transformations had been one of negotiated nature of

Thus, while viewing Darjeeling under colonial occupation, the present study agrees with the arguments of Richard English when he observes, "*the character of British interests in the Himalaya reflects two distinct phases in the development of the colonial economy in India: the first being the period of mercantile exploitation under the Company, and the second being the expansion of commercial agricultural investment under the civil administration of the Raj*".¹⁵

The British notion of Nature as indoctrinated in the mindscape of the colonial officials, since the beginning of colonial rule in Darjeeling was fundamentally different from the notion of Nature of the indigenous people who in fact lived in and lived with Nature. Nature to them was a strong cultural space and loosely defined political territory. The ecologically distinct attitude manifested the inter-communities ties with the natural world. The animist religious practices celebrated nature and natural objects. Unlike Europeans, forest to the indigenous people was their natural abode and means of subsistence and was certainly not a source of profit extraction. Colonial interventions brought about decisive changes in the ecology and society of the native hill population of the Darjeeling tract.¹⁶

It is therefore argued that for Darjeeling, environmentalism and colonialism have a shared past. However, the British Acts and Forest Rules were enacted and framed with the environmental concern along with the expansion of imperial powers. In this way, colonialism in the Darjeeling hills mothered environmentalism by the evolving system of governability.

From all the colonial legislations, it was clear that commercial interests were the primary consideration in declaring forests reserved and Darjeeling forests were of no exception. When the entire Darjeeling forested tract was occupied by the East India Company through a Deed of Grant from the Raja of Sikkim in 1835, there had been no personal proprietary hold over the forested land. Darjeeling tract was not either predefined as Zamindari Khas (self-cultivated holdings) or did remain under Raiyati (occupancy of the cultivating tenants). Unlike plains of South Bengal, there had been the absence of Jungle Zamindars in Darjeeling. This was the principal reason why Colonial scientific forestry under the Indian Forest Act, 1865, was first adopted in Darjeeling hills.

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The imperial objective for tea was to grow it in territories under British control rather than importing tea from China on a competitive scale. The British Scientists and Botanists under the leadership of Nathaniel Wallich had noticed that the tea plant succeeded best on the sides of mountains. During the same period, the coincidence was that including Darjeeling hill tract along with extensive tracts of the Himalayan foot-hills

had been brought under Company's direct control as the end results of wars with Burma, Nepal and Sikkim.¹⁸

The colonially induced expanding tea plantation lovingly called 'imperial cash crop', owned and engineered by the British planters under the patronage of British East India Company gave rise to an insular economy hitherto unknown by the indigenous people lived in so far on tradition based subsistence economy. In this way, as a part of grand imperial political project, Darjeeling hill was drawn into the world capitalist system. The incorporation was also part of the expanded reproduction so essential to the workings of the capitalist mode of production corroborated with colonial mode of natural resource use.¹⁹

Darjeeling witnessed fundamental ecological changes too due to rapid depletion of forests, growing tea plantation, roads and railways construction, making of towns and military institutions. All these colonial capital based development induced transformations resulted to a strong colonial political regime, colonial ecological regime, colonial planters regime, installation based military regime, colonial forest 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 along with as wage earners forming a new working class witnessed both peasatization and proletarianization categorized as toiling hill men, could not form any meaningful voice. Due to colonial encounter, Darjeeling hills experienced rapid changes in her landscape and in social relations accompanied by equally sweeping ecological transformations.²⁰

The colonial encounter in Darjeeling hills being a regional sub-space was never a part of the historical accounts of colonial India till the occupation of the Darjeeling tract by the East India Company in the mid-thirties of the nineteenth century. The colonially led politico-administrative processes had integrated Darjeeling into the larger colonial political economy of British India. Such integration had been momentous event of history for this peripherally situated border zone, so to say, an anomalous zone, remained outside the civilization centers of India. Here the significance of the colonial intervention lies in the unique modes of natural resource extraction made possible by the political dominance of the Raj and such tools or technologies previously unknown to the people of this peripheral Himalayan zone. Putting nature back to the historical studies, the present study searches the ways in which the material perspective has influenced the course of human history in Darjeeling.

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