CHAPTER II

Darjeeling: Historical and Geographical Contours

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2.1 Origins of the Name of the District

The name of the district 'Darjeeling' probably has Tibetan origin. This means where Indra's (the Hindu God) thunderbolt or sceptre rested (Dorje – the majestic thunderbolt, Ling – place, hence 'the place of the thunderbolt'). This was also the name of a Buddhist monastery once situated on the top of the Observatory Hill in Darjeeling (Mordecai and Agarwala, 1960).

A L Waddell, who visited Darjeeling in 1889 informs us that Darjeeling means the cave of the mystic thunderbolt on the Observatory Hill from which cave Dorje-ling or Darjeeling derives its name. Earl of Ronaldsay says, 'In the interests of historical accuracy I should, perhaps, add that I believe the commonly accepted explanation to be incorrect. A derivation, seldom heard, but which I have the best of grounds for believing to be correct, is that which attributes the word Dorje in the first half of Darjeeling to the name of a Lama, Dorje-rinzing, who founded the monastery which once stood on Observatory Hill. The shrine was subsequently removed to the Bhutia Basti, where it remains to this day; but the former site retained the name of the place of Dorje-Lama.' According to another view Darjeeling is the corruption of the Sanskrit word 'Durjaya-Linga' means 'Siva of invincible prowess, who rules the Himalayas'. Sankrityayan thinks that this view is not tenable. He also believes that Dorje-ling was the name of the monastery on the Observatory Hill and means 'vajra-dvipa' (Sen, 1989).

2.2 Physical Settings and Topography

The physiographic divisions of the district are well marked with the tremendous variation in the range of altitude (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986). The plains from which the hills take their rise are only 300 feet above sea level; the mountains ascend abruptly in spurs of from 6000 to 10000 feet in height (Hunter, 1974).

2.2.1 Location and Boundaries

Darjeeling, the northernmost district and the smallest district of West Bengal is located between 26°31′ and 27°13′ North latitudes and 87°59′ and 88°53′ East longitudes (Dash, 1947). The principal town and administrative head quarters of the district is Darjeeling town at 27°3′ North latitude and 88°16′ East longitude (Ray, 1967).

Of all the frontier districts of India the boundary of Darjeeling is most complicated. There is Nepal to the west, Sikkim to the north, Bhutan and Jalpaiguri to the east and Purnea, North Dinajpur and Bangladesh to the south. The area of the district according to the Surveyor General of India is 1160 sq. miles but according to the Director of Land Records and Surveys, West Bengal, 1200 sq. miles (Mitra, 1954). The total area of the three hill subdivisions namely, Darjeeling, Kurseong and Kalimpong is 2157 sq. kms (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

2.2.2 Geological Formation

The Himalayas are part of the string of Eurasian mountain ranges from the Alps to the mountains of south - east Asia that were formed within the past 65 million years by global plate–tectonic forces that produced tremendous upheavals in the Earth's crust.

During the Paleozoic and Mesozoic eras (65 to 570 million years ago) the area that is now the Himalayas occupied the floor of the ancient Tethys Sea on the north part of the Indian Plate of the old super continent of Gondwanaland. One of Gondwanaland's fragments, the lithosphere plate that formed the Indian subcontinent, pursued a northward collision course with the Eurasian Plate. This Indian-Australian Plate gradually confined the Tethys trench within a giant pincer between itself and the Eurasian Plate. As the Tethys trench narrowed, increasing compressive forces triggered many tectonic swells, depressions, and interlacing faults in its marine sediments, and masses of granites and basalts intruded from the depth of the mantle into this weakened sedimentary crust. The mountains were formed as the Indian Plate, moving north, pressed against the stationary Eurasian landmass. The main uplift occurred during the middle or late Tertiary period (12 to 65 million years ago). The

ranges of the system developed from north to south in a series of stages. Only within the past 600,000 years, during the Pleistocene Epoch (1.6 million to 10,000 years ago), did the Himalayas become the highest mountains on Earth. Even today the system has not reached a state of equilibrium, and earthquakes are frequent. According to the Bureau of Indian Standards, the town Darjeeling falls under seismic zone-IV, (in a scale of I to V, in order of increasing proneness to earthquakes) near the convergent boundary of the Indian and the Eurasian tectonic plates.

The mountains are made of folded rocks. Resting over the Shiwalik beds is a group of still older rocks consisting of course, hard sand stone, sometimes solidified into quartzite of carbonaceous and splintery states of shale and of impersistent seams of powder coal. North of the Gondwanaland outcrops the hills are occupied by a group of low grade metamorphosed sediments represented by quartzite, slates, phyllites and foliated rocks composed of flaky minerals such as graphite etc. the Daling series rests under a variety of foliated and banded metamorphic rocks, partly sedimentary and partly igneous in origin. Those rocks are known generally as Darjeeling Gneiss (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986). Darjeeling gneisses consist of garnetiferous gneisses, sillimanite biotite gneisses, pegmatite and aplites (Bose, 1968).

2.2.3 Topography

Himalayas comprises a series of parallel and converging ranges. The vast Himalayan complex extends in an arc of about 2410 km (about 1500 mi) from the Indus river in North Pakistan eastward across Kashmir, North India, part of South Tibet and West Bengal and most of Nepal, Sikkim, and Bhutan. The system covers an area of about 594,400 sq km (about 229,500 sq mi). The Himalayas can be divided into four parallel, longitudinal mountain belts of varying widths. From south to north these belts are the Outer Himalayas or Sub-Himalayas; the Lesser Himalayas; the Great Himalayas; and the Tethys or Tibetan Himalayas. The Outer Himalayas comprise the Shiwalik range, which rises steeply from the North Indian plains and descends gently to flat-floored basins. Most of the Darjeeling district lies in the Shiwalik Hills (Lower Himalaya).

The district is shaped like an irregular triangle, but when the Siliguri subdivision is excluded the hill areas looks somewhat a quadrilateral (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986). The southern region, the base, comprises the Terai, a marshy low-lying area at an average height of 300 ft above sea level; the apex is formed by the Phalut ridge, nearly 3600 metres high, where Nepal meets India. The Eastern frontier lies along the Rivers Teesta and Rangeet, beyond is Rishi-La and Bhutan. The lower regions of the labyrinthian hilly forest-clad ridges, have been cleared for the cultivation or the world famous Darjeeling Tea (Banerji, et. al., 1980).

The hill portion of the district is confused labyrinth of ridges, bold spurs, narrow deep valleys carved out by various agents of denudation like wind, water and snow. The main ridges wind and zigzag in all directions giving off a number of long spurs on either flank. For the most part the ridges stretch from north to south while the courses of the principal rivers are in the same direction but many of the spurs and of the torrents flowing between run east to west and even in some areas from south to north (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

Mountain System

In spite of the confused nature of the terrain pattern certain well-marked features can be observed. In the northwest the lofty Singalila ridge that culminates ultimately in the lofty height of Kanchenjungha (8585 m.) in Sikkim, enters the district forming the highest part of the district. The Phalut ridge goes gradually towards Sandakphu and descends south at Maneybhanjan. The ridge continues southward to the level of the plains near Mechi River. From Singalila, the Senchal–Mahaldiram spur juts out in the eastern direction and moves in a north–northwest to south–southeast alignment. This spur is in the central part of the district and acts as a mountain knot from which as many as seven spurs diverge in different directions separating one valley from the others, the more prominent on the east side being the Takdah–Peshok ridge descending to the junction of the Rangeet with the Teesta and the Sittong spur further south.

The eastern ranges are separated from their western counterparts by the Teesta gorge. East of the Teesta, the highest ground is at the Rishi La. From here one of the more prominent ridges runs south–east and cuts off the Jaldhaka Valley from the rest

of the district. Another ridge descends Labha. From here an important spur leads south–westward down to the plains and another north–west of Rissisum where it joins a ridge running north–east to south–west in Pedong and the south–western spur passes through Kalimpong and descends abruptly into the Teesta valley (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

River System

The rivers of this district are the chief water resource of the area though there are a large number of springs. The main rivers of the district are perennial and are characterized by high run-off being fed from the glaciers and monsoon rain.

The most dominating river Teesta forms the boundary of the district from the point where it is joined by the Rangpu down to its junction with the Great Rangeet flowing in from the west. It leaves the district at Sevok. In Darjeeling district, its principal tributaries are the Rangpu and the Rilli on its left bank and the Great Rangeet, the Rijang and the Sivok on the right bank.

The rivers to the west of Teesta are the Mahananda, the Balason and the Mechi.

The rivers of the district are mainly utilised for floating the logs and generation of hydel power. Incidentally the first hydel power plant of India was set up at Sidrapong near Darjeeling in 1897 (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

Climate

Due to tremendous variation of altitude, differences in aspects, the climate within the hill areas vary greatly. In general the hill areas enjoy pleasant summer, heavy rain in rainy season due to strong monsoon winds and cold winter often added with snowfall in higher altitudinal areas.

Summers (lasting from May to June) are mild, with maximum temperatures barely crossing 25 °C (77 °F). The monsoon season (June to September) is characterized by torrential monsoon rains that lash the towns. The monsoons are severe, often causing landslides that often block Darjeeling's land access to the rest of

the country. In the hilly tract of the district the atmosphere is highly humid throughout the year, and relative humidities are between 90 percent and 95 percent in the south–west monsoon. Winters (December to February) see average temperatures averaging 5–7 °C (41–44 °F). Occasionally the temperature may drop below freezing, inducing rare snowfall. During the monsoon and winter seasons, Darjeeling is often shrouded in mist and fog.

The annual mean maximum temperature is 12°C (53°F) at Darjeeling and the mean minimum temperature is 1.7°C (35°F); monthly mean temperatures range from 5–17°C (41–62°F). At Kalimpong both the maximum and the minimum are higher – being 26.7°C (80°F) and 7.8°C (46°F) respectively. The highest temperature ever recorded in the district was 26.7°C (80.1°F) at Darjeeling, while at Kalimpong it was 31.1°C (88°F) on 23 August 1957. The lowest ever recorded was -5°C (23°F) on 11 February 1905 at Darjeeling and 0.6°C (30.9°F) on 27 December 1922 at Kalimpong (Ray, 1967).

The average annual precipitation in Darjeeling is about 3000 mm; with the highest average precipitation occurring in July (75.3 cm or 29.6 in) while the average annual precipitation in Kalimpong is about 2000 mm and in Kurseong is about 4000 mm. The rainfall during the south–west monsoon season constitutes about 80 percent of the annual rainfall.

Soils

The Himalayas consist primarily of metamorphic rocks; extensive areas of igneous rocks are in the south. Paleozoic and Mesozoic marine sediments are found in several regions.

The soil is chiefly composed of sandstone and conglomerate formations, which are the solidified and up heaved detritus of the great range of Himalaya in their rear. However, the soil is often poorly consolidated. The permeable sediments and poorly developed soils of the region do not retain water between rains and is usually considered not suitable for agriculture. The area has steep slopes and soft, loose topsoil, leading to frequent landslides in the monsoon season. Some of the wet, deep, upland soils of this type in the eastern Himalayas mainly in the Darjeeling Hills and in

the Assam Valley have a high humus content that is good for growing tea, cardamom, citrus fruits and few other crops.

The soil of the district shows multiple varieties ranging from red–clay and sandy loam grey–brown forest soil. The forest soil of the hills is rich in organic matter and being developed under forest cover act as cushions on rainwater. In the hills the cultivators recognize only three kinds of soil, namely, white, red and black. Of these the black soil is the richest, the white the poorest, the red soil occupies an intermediate position, requiring heavy manuring to give as good an outturn as the black. The fertility of the soil depends much on the geological formation of the underlying rocks from which the soil is derived. Generally soils throughout the district are deficient in lime.

Of the total area of Darjeeling Himalaya about 33 percent of the land is under forest. Farmlands cover about 18 percent of the total area. Whereas 44 percent of the land are not available for cultivation. The rest are put to miscellaneous uses. It has already been stressed that the bulk of the valuable land resources of the district has been rendered unproductive by deforestation being followed by landslides, especially after monsoon downpour, thereby exposing the bare rock surface to the vagaries of soil erosion (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

Minerals

The metamorphic rocks of Darjeeling and Daling series contain deposits of copper, nickel, iron, mica and precious stones. Lying south to the metamorphic occur the Gondwanaland belt, passing through Tindharia. This bed contains fairly good deposit of anthracite coal but due to pressure facies of the Himalayan progeny, coal has become extremely friable and as such unless formed into briquettes it cannot be used for commercial purpose. Lying further south is a thin belt of Tertiary and Pleistocene terrace beds and gravels where some deposits of lime are found. Stones from the hilly section are often quarried for building and road construction (Lama and Sarkar (ed.), 1986).

2.3 Brief History of Darjeeling

Little is known about the early history of Darjeeling. The area was historically part of the kingdom of Sikkim. In 1706 what is now the Kalimpong subdivision of the district was taken from the Raja of Sikkim by the Bhutanese (Ray, 1967). In 1780, the Gorkhas marched into Sikkim, annexed the Terai, advanced to the Teesta River and set off a conflict they had not bargained for. They had trodden on the toes of the East India Company, the war of 1814 was fought with Nepal, the tract ceded by the treaty of Titaliya in 1817, and the Raja of Sikkim was reinstated with his sovereignty guaranteed by the Company. Sikkim, including Darjeeling, became a buffer state between Nepal and Bhutan (Kar). Ten years later the dispute broke out afresh. In 1828, another dispute occurred between Nepal and Sikkim. Two Officers, Captain Lloyd and Mr. Grant were deputed in 1828 to deal with the disputes.

They however found the Darjeeling region very suitable as a sanatorium for British troops. The company negotiated with the king of Sikkim to lease the area starting in 1835. Dr. Campbell, a member of the Indian Medical Service and Lieutenant Napier were given the responsibility to found a hill station there. Thus in 1835 the king of Sikkim through a Deed of Grant gave a portion of the Darjeeling hills to the British for establishing a sanatorium. This was an unconditional cession. But the government granted the Raja an allowance of Rs. 3000 as compensation and raised the grant to Rs. 6000 in 1846.

After the cession, General Lloyd and Dr. Chapman were sent in 1836 to explore and investigate the climate and the capabilities of the place. By 1840, a road had been made from Pankhabari. There were staging bungalows at Pankhabari and at Mahaldiram. A hotel had been started at Kurseong and another at Darjeeling. Thirty private houses had been erected at Darjeeling and nearly as many 'locations' or building sites had been taken up at Lebong.

The rest of the ceded area was however under forest and practically uninhabited. According to Captain Herbert, this was because about ten years previously (i.e., in 1830s) 1200 able–bodied Lepchas forming two–thirds of the population of Sikkim had been forced by the oppression of the Raja to fly from Darjeeling and its neighbourhood and take refuge in Nepal. What little cultivation

there had been was abandoned and the Raja prohibited his subjects from going to Darjeeling and helping in the establishment of new settlements (Ray, 1967).

In 1839, Darjeeling got its first Superintendent, Dr. Campbell. He was given the charge of political relations with Sikkim besides, running the civil, criminal and fiscal administration, when he found time; he also acted as Postmaster, Marriage Registrar and Administrator of the station funds. Campbell built the district and laid the foundation of the, now multi-million dollar tea industry in 1841. Twenty-five years later, there were already 40 gardens in 10,000 acres with an outturn of half a million pounds. Immigrants poured in. Dr. Campbell gave much encouragement to immigrant cultivators and population rose from about 100 in 1839 to about 10000 in 1849.

The Darjeeling Municipality was established in 1850. In the same year Terai was annexed and a portion of the Sikkim hills bounded by Rammam and Great Rangeet on the north, by the Teesta on the east and by the Nepal frontier on the west also came under Darjeeling. The new territory, 640 sq. miles, suitable for tea cultivation, was placed under the Superintendent of Darjeeling, which was linked with Jalpaiguri and Purnea on the south. To the west of the new territory was Nepal; to the east was Bhutan. The treaty put an end to the sufferings of the residents of Darjeeling, but the peace was interrupted by the incursions of the Bhutanese into the district. A large force was sent in the winter of 1864 and ultimately the whole of the Dooars was occupied, the Kalimpong police circle was added. In the meanwhile Kurseong was developing and it was made head quarter of a new sub-division in 1891. Separated from the Kurseong sub-division, Siliguri was made a new sub-division in 1907. Kalimpong sub-division was created in 1916 (Ray, 1967).

The freedom movement in the district was much tempered by its moderate political ideology. One outstanding incident connected with the 'terrorist movement' was the attempt on the life of Sir John Anderson, the Governor of Bengal, at the Lebong Race Course on May 8, 1934 by Bengali 'terrorists' (Banerji, et. al., 1980).

Darjeeling was declared a Non-Regulation District till March 1937 (Subba, 1985). Thus acts and regulations did not automatically come into force in the district in line with rest of the country unless they were extended to it. The district was

included in the Rajshahi Division until October 1905 when it was transferred to the Bhagalpur Division. With the rearrangement of the provinces it was retransferred to the Rajshahi Division in March 1912 (Ray, 1967). The town lacked any major contribution to the freedom struggle of India probably due to the moderate political climate prevailing in the region. However, the revolutionaries attempted to assassinate Sir John Anderson, the Governor of Bengal in Darjeeling.

After the independence of India in 1947, Darjeeling became a part of the state of West Bengal. A separate district of Darjeeling was established consisting of the hilly towns of Darjeeling, Kurseong, Kalimpong and some parts of the Terai region. The district was placed thereafter in the Presidency Division (Ray, 1967). After the People's Republic of China annexed Tibet in 1959, thousands of Tibetans fled to India, migrating to several places in the district, including Darjeeling. The district is at present under the Jalpaiguri Division (Ray, 1967).

Between 1986 and 1988, the demand for the creation of the separate states of Gorkhaland and Kamtapur along ethnic lines grew strong. Matters came to a head after a forty-day strike called by the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) during which rioting occurred. The Darjeeling town was virtually under siege, causing the state government to call in the Indian army to maintain law and order. The movement ended with the establishment of Darjeeling Gorkha Hill Council (DGHC) under the Chairmanship of Subash Gishing. DGHC was given semi-autonomous powers to govern the district. Later the name of DGHC was changed to Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council (DGAHC). Though Darjeeling is now peaceful, the issue on a separate state still lingers.

The Gorkha-dominated hill areas of the whole Darjeeling district are under the jurisdiction of the Darjeeling Gorkha Autonomous Hill Council since its formation in 1988. The DGHC's elected Councilors are authorised to manage certain affairs of the hills, including education, health, and tourism. The DGHC was formed after large-scale unrest among the Nepali-speaking Gorkha people, in which the Gorkha National Liberation Front (GNLF) had sought to carve a separate state out of West Bengal for Nepali speakers.

Darjeeling is a part of the Darjeeling Lok Sabha (Indian Parliament's Lower House) constituency. The Darjeeling hill areas elect three members to the West Bengal state Legislative Assembly (Vidhan Sabha). Indian National Congress won the Lok Sabha seat in Indian general elections, 2004 while the state assembly seats were owned by GNLF in 2006. Unlike many other Indian cities, Darjeeling does not have its own police commissioner. Instead, it comes under the jurisdiction of the district police (which is a part of the state police); a Deputy Superintendent of Police oversees the town.

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