

Unearthing the Silent Narratives of Women of Darjeeling in Colonial Photography (1835-1947)

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Abstract

Photography, introduced to India shortly after its European invention, became a pivotal tool in documenting and shaping colonial life. In Darjeeling, amidst the scenic eastern Himalayas, photography captured the region's exotic appeal and socio-economic changes under British rule. This article explores the visual representation of women in colonial Darjeeling, revealing how photographs perpetuated imperialist ideologies while offering insights into women's lives and agency. By examining images of women tea plantation workers, local elites, and everyday individuals, this study highlights how photography both reflected and constructed colonial experiences, reinforcing stereotypes and justifying British rule through narratives of primitiveness and the need for a civilizing influence. Despite many exploitative depictions, some photographs also showcase women's resilience and contributions to the colonial economy and society. This research underscores photography's importance as a historical document and medium of expression, providing valuable insights into the gendered dynamics of colonialism and the broader imperialist project in Darjeeling. Through these lens, we better understand the interplay between power, representation, and identity in colonial India, appreciating the multifaceted role of women in shaping and being shaped by the visual culture of the time.

Keywords: *Photography, Women, Imperialist, Tea plantation workers, Colonial Darjeeling.*

Introduction

The arrival of photography in India closely mirrored its development in Europe, with discussions about the medium taking place at the Asiatic Society in Calcutta in 1839. By the next year, photographs captured in Bengal began to be exhibited, generating significant interest. The formation of the Photographic Society of

Bombay in 1854, along with similar groups in Calcutta, fueled this growing enthusiasm. These organizations enabled both amateur and professional photographers to showcase their work through exhibitions and publications. In the later part of the 19th century, professional photographers traveled to India to create images for both commercial and artistic use, serving the colonial administration, the media, British expatriates, and affluent Indian patrons. As photography became more affordable toward the end of the century, an increasing number of amateur travelers recorded their journeys with cameras, enhancing the photographic narrative of colonial India. Hill stations like Darjeeling provide significant insights into British colonialism in the region. The British acquired Darjeeling from the Maharajah of Sikkim in 1835, attracted by its pleasant climate for health benefits. The establishment of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway in 1881 greatly increased visitor numbers, including both casual and professional photographers. These photographers captured images of the Himalayan scenery, local markets, roads, railways, and people, making remote colonial environments accessible to audiences in European cities such as London, Paris, and Rome. These photographs often reinforced stereotypes and preconceived notions, presenting Indian society through the perspective of Victorian European values. These visual portrayals significantly contributed to the colonial domination of India, legitimizing British rule by depicting the region as underdeveloped and in need of European enlightenment.

Set amidst the breath taking landscapes of the Eastern Himalayas, the colonial period in Darjeeling witnessed a transformative convergence of cultures, economies and power dynamics. In this context, photography became a powerful tool of visual representation, documenting the nuances of colonial life and shaping perceptions of the region both locally and globally. While much attention has been given to the broader historical significance of photography in colonial Darjeeling, the specific roles and experiences of women in this visual narrative are a fascinating yet overlooked aspect of the historical record. Throughout the colonial period, Darjeeling served as a strategic outpost of the British Empire. Its mild climate and scenic beauty attracted colonial administrators, traders and tourists. In this dynamic environment, photography flourished not only as a way to capture the exotic charm of the Himalayas but also to document the social and economic transformation brought about by colonial rule. However, photography

in colonial Darjeeling was not solely the domain of men. Women also played a vital, though less studied, role in shaping the visual culture of the region. During Darjeeling's colonial period, photography became a powerful tool for documentation and research. These images capture the essence in the aspect of multiple local life, from everyday workers to tea garden for women, luxurious lifestyles of colonial elite. These photos proposed a delicate viewpoint of the complexity of the colonial society, questioned the ordinary story, and changed the visual scenery of the darkening. By documenting these diverse experiences, especially those of women, photography highlighted the interplay between colonial power dynamics and local realities. This article explores photography in colonial Darjeeling, aiming to uncover the hidden stories and perspectives of women who contributed to shaping the visual landscape of the region. Through their photographs, we gain a deeper understanding of the complexities of gender relations, power and representation in colonial society, while paying tribute to women's often unrecognized contributions to Darjeeling's storied history.

Photography as a historical document

Photographs of Darjeeling during the colonial period constitute important historical documents that provide a visual representation of the socio-economic and cultural landscape of the region. They offer information on daily life, work and interactions of various communities, especially women. Despite the colonial biases inherent in these images, they remain precious to understand the complexities of colonial domination and its impact on local populations. These photos are an aggressive structure that is not just a passive reflection of reality, but is a photographer's perspective and intention. They were often used to strengthen colonial ideology, minimizing the resilience of institutions and local residents, emphasizing the exotic "other" aspects of Indian society. However, critically analyzing these images will reveal the layer of meaning and gain a detailed understanding of historical context(Chaudhary,2012).

For example, the visual expression of a woman in the colonial Darjeeling circle gives the idea of colonialism by gender. Photographs of female tea plantation workers highlight their important but exploited role in the colonial economy. Images of women dressed in traditional costumes and roles reveal the British fascination with and commercialization of Indian culture. At the same time, the

photographs inadvertently capture moments of activity and resilience, providing a more nuanced portrayal of the women's lives. Viewed in historical context, these photographs offer a deeper understanding of the interplay of power, representation and identity in colonial Darjeeling. These photographs document the complex realities of colonialism, including women's exploitation and marginalization, as well as their contributions and resistance. They reveal how photography was used as a tool of colonialism while also capturing moments of human dignity and strength. The colonial Darjeeling photos are valuable historical documents that give ideas of social and economic and cultural landscapes in the region. They have clarified the difficulties of colonial rule and the effects of women, especially on women. By critically analyzing these images, you can clarify the layer of meaning and evaluate the multifaceted experiences of the colonial Darjeeling women. These photos emphasize the interaction between power, expression, and identity, and provide more detailed understanding of historical context (Edwards ,2000).

Photographic Imagery and Imperialist Ideology

Photographs taken during British colonial rule in Darjeeling played a significant role in shaping British perceptions of Indian society, especially women. These images were not simply reflexive narratives, but actively constructed ones that corresponded to imperialist ideologies, similar to those expressed in Rudyard Kipling's poem "The White Man's Burden." British photographers documented the different communities of Darjeeling, identifying people by their ethnicity, race, religion, occupation, and gender, including detailed images of women. The women in these photographs were often depicted in ways that reinforced British colonial stereotypes. Their dress and appearance have been carefully arranged to accentuate their ethnic difference, presenting them as exotic and "other". For example, images of Bhutia (Figure 1), Lepcha (Figure 2) and Nepalese (Figure 3) women have been used to highlight the diversity and perceived primitiveness of Indian society. These visual representations served to categorize and classify Indian women, reflecting the extensive colonial classification programme evidenced in the All India Census (Chaudhary, 2012).



Fig 1: Bhutia Woman Fig 2: Nepali Woman Fig 3: Lepcha Woman

Source: Darjeeling and its Mountain Railway, A Guide and Souvenir Published by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, Caledonian Printing Press, Calcutta, 1921, p-5,7,46.

The depiction of women in these photographs was important in reinforcing the British claim that the Indian nation needed to be "civilized". From a colonial perspective, women were often shown in traditional dress and in settings that emphasized their roles in family and society. This emphasis on traditional roles and national dress assumed a static, unchanging society, which stood in stark contrast to the dynamic progress that Britain claimed to have brought. While these photographs emphasized traditional roles and ethnic differences, they also played into gender stereotypes. Women were often depicted in domestic or passive roles, reinforcing the Victorian ideal of femininity that the British sought to impose. This representation supported the colonial logic that British rule was necessary to uplift and modernize Indian society, including women (Said, 1978).

Moreover, the detailed categorization of these photographs aligned with the broader goals of colonial administration: by visually recording and categorizing women according to their ethnic and social roles, the British reinforced the

hierarchical structures that justified their rule. These images contributed to a narrative that portrayed Indian society as fragmented and in need of the unifying and civilizing influence of British rule. Colonial photographs of women in Darjeeling were powerful tools in shaping British perceptions of Indian society. They have strengthened their stereotypes and supported the ideology of imperialism by drawing women in traditional and passive roles that emphasize women's distinction. These images have not only actively constructed a story that justifies the mission of British colonial rule and its civilization. Through this visual record, the British sought to assert and maintain control over the diverse and complex society of colonial India.

Class, Labor, and the Visual Economy

During the British colonial period in Darjeeling, photographers played a pivotal role in shaping and reinforcing imperialist ideologies. They captured images of different social classes, including coolies, tea plantation workers and beggars (see figures 4, 5 and 6), highlighting the British's contentment in portraying the indigenous people as crude and barbaric, in need of the civilizing influence of British rule. This perspective is consistent with Edward Said's concept of "imperialist pleasure" and reflects the colonial powers' sense of superiority and justification of domination. These photographs were not just documentation; they were propaganda tools. (Figure 6), depicting coolies working on a tea plantation under the supervision of Indian overseers and European artisans, clearly illustrates the hierarchical social structure imposed by the British. In particular, the image was used to convey the story to Victorian audiences at home that the Indian population was largely made up of destitute poor people seeking relief from British ignorance and backwardness.



Fig 4: Bhutia Beggar Woman Fig 5: Hill coolie Girl Fig 6: Coolies in the tea garden

Source for Fig 4: The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, Illustrated Guide for the Tourists, Mc Corduodale & Co Ltd, Cardington Street, N.W.1896, p-15

Source for Fig 5: Postcard photographed by Samuel Bourne and Shepherd, 1898.

Source for Fig 6: <https://www.istockphoto.com/vector/tea-plantation-in-india-darjeeling-gm>

Depictions of beggars and female coolies further reinforced this notion. By focusing on these marginalized groups, these photographs perpetuated the generalized notion that most indigenous Indians belonged to the poor and dependent classes. This visual account was used to legitimize British colonial domination by suggesting that it was a benevolent force bringing cultural illumination and economic progress towards a so-called non-civilized population. These images played in the broader imperial agenda by promoting a vision of India as a land of exotic and primitive peoples, thus rationalizing the British presence as a civilizing mission. The representations of workers and beggars were not simply reflections of reality but built representations which were used to justify and perpetuate the colonial system. They underlined the striking contrasts between the perceived refinement of the British and the alleged primitive character of the Indian population. The strategic use of these images had important implications on how the British public has perceived their empire. He favored a feeling of moral duty and superiority, strengthening the idea that British colonialism was a philanthropic enterprise aimed at building and

civilizing native populations. This narrative was disseminated through widely circulated photographs and played a key role in maintaining public support for the colonial project(Harris,2017).

Photographs taken by British photographers in colonial Darjeeling were a powerful tool of imperialist propaganda. These images reinforced stereotypes of Indians as poor and uncouth by depicting coolies, tea plantation workers and beggars, thereby justifying British colonial rule as a civilizing mission. These visual representations aligned with broader ideological structures of the British Empire and helped to perpetuate narratives of British superiority and the perceived need for imperial intervention.



Fig 7

Fig 8

Fig 7: Lepcha women of 1890s (File photo Aachuly magazine)

Fig 8: Women tea pluckers of 1904

The position of female tea workers in colonial Darjeeling was extremely difficult and exploitative, reflecting the broader power relations in the colony at the time. Employed primarily on the tea plantations, these women were subjected to hard work, low wages and harsh living conditions. Their situation was further exacerbated by their gender, exposing them to additional levels of vulnerability and exploitation. Darjeeling's tea workers are essential to the operation of tea estates and often make up the majority of the workforce. Their work also involved plucking the tea leaves, which required careful attention and long hours standing in the fields.

Women tea workers in particular faced additional exploitation and vulnerability, compounding their difficulties. The plight of women tea workers in colonial

Darjeeling was characterized by severe exploitation and deprivation: although they were essential to the profitability of the tea industry, they remained marginalized and oppressed in the colonial labor system (Figures 7 and 8). Their resistance and resilience, despite harsh conditions, is a testament to their resilient spirit and their fight for justice. These historical accounts highlight the complex interplay of gender, labor, and colonialism, and underscore the need to remember and honour the contributions and struggles of these women (Behal,2006).

Visual analysis of Darjeeling women and cultural hybridity

Voyeuristic images of Himalayan women were common in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often depicting them in stereotypical roles ranging from laborers to beautiful market girls. Among these performances, the glamorous photographs taken by Paar's studio in Darjeeling stand out. Unfortunately, the names and life stories of most of Paar's models remain unknown. For example, the image titled "Bhutia Girl" (Figure 11) depicts an elegant young woman in a noble lady's dress posing against the backdrop of luxurious studio curtains, suggesting a sophisticated and dignified presence that goes beyond the simple image of a signature (Harris,2017).



Fig 9

Fig 10

Fig 11

Fig 9: Thomas Paar, "Tibetan Lady" (Ani Chokyi), hand-coloured postcard, Darjeeling, printed around 1900

Fig 10: Thomas Paar, full-length studio portrait of Ani Chokyi, albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s

Fig 11: Thomas Paar, "Bhutia Girl," albumen print, Darjeeling, 1890s

Other photographs by Paar, preserved in clients' albums, convey the beauty and dignity of the Himalayan women, reflecting the appreciation of both the photographer and his clients. A striking example is the series of portraits of Ani Chokyi (Fig. 10), a prominent Tibetan matriarch, taken around 1900. These portraits, including a complete size image showing it in a traditional Tibetan dress in the background of the English garden, show its confidence and its status. Ani Chokyi, the head of the wealthy Tibetan family and the owner of several companies, including the brewery, was very English. Her family adopted English customs, language and aesthetics, blending them with their own(Harris,2017).

Ani Chokyi's portraits are significant because they represent her self-fashioning and cultural hybridity in colonial Darjeeling. Rather than seeing these images as impositions of a European aesthetic on a submissive subject, they can be seen as expressions of Ani Chokyi's identity and pride. She was not only a prominent businesswoman, but also the wife of Ugyen Gyatso, a qualified expert employed by the British government. Ugyen Gyatso is famous for his secret expeditions to Lhasa and the mapping of Yamdrok Tso in Tibet in 1883, during which he was accompanied by Ani Chokyi on these difficult journeys. Ani Chokyi's determination and achievements made her a suitable subject for Paar's camera. His portrait provided not only personal memories but also commercial products. The image was sold as a postcard called Tibetan woman. This duality emphasizes the awareness of Ani Chokyi (Fig. 9) in a way that can use its image to represent ethnicity, gender, and religion in the colonial context. Thus, Paar's photographs of Ani Chokyi highlight the complexities of identity and cultural representation in colonial India, showcasing a blend of personal pride and the broader colonial gaze(Harris,2017).

Colonial Education and its Impact on Darjeeling Women

During the British colonial period in India, colonial administrators and Christian missionaries promoted the modernization and westernization of Indian society through education, but with different objectives. The administrators aimed to remake Indian society in Britain's image by fostering cultural imperialism and creating a submissive populace that would support British rule. They also sought to create a cheap labor force of clerks and interpreters to fill lower-level

administrative positions. Conversely, missionaries, allowed into India by the Charter Act of 1833, hoped that education would facilitate mass conversions to Christianity. In Darjeeling, this westernization agenda was particularly evident. Education in the region became a priority for the government and missionaries, but the British government often neglected the educational needs of the hill people. The superintendent, Dr Campbell, reported on this neglect, highlighting the colonial attitude that saw the natives as inherently weak and unmanageable, living like wild animals. Inspector Mr.W.B. Jackson's 1853 report reflected this sentiment; the lack of educational progress was due to the poverty, backwardness, and ignorance of the natives(Bellenoit,2007).



Fig 12

Fig 12: Mrs. Norbu the only Tibetan in the class of 1944, St.

The colonial work on the education of hills in Darjeeling neglected the rich indigenous forms of informal education, which existed until 1835. This included monastic training and knowledge of women on myths, legends, fables, medicinal herbs and other traditional practices. Women are known as healers, ascetics, sacred singers, artisans and artists, but the British viewed the native minds as a blank slate (*tabula rasa*) and imposed formal education to serve their colonial objectives. The British introduced uniforms in schools which was not a part of Indian culture. This approach was marked by ambivalence; they only allowed elementary education with the broader goals of conversion and discipline. The British feared that higher education might lead to political discontent, revealing a tension between their desire to educate and their need to maintain control. The situation for girls' education was even more dire. Women were burdened with household chores and other tasks, and families saw no reason to provide an

education for girls, considering it a waste of time and money. Influential British writers exploited this situation to justify colonial rule by portraying British women as saviors who would help educate "unfortunate" Indian women (Chaudhuri, 1995). The perceived progress of indigenous women was used as a measure of colonial development and as a justification for British rule (Figure 12).

Conclusion

In conclusion, the role of photography in colonial Darjeeling reveals a complex and multifaceted narrative shaped by power, representation and identity. As a burgeoning art form and medium of documentation, photography not only captured the picturesque landscapes and daily lives of the region but also played a pivotal role in reinforcing and disseminating colonial ideologies. The images produced during this period were powerful tools of propaganda, shaping British perceptions of Indian society and justifying the colonial rule through constructed narratives of primitiveness and the need for civilizing influence. The inclusion of women in this visual landscape, both as subjects and participants, adds further depth to our understanding of colonial Darjeeling. Photographs of women, whether workers, elites, or ordinary people, often perpetuated stereotypes consistent with Victorian values and imperialist policies. However, they also offer insights into the lives and actions of these women, challenging monolithic representations and highlighting their resilience and adaptability in the face of colonial exploitation. The photographic documentation of the women of colonial Darjeeling also served as powerful propaganda tools, reinforcing stereotypes that portrayed the Indian population as unrefined and in need of British civilization. Images of laborers, beggars and tea workers were used strategically to perpetuate the narrative of British superiority and the supposed benevolence of the colonial regime. Despite the harsh realities and exploitation that women faced, their resilience and contribution to the colonial economy and society are evident in these visual documents. Taken as a whole, the photographs from colonial Darjeeling constitute a rich historical record that reflects and constructs the colonial experience, capturing the intersections of cultures, the imposition of power, and the nuanced lives of individuals within a colonial environment.

Studying these images and stories are behind them, we are deeper in the ideology of colonial gender dynamics and the ideology of the empire. The visual story built with the help of photos has not only reflected, but also has a colonial experience, giving the reality of women's life and the ideas of a wider imperial project. Thus the importance of photography remains as a historical and expressive document that captures the various dynamic experiences of Indian women in the colonial era.

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