

The Origin and Growth of Kalimpong as an Urban Hill Station in Colonial India: A Historical Study

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Abstract:

Urbanization has not been uniform all over the world. Different ages have witnessed localized growth. The degree of urbanization of a nation is generally defined as a proportion of the population resident in urban places. Kalimpong as a hill urban centre was developed later than the most hill stations in India. Kalimpong was nowhere on the map of India before 1865. Actually, the region of Kalimpong was originally a part of Sikkim from which it was taken over by Bhutan. Finally following a defeat in the Anglo-Bhutanese war in 1865 Bhutan handed over the tract to the British government of India in 1865. The trend of urbanization in Kalimpong was not same as the satellite town of Darjeeling rather Kalimpong civil station had a character of its own, totally different from the seasonal retreats by virtue of their social life, their good spirits and style. Above all it was meant for the Indians and Anglo-Indians.

Keywords: *Urbanization, development, Hill station, Settlement, Colonial*

Introduction:

The term 'urban' is derived from Latin word 'urbanus'. Urbanization means the process of the physical and social growth of a city both in terms of its social structure, population and cultural organization.¹ The Indian subcontinent shares, with Mesopotamia and the Nile valley, a long history of urbanization. The first phase of urbanization in the Indus valley was associated with the Harappan civilization dating back from around 2350 B.C. to 600 B.C. India, again came across towns and cities associated with the two major and closely related, cultural streams of India, namely the Aryan civilization of the North and the Dravidian civilization of the south from this period onwards. For about 2500 years,

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India has had a more or less continuous history of urbanization. However, from the historical evidence it is evident that there were both periods of urban growth and periods of urban decline.²

The story of urbanization in India in historical times is a story of spatial and temporal discontinuities. The earliest urban developments were confined to the Indus valley and the adjoining parts of Rajasthan, Punjab and to some extent western Uttar Pradesh. Other parts of the country remained outside the pale of urbanization. The causative factor behind urbanization varied from time to time, leading to not one but several urbanization processes at different points of time.³ In the historical periods, from the ancient to the British period, urbanization was inextricably related to the rise and fall of kingdoms, dynasties and empires, and thus, in effect urbanization during this period was essentially a political process. In recent times, urbanization has been associated with industrialization and economic development. In this sense, urbanization is essentially an economic process.⁴

Urbanization is a concept that refers to a demographic change involving an increase in the urban areas and the concentration of population in large urban settlements. The degree of urbanization of a nation is generally defined as a proportion of the population resident in urban places.⁵ The first hill stations were established as early as 1815, and by 1870 there were over 80 hill stations in four different areas in India, serving the four major metropolitan cities of Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Madras.⁶ The hill stations originally catered to the need of the British population in India, which consisted mainly of civilian and military personnel and their dependents. In course of time, a substantial native population migrated to these towns, seeking employment in providing the various services which the British needed.⁷ The British built schools, hospitals, hotels and clubs for the exclusive use of Europeans. Women and children of European origin outnumbered the men, who were compelled to spend longer times in the plains. In due course, the Indian princely families followed the British to the hill stations, where they established their summer palaces. Urbanization in Kalimpong was vastly different from plains like Calcutta and other metropolitan and non-metropolitan cities. Kalimpong as a

hill urban centre was developed later than most hill stations in India. Kalimpong was nowhere on the map of India before 1865.⁸

A brief history of Kalimpong:

The precise etymology of the name Kalimpong remains unclear. There are many theories on the origin of the name. One widely accepted theory claims that the name “*Kalimpong*” means ‘Assembly (or stockade) of the King’s minister’. The word is derived from Tibetan ‘*kalon*’ (king’s minister) and ‘*pong*’ (stockade).⁹ It is located at an average elevation of 1250 meters (4101 Ft.) from sea level. The village, which has given its name to the tract of country formerly known as Dalimkot, used to be the headquarters of a Bhutanese district. Kalimpong had been invaded by several successive rulers since the second half of the nineteenth centuries. The first Tibetan captured the land in the name of Namgyal dynasty. The Bhutanese usurped the whole area of Kalimpong from Sikkim and carried out an autocratic rule over this land of the Lepchas. After the Anglo-Bhutan war of 1864, the entire area lying over the eastern bank of the Teesta River as well as the Dooars was ceded to British India and this ceded area was attached to the Western Dooars District. In the following year, this area was transferred to the District of Darjeeling.¹⁰

The annexation was a strategic necessity unlike that of Darjeeling which was a gift, actually exacted from Sikkim, for the bracing climate and its perfect physical location of as a sanatorium. Kalimpong was not favoured as one, although there existed all the essential factors which are usually identified as basics to the establishment of a hill station- altitude, scenic beauty ,terrain, accessibility –not only physical accessibility based on distance and availability of transportation, but also social factors such as political control or access.¹¹

Till 1912, that is for about fifty years since the annexation of the Kalimpong region from Bhutan (Treaty of Sinchula of 1865) there were no talks of developing Kalimpong as a hill sanatorium. Kalimpong was considered so insignificant that the Ashley Eden of the Bengal Civil Service, made just a flying reference to the village of Kalimpong, in his report to the Secretary to the Government of India.¹²

The question of developing Kalimpong as a hill station arose out of petition made to the Government in 1913, by Mr. Corb who was the Resident Representative of Cawnpore Wollen Mills. He tried to seek permission to purchase a house and a plot of land from a 'cultivating *ryot*' in the village. Since the annexation it had been the government policy to reserve all land for the Lepchas and the Bhutias and any transfer of land was strictly prohibited. The government then tried to seek suggestion from the Board of Revenue, Bengal, regarding the advisability of making provision of new sites for the European settlers and also to decide whether Kalimpong should be developed as a hill station, and if so, what should be a general plan of development of the place.¹³

With the government's approval regarding the matter, C.J. Stevenson Moore, Hon'ble member of the Board of Revenue, was given the authority to enquire into the feasibility of opening a hill urban centre in Kalimpong. While Mr. Moore was in Kalimpong on 3 and 4th June, 1914 he held discussions with Dr. J.A. Graham of the mission and a few government officials of various ranks. They were all unanimous that the hill station was a good idea. Dr. Graham was of the opinion that if Kalimpong was well planned it would become one of the most attractive hill stations in India. The reports indicated that opening another hill station in Bengal (after Darjeeling and Kurseong) was a viable proposition. Stevenson Moore argued that Darjeeling and Kurseong were already overpopulated having little scope of further expansion and the climatic condition of Kalimpong was better suited than Darjeeling, to the needs of the retired Anglo-Indians. And Kalimpong could easily be connected with Calcutta via Siliguri. An extension of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway was already under progress from Siliguri to Gailkhola, a point at a distance of about 7 miles from Kalimpong.¹⁴

Development of Kalimpong :

Kalimpong became an important centre for trade with Tibet due to the closeness of the town to the Jelep La pass which allowed access to central Tibet. Trade with Tibet was channelized through Kalimpong. Musk, wool, fur, food grains, etc., that were traded in Kalimpong. Increasing reclamation of land for cultivation encouraged many to settle in Kalimpong. The decision to develop Kalimpong as a hill station too prompted well- to-

do families from the plains and as well as British Officers to frequently visit the place and build summer cottages there.¹⁵

Apart from the agriculture and trade, British interest in Kalimpong was largely in the field of missionary activities. Eight years after the annexation, in 1873, William Macfarlane started to work among the Lepchas. J.R. Minto (1974), in his book “Graham of Kalimpong” writes that Macfarlane found caste system and orthodoxy of the Hindu Nepalese a ‘stumbling block’ to his work in Darjeeling. Over the years the mission grew up and extended. Since 1878 the mission received land on token or nominal rent for its extensive philanthropic works. The Scottish University Mission Institution was the first school that was opened in 1886. The Kalimpong Girls high School was established in 1886 as well. A Church was erected in 1891, a hospital opened in 1893. By the late 1890s the mission started running an Anglo-Hindi middle school for boys, a girl’s school, a vocational training institution for the hill tribes. In the year 1900, Rev. J.A Graham founded the present Dr. Graham Homes which were aimed to be a school cum orphanage for destitute Anglo-Indian children. The Christian settlement thrived in the cozy corner of *khasmahal* without any hindrance or opposition what so ever.¹⁶

The Schools of Kalimpong, besides imparting educations to the locals, attract a significant number of students from the plains, the neighbouring state of Sikkim, Bihar and countries such as Bhutan, Nepal, Bangladesh and Thailand. Kalimpong gained little importance from the commercial point of view until the last decade of the nineteenth century. A small township began to take shape around the mission. A number of European missionaries, their Indian converts, people seeking job as coolies, servants and scavengers, all contributed to clearing of jungle and extension of the human habitat. Some adventurous people from distant Haryana and Rajasthan appeared on the scene to take up the job of supplying provisions to the missionaries.¹⁷

Stevenson-Moore pointed out that some steps should be taken as precondition of the development scheme: 1) Setting up a Kalimpong Sub-division, 2) Provision for water supply, and 3) Improvement of the existing mule track leading to the Tibet border. However, Moore made another spot enquiry in 1915 and forwarded a second note on July

1, 1915. That the Government acted upon Stevenson-Moore's note was apparent from the fact that a new Sub-division was created with its headquarters at Kalimpong with effect from March 1, 1916.¹⁸

The outstanding landmark at Kalimpong is a beautiful Gothic church and tower just above the bazaar, which were built as a memorial to the Rev. Macfarlane, the pioneer missionary of the Church of Scotland in the Darjeeling district. Several mission houses near the church, a charitable dispensary from which 1500 patients obtain relief annually, an excellent dakhunglow, and a residence of forest officer through the area near the Church, while near the bazaar there are the Mahamedan mosque, the Hindu temple and Buddhist monastery, and about two miles from the town, there is the residence of the Bhutan agent in which the Dalai Lama lived during his visit at Kalimpong.¹⁹

A few examples of the changing trend may be cited. New shops in the Bazaar appeared, concrete buildings started to be erected, hotels opened, motor vehicles arrived. Number of rural people was being engaged in the bazaar as transport coolies and labourers as trade expanded. Jubilee High School, the first non Missionary high school of Kalimpong was established in 1936.²⁰

There was a need and demand for a municipality. In 1943 the government of Bengal declared their intension to establish a Municipality in Kalimpong. Two years later (1945) it was established extending over the development area, the bazaar and the mission compound and covering 3.35sq mile.²¹

Transportation:

The communication between the plains of Bengal and Kalimpong was a creation by the Britishers. There were traditional trade routes between India and Tibet but most of the routes were through Nepal. Among all the Indo-Tibetan trade routes the Bengal-Kalimpong-Lshsa route became the most important one. During the second half of the nineteenth century, after a British control was established over Sikkim (1861) and Bhutan was defeated in the Anglo-Bhutanese war in 1864, a direct route from Bengal to Tibet via Kalimpong was laid out. In course of time, Kalimpong, a small village in this area became the linking point between the plains of Bengal and Lshsa.²²

Trade from Tibet to the plains of India via Kalimpong subdivision follows two routes both of which pass through Sikkim state.²³ In 1888 a British force of appreciable strength passed through this area to drive out the Tibetans from the Sikkim's territory. After the successful repulsion of the Tibetans and the resultant Anglo-Chinese Convention (1890) and Anglo-Chinese trade convention (1893) empowering the British to open a trade mart at yatung on the Tibetan side of the frontier, Kalimpong started to grow as a trade centre.²⁴

In 1907 and 1908 a new road was built by the government in the Teesta valley at a higher level and the railway company took over what was left of the old road and constructed the Teesta valley extension railroad which was opened for traffic in 1915.²⁵

The Teesta valley road started from Siliguri and reached Kalimpong crossing about 36 Miles away. At that time cane bridge was very common in this area. During the second half of the nineteenth centuries the Cane Bridge was replaced by Iron suspension bridge.²⁶ A macadam surfaced road from the Coronation Bridge to the Teesta Bridge was made. It was fit for heavy motor transport limited to 35 cwt.laden weight.²⁷

The continuation of the Teesta Valley road went towards Kalimpong rising over 3000 feet in eight miles. It was improved in the year of 1929-30 to make it usable by heavy motor traffic.²⁸

The cart road from Siliguri to Kalimpong was frequented by the travelers, traders, missionaries, and the government officials soon after the annexation of Kalimpong. A two feet gauge steam tramway system pulled by a small powerful engine, started off at Siliguri and ran up to Gailkhola. The mode of transport between Gailkhola and Kalimpong was bullock carts, horses and ponies. As early as 1914, Mr.Cresswell, the Manager of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, expressed the company's intention of constructing a ropeway from Gailkhola to Kalimpong.²⁹

The Kalimpong Ropeway co. Ltd. was formed in 1928 for the purpose of transporting commodities between the town of Kalimpong and the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in the Teesta valley. The ropeway was designed and constructed by the engineers of the British Ropeway Company Limited; London was opened for traffic in

1930. The ropeway served Kalimpong's trade in a big way. It now took only one and half hours to transport goods between Kalimpong bazaar and Teesta valley, while Bullock carts used to take 12 hours to cover the same distance.³⁰ After the improvement of the Teesta valley road, trucks competed with the ropeway.³¹

On June, 12, 1950, the railway line up to Gailkhola was washed away by disastrous floods. The damaged ropes were soon repaired but there was no initiation taken on the part of the government to open the ropeway for traffic or construct the railway line.³² Sometime later trade was revived with the improvement of Teesta valley roads. Trucks began to be used for carting commodities up to Siliguri. In the sixties Siliguri-Gantok route became very important.³³

Settlements and Territorial Development:

According to Bell's survey and settlement report, "Government is the proprietor of the Estate." Therefore, the absolute ownership of lands changed hands from one alien ruler to another, from the hands of the Namgyal rulers to the British colonial rulers. Since first survey and settlement in 1882, the *raiyat* was given *pattas* for his holdings and on that *patta* his rights were based. In 1878-82 a Survey and Settlement of the more advanced portion of the estate was carried out by Messors Paul, Ritchie, and Shake. The area under settlement consisted of 53494 acres in the valleys of the Teesta, Relli, and Rangeet.³⁴

By 1901 the population of the sub-division had risen to 41,511 from 12,683 in 1881, while the population of the government estate alone was about 36,000. The total area of the estate was found to be 178 square miles or 114,216 acres, of which 53,349 acres were held by raiyats and 60,867, were 'khas' government waste.³⁵

The term of the last settlement expired on 31st March 1913, but it was extended for another five years under government order no-581, dated the 6th February 1912, and thus ultimately expired on the 31st March 1918. In 1918 a partial resettlement of a portion of the estate near Kalimpong was sanctioned and Mr. D.G Pyne, the Deputy Collector and Sub divisional Officer, Kalimpong, was appointed as the Settlement Officer. It was decided, however, to postpone these operations and to take up the re-settlement of the whole estate. The process of settlement, as expected, was slow in the beginning.³⁶ It was

ordered, therefore, that the work of receiving the old maps and record should begin in the field session of 1919-20, and the re-settlement of the Kalimpong estate should be taken up separately from that of the other two estates in which cadastral survey was required and could not be started till the following year.³⁷

The rent rolls were published under Act VIII of 1879 and thus the new rents came into effect from 1st April 1921, in accordance with section 12 of that Act. The news that a new civil station was in the process of opening was already in the air and there are reasons to assume that interested parties were enquiring about the various aspects of the settlement. A building lease for 90 years subject to renewal after every thirty years would be granted. The form of lease was finalized in August 1919. It laid down certain strict conditions. Water connections and water borne sanitations and regular dressing and upkeep of the areas adjoining each holding were insisted upon.³⁸

Demographic changes:

A great deal of research work including government gazette on the history and people of Kalimpong recorded high growth rate of migrant population in every decade. It should turn to Bell's report for probing the question of population explosion and changing demographic pattern in the government estate of Kalimpong. The Marwaris outnumbered the Bengalis as a single community in Kalimpong. Their influx in Kalimpong began long ago-in the late 19th and early 20th century in connection with Tibet trade. The goods were brought down by the Tibetans but in Kalimpong they were handed to the Marwaris who exported them out of Kalimpong. The occupational pattern of the communities changed to some extent in post- independence period. The dominance of the Marwaris over business continued and they continued to dominate commodity trade and business in Kalimpong. Biharis are mainly found in retail shops. In the pre independence period the share of the Europeans and Anglo Indians in gazetted services was high. In place of the Europeans the proportion of the Nepalis increased in Government and semi Government jobs in post-independence period.³⁹

The list of leases indicates that in the beginning it was mainly the Indians who were coming in as predicted back in 1914, by Stevenson-Moore and ,of course, well to do Indians alone could afford the luxury of maintaining a holiday resort in the hills. Thus,

posh locality of affluent community gradually emerged in Kalimpong. And with the passage of time the new settler mingled with the local people and contributed to the growth of a population characterized by mixed cultural identity of the society that existed and still exists in Kalimpong.⁴⁰ Most important fact is that from the very beginning the urban settlement of Kalimpong tended to be much a seasonal retreat of outsiders. Urbanization in Kalimpong remained basically a rural environment for the most part. The traders were perfectly comfortable in the typical rural setting. Trade was all that mattered; in the existing urban condition there was no hindrance to trade.⁴¹

POPULATION OF KALIMPONG (1881-1941)

TABLE -I

| Year | Population | Decade variations | Percentage of decade wise variations |
|------|------------|-------------------|--------------------------------------|
| 1881 | 4033 | ----- | ----- |
| 1891 | 3522 | -511 | -14.50 |
| 1901 | 4469 | 947 | +26.88 |
| 1911 | 7880 | 3411 | + 76.32 |
| 1931 | 8776 | 896 | +11.37 |
| 1941 | 11491 | 2715 | +30 |

Source: Census of India of respective years.

From the above tabulated data, it is clear that there was a decline in population in the decade (1881-1891), after which the population gradually started rising. The highest increase was noted during the period of (1901-1911) due to lot of influx of migrants coming to settle in the hills for trade and commerce. Kalimpong was declared a town (Class-V) in 1931 with a population of 8776 people and it changed its rank to the next class in 1941 with a population of 11961 people.⁴²

Conclusion:

The present paper has studied the origin and growth of Kalimpong as an urban colonial hill station. In spite of having several favourable geographical conditions; Kalimpong has failed to draw adequate attention of the colonial rulers as a hill station until the last decade of the nineteenth century. The initial phase of urbanization in Kalimpong was

completed by 1920. However, population of Kalimpong's urban area increased significantly without having any significant changes in physical infrastructure and basic service facilities; this has directed the urbanism of locals to a miserable condition. An unplanned building construction, gradual disappearance of foot paths, lack of transport planning have led the town to be congested and has also exposed it to serious threats of natural hazards and disasters like earthquake and landslides. Beside loss of land, environmental degradation also affected the people of Kalimpong estate. Both British administration and new settlers were responsible for this destruction. Urbanism not only destroyed the hill eco-system but also increased landslides to a great extent. Today Kalimpong relies mostly on the business generated by the educational institutions, tourism, agriculture, horticulture and floriculture. Now it is the time to rethink about the future of the town from a holistic stand to ensure the sustainability of urbanization of Kalimpong.

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