

## FROM OBSCURITY TO A SUB-DIVISIONAL HEADQUARTER: SILIGURI IN COLONIAL PERIOD

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### *Abstract*

*Siliguri is a city which spans across the Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri districts in the Indian state of West Bengal. The city is located on the banks of the Mahananda River and the foothills of the Himalayas. Siliguri is known for its "4T": Tea, Timber, Tourism and Transport and is one of the fastest developing and growing metropolis of the state and also of the country. This city with sky scrapers, big hotels, many residential townships, three Railway stations and airports is boosted as the "Uncrowned capital of North Bengal" by the newspapers. However, a hundred years before this metropolis was only a small village. This research article tries to trace the colonial history of Siliguri, the conduct it received from the colonial rulers and the reasons for its quick unprecedented development.*

**Keywords:** *terai/tarai, sanyassis, Raikats, Tongas, Teesta/Tista, urban markets, toy train, Hill-cart road, tea.*

### **Introducing the Region**

Oxford dictionary defines 'region' as a continuous part of surface, space or body; administrative division. Brudel remarks 'mountains as much as monkey maketh Man'. Regions are areas that are broadly divided by physical characteristics, human impact characteristics and the interaction of humanity and the environment. Siliguri is spread over two districts in West Bengal, viz., Darjeeling and Jalpaiguri. Naxalbari, Jalpaiguri, Rajgunje, and Malbajar are some important towns near Siliguri. Siliguri is the headquarters of the

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plains sub-division of Darjeeling district of West Bengal. Situated in Darjeeling district, it is the district's largest city; however, the district headquarters is located at Darjeeling.

Siliguri town the gateway to North East, Sikkim and Bihar also shares borders with three countries – Bangladesh, Bhutan and Nepal. The town's cosmopolitan character, grown out of it being "an island of prosperity," makes it prone to both external and internal threat. Pakistan and China may pose an external threat via Bangladesh and Nepal through this narrow strip of land called the Siliguri corridor (which at its narrowest is 20 kilometers long and just 20 kilometers wide in the general area south west of Siliguri). It also connects hill stations such as Gangtok, Darjeeling, Kalimpong, Kurseong and Mirik and the northeast states with the rest of India.

### **The Contested landscape:**

The district of Darjeeling was part of the Dominion of Raja of Sikkim. In 1706 what is now called as kalimpong subdivision of the district was taken from the Raja of Sikkim by the Butaneese. The Raja later became engaged in unsuccessful struggles with the Gurkhas who had seized power in Nepal and invaded Sikkim in 1780. During the next 30 years they overran Sikkim as far as the Tista and conquered and annexed the terrain. In the meantime, war broke out between East India Company and the Nepalese. The war ended in 1817 by the treaty of Titaliya and the tract which the Nepalese has wrested from the Raja of Sikkim was ceded to the company. The company restored the whole of the country between the Mechi and the Tista to the Raja and guaranteed his sovereignty. Sikkim was thus made the buffer state between Nepal and Bhutan. Under the above treaty the Raja was bound to refer to the arbitration of the British government in all disputes between his subjects and those of neighbouring States. Ten years after it was signed, the disputes on the Sikkim-Nepal frontiers rose and were referred to the Governor General. Two officers Captain Lloyd and Mr. Grant were deputed in 1828 to deal with the disputes. Lloyd spent 6 days in February 1829 in the 'old Goorkha station of Darjeeling' and was attracted by its advantages as a site for a Sanatorium. Darjeeling was then deserted although it had been occupied by a small

village around the residence of one of the principal kazi. Mr. Grant reported to the Governor General Lord William Bentinck about the numerous advantages promised by a sanatorium at Darjeeling and also recommended its occupations for military purpose as the key of a pass into Nepal. The Governor General then deputed Captain Hebert, the Deputy Surveyor-General to examine the country with Mr. Grant and in due course the Court of the Directors approved the project. General Lloyd was directed to open negotiations with the Raja of Sikkim and he got the opportunity to negotiate only when he was deputed to enquire into the causes of an incursion from Nepal of Lepchas who had taken refuge there from Sikkim. Thus, Lloyd succeeded in obtaining the Grant from the Raja of Sikkim on 1st February 1835 and it was worded as follows-

“ the governor general has expressed his desire for the possession the Hills of Darjeeling on account of its cool climate, has been introduced for the purpose of enabling the servant of his government, suffering from the sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages and I, the Sikkimputta Raja, out of friendship and for the said Governor General, help present Darjeeling to the East India company, that is, all the land south of great Ranjit river, East of Balasun, kahail and little Ranjit river and west of Rungno and Mahanadi.” This was an unconditional cession of what was then an inhabited mountains but in 1841 the government granted the Raja an allowance of Rupees 3000 per annum as compensation and this was raised in 1846 to Rupees 6000 per annum. After the cession, General Lloyd and Dr. Chapman was sent in 1836 to explore and investigate the climate and the capabilities of the place. They spend the winter in 1836 and part of 1837 doing this when it was finally decided to develop the site as a Sanatorium. General Lloyd was appointed as a local Agent to deal with applications of land which began to pour in from residence of Calcutta. In 1836, Lloyd and Chapman found only few Huts erected by Raja of Sikkim and by 1840 a road had been made from Pankhabari thereby Staging Bungalow there and a Hotel had been started at Kurseong and other at Darjeeling, about 30 private houses were erected.

The rest of the ceded area was however under forest and practically uninhabited. According to **Captain Herbert** this was because previously about hundreds of able bodied lephas forming two third population of Sikkim had been forced by the operation of the Raja of Sikim to fly from Darjeeling and neighborhood areas and take Refuge in Nepal.

### **Sikkim threat and Dr. Campbell**

In 1839, Dr Campbell of the Indian Medical Service, British resident in Nepal as transferred to Darjeeling as superintendent. He was not only in charge of Civil, Criminal and Fiscal administration Of the District but also in charge of establishing political relations with Sikkim and adjoining foreign areas. Dr Campbell encouraged Cultivators and the population of the area which was hundred in 1839 rose to 10,000 in 1849. 'Whatever has been done here' said Mr. W.B. Jackson, an inspecting officer in 1852, was done by Dr Campbell alone and it was the efforts of Campbell that led to the establishment of no less than 70 European houses, Buildings for the accommodation of the sick in the depot and other public as well as private buildings.

However in the mean time relations with Sikkim deteriorated. The increasing Importance of Darjeeling brought a sense of loss and frustration to the Lamas and other leading men of Sikkim headed by the Diwan Namguay. The lamas and the Diwan had to bear huge loss because many slaves from Sikkim had settled as free men in and around Darjeeling. The Sikkimese restored to frequent kidnappings and demanded for return of slaves. The climax took place when in November of 1849, Sir Joseph Hooker and Dr. Campbell, while travelling in Sikkim with the permission of the Raja, were made prisoners at the command of the Diwan of Sikkim. Various demands were made as conditions of release but after some days on 24<sup>th</sup> December both were released unconditionally. In February of 1850, small punitive force entered Sikkim and remained there on the north Bank of great Ranjit river for a week but the serious retaliatory action by the British was the withdrawal of the grant of Rupees 6000 for the Raja and annexation of the Terai, the portion of the Sikkim Hills

bounded by the Ramman and the great Ranjit on the north, by the Tista on the east and by the Nepal Frontier on the west. The area annexed was 640 square miles in extent.

Immediately after the annexation of the Terai in 1850, the Southern portion of the Terai was placed under the Purnia district, but in consequence of the dislike of the inhabitants, this whole area was attached to Darjeeling. The Terai and the Hill territory annexed from Sikkim and managed by the superintendent who from 8<sup>th</sup> may 1850 was called the Deputy Commissioner. The change was welcome by the inhabitants who now had to pay only some fixed sums in the treasury in Darjeeling instead of having to meet uncertain and fluctuating demand in kind or for personal services made by the Raja and the Diwan.

The annexation brought about significant changes in the relation between Sikkim the British. Previously the Darjeeling district had been an Enclave in Sikkim territory and to reach at, the British had to pass through a country acknowledging the rule of a Foreign, though dependent Raja. After the annexation the British territory state in Darjeeling was continuous with the districts of Purina and Rungpur in the plane and Sikkim Raja was cut off from access to the plans except through British territory.

For some years after the annexation, relations with Sikkim were not disturbed but raids on British Territories latter recommenced and British Subjects were carried off and sold as slaves or detained in Sikkim. The raja was now an old man of nearly eighty and retired to Chumbi Valley in Tibet leaving the Government to Diwan Namguay who had arrested Campbell and Dr. Hoker in 1849. Six months negotiation proved fruitless and it was decided to take possession of the portion of Sikkim North of the Ramman and west of the great Ranjit until British Subjects were released, offenders handed over and security obtained against a recurrence of similar offences.

With this objective Dr. Cambell with a small force of 160 rank and file crossed the Ramman in November 1860 and advanced as far as Rinchipong. He was however attacked and forced back to fall on Darjeeling

Latter Colonel Gawler with Sir Ashley Aden as envoy and special Commissioner moved with artillery and a force of 2,600 men and entered Tumlong, the Capital of Sikkim in March 1861.

The Diwan fled and the abdicated in favour of his son with whom on the 28<sup>th</sup> March, a Treaty was made which was of particular importance to Darjeeling, because it finally put an end to frontier troubles with Sikkim and secured full freedom for commerce across the Sikkim boarder.

### **The Bhutan Menace**

The British Northern policy of Annexation made the Terai and Doars strategically important. The land between southern Siliguri and Jalpaiguri was a bone of contention between the Bhotias and Koches.<sup>1</sup> The Koch Chieftains hotly contested Bhutanees hold over extensive area which also included the large southern tract of land between Siliguri and Jalpaiguri. However, post first Anglo-Bhutanese war (1774) a large area was ceded to Bhutan as a part of the policy to appease the Bhutaneese and is the interest of Trans-Himalayan trade.<sup>2</sup> This move of the Britishers was not acceptable by the Koch Zamindars. The large tract remained subject to the plundering by both Bhutaneese soldier and the Koch Zamindars.

The Bhutaneese were responsible for a series of incursions in which property was plundered, lives take and many innocent persons carried off into captivity. Due to these activities the British Government took control of a large part of this disputed territory in 1842 on an annual rent of Rs. 2000 to the Bhutan Government. But 18 years after in 1860 the payment was discontinued for alleged act of aggression. In 1862 news came that the Bhutaneese were preparing to make an attack on Darjeeling and troops were hurried up from Dimapur to restore confidence. This was followed in 1863 by a dispatch of a special mission to Bhutan under Sir Asley Aden to settle differences and obtain the restoration of plundered property.

The mission failed as the British envoy was compelled by threats to sign a document giving up all claims to Bhutan Dooars on the Assam frontiers. He was treated with indignity and only with difficulty in April 1864 succeeded in leaving Punakha by night and returning to Darjeeling.

Negotiations continued fruitlessly and the Government of India decided to annex the Bengal Dooars and such Hill Territory as might be necessary to prevent Bhutanese incursions into Darjeeling district. Small expeditions were sent into Bhutan in the winter of 1864. This met with very little opposition and the operations terminated when, in November 1865 the Treaty extorted from Sir Asley Aden was replaced by a fresh one by which what is now the Kalingpong Sub-division as well as the Bhutan Dooars and passes leading into Bhutan Hills were ceded to the British in return for an annual subsidy.

During the campaign of Eden in 1864 these tracts were “permanently annexed to British Dominion”.<sup>3</sup> The proclamation regarding the annexation read that the British Government, under Article 11 of the Treaty concluded on the 11th day of November 1865, had obtained from the Government of Bhootan, forever the cession of the whole of the tract known as the Eighteen Dooars bordering on the districts of Rungpoor, Cooch Behar, and Assam, together with the Talook of Ambaree Fallacottah and the Hill territory on the left bank of the Teesta, up to such point as may be laid down by the British Commissioner appointed for the purpose. “It was declared that the territory ceded by the Bhotan Government as aforesaid is annexed to the territories of Her Most Gracious Majesty the Queen of England. It was further declared that the ceded territory was attached to the Bengal Division of the Presidency of Fort William, and that it will accordingly be under the immediate control of the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, but that it shall not be subjected to the general regulations.”<sup>4</sup>

In the days of the Dooars war, Chandra Shekharthe “Sixteenth Raikat”<sup>5</sup> Petitioned the Government stating the services he had rendered to Eden’s mission and supplies provided to

the Bhutan Duar Force “Amounting to fifty or Sixty thousand rupees”<sup>6</sup> and in lieu of his service the British Government should restore the Zamindari rights of his forefathers over the large tract of land ceded to the Bhutaneese. The British Government reject the plea of Chandra Shekhra Deva and henceforth the areas south of Siliguri was permanently annexed by the British Government. Thus the area which was considered as no man’s land became part of the southern sub-urban of Siliguri towns.

### The Town

L.S.O’ Malley never mentioned Siliguri as a town and he stated that in the Darjeeling District “there were only two towns Darjeeling and Kurseong which between them account for only 21393 persons”<sup>7</sup>. Prior to O’Malley, W.W. Hunter in his the Statistical Account of Bengal, do not mentions about Siliguri, however, makes a sweeping statement that these places were “chiefly uninhabited by the Meches and Dhumals, two tribes who are said not to suffer from the unhealthy nature of the climate.”<sup>8</sup>

O’ Malley wrote about Siliguri that Siliguri is a “village is the South of Kurseong Sub-division near the left bank of Mahananda is 26°43’ N and 88°26’E. Population (1901) 784. Siliguri is the northern terminus of the Eastern Bengal State Railway, where it is joined by the Darjeeling- Himalayan Railway. It is also the terminus of the Cart Road from Kalimpong and Sikkim and it thus focuses the local trade. Several jute firms are established here and in addition to the permanent shops there is a biweekly Government market. It is the Headquarter of a Deputy Magistrate who disposes of the criminal work of the *Tarai* and manages the large Government estate; he was formerly stationed at Hansquar (Hanskhawa) near Phansidewa, but his headquarter were removed to Siliguri 1888 on the extensions of the railway to that place. It also contains a small sub-jail and post office, dak bungalow, inspection house, police station and a dispensary with 20 beds, all situated on fairly high ground and its name means “the stony site” presumably because the bed of the Mahanadi close by is a mass of broken stone brought down from the hills.”<sup>9</sup>

The area is and around Siliguri was always dreaded by the Europeans is the beginning of the twentieth Century. It was considered as “a tract of reeking moisture and rank vegetation it (Siliguri) has always been dreaded by Europeans, who used is the days before the railway, to hurry through it as fast as they could travel and if possible in the early morning in order to get beyond the fatal fever zone. That such speed was necessary was proved by the fate of lady Canning, who caught the fever which ended in her death while halting to sketch by the road side on her return journey from Darjeeling, by for the greatest mortality is caused by fevers, which are generally malaria is nature .... They are commonest is *Terai* where they account for 80% of the total mortality, the death rate from fever being 51 per mile is 1905. The foremost frequently met with is intermittent fever with the enlargement of spleen, quotidian double quotidian and tertian being very common, but a great variety of fever are found including the deadly *Kalaazar* and Black water fever.<sup>10</sup> The death rate is appalling the average mortality being nearly 60 per 1000 is the ten years ending (i.e 1890-1900). In 1900 while it exceeded, 71 per 1000 is that year and on the other hand, the average birth rate is the decade was nearly 19.4 per annum.<sup>11</sup> The Europeans found this place unsuitable to inhabit but O'Malley confessed that “there is however, one race which inhabitsthis sickly region with comparative immunity the aboriginal Meches; and the Rajbanshis are also to a certain extent free from fever largely occurring to their cleaning away the rank Jungles around their homesteads and to the high platform on which they erect houses.<sup>12</sup>

### **The Land of Lawless Bandits**

This tract of land was also popular for giving refuge to the sanayasis who were branded as bandit and robbers. The British official records these Sanyasis as “lawless bandits” who pretenses of charity unleashed terror. The Sanyasi were held in high veneration by the people is the countryside and put up a stiff resistance to the expanding British power at the end of the 18<sup>th</sup> Century.<sup>13</sup>

Baikunthapur, a place nearby Siliguri was considered to be head-quarter of Sanyasis. The Baikunthpur forest, nested these 'bandits' who ravaged the country in armed bands numbering hundreds. Mr. Glazier described this area in the following manner, "In 1789, we have an account of a large body of bandits who had occupied the Baikunthapur Forest, Which lies at the northern apex of the district (Rangpore) right under the hills, whence they issued on their predatory excursions." The forest was composed of tree jungles enter woven with cane and was impossible except by narrow winding paths known only to the dakoits. The collector, says Glazier, got together a force of two hundred *barkandazes* and held all the entrances into the forest. Several skirmishes ensued but months elapsed before any decisive result was obtained. The marauders were at length starved out. Some escaped into Nepal and Bhutan but great numbers were captured including their leaders and several of his principal associates. Within twelve months in this and other parts of the district the collector arrested and brought to trial 549 dakoits. Lieutenant Macdonald was sent against them with 180 sepoy, and brought in the leaders of the gang, but their followers escaped into the hills. Three years later, as many as 1,500 crossed the Brahmaputra at Diwanganj; they had rockets, *jinjal* pieces, and 110 horses. Besides these wandering thieves, there were numbers of sanyasis who settled down in hermitages, which they fortified, and where they carried on their trade of moneylending, combined with dacoity. A report to the Board of Revenue, dated 29th April 1789, makes mention of the seizure of two dacoit boats of 80 and 100 cubits in length, belonging to head sanyasis, and gives a detailed account of the oppressions practised by these scourges, not only on the cultivators, but on the zamindars and their officers, whom they carried off and confined until their demands were satisfied."<sup>14</sup>

### **Administrative Developments after 1866**

The year 1866 thus mark an epoch in the History of the District. Peace was then established within and all its border and development, which had been considerable in spite of pioneering difficulties and interruptions due to political disturbances now proceeded with more certainty and momentum. The Kalinpong area was first notified as a subdivision under

the Deputy Commissioner of the Western Doors district but in 1866 it was transferred to the district of Darjeeling. This was the last addition to the district which then reached its present dimension.

After Kalimpong had been brought under British administration the district was divided into two subdivisions the headquarter Sub-Division with an area of 960 square miles including all the hills on the both sides of the Testa and Terai Sub-Division with an area of 274 square miles which included the whole of the country at the foot of the hills. The Headquarter of the Terai subdivision were at Hanskhawa near Phansidewa from 1864 to 1880, when they were transferred to Siliguri. The meter gauge Railway of the North Bengal State Railway had been extended to Siliguri and Siliguri, at that time in the Jalpaiguri District was transferred to Darjeeling district with a small surrounding area and made the headquarters of the Terai subdivision. In the mean time Kurseong had begun to develop and 1891 it was made the Headquarter of a new subdivision which included both the Terai and the lower hills west of the Testa.

Later in 1907 Siliguri was made a Subdivision, thus re-establishing the Terai Subdivision which had in 1891 been absorbed into the Kurseong Subdivision. Till 1907 there had been a Deputy Magistrate at Siliguri working under the Subdivisional Officer, Kurseong, and managing the Terai Government Estate under the Deputy Commissioner. Kalimpong in the meantime had been in the Sadar Subdivision with a manager of the Khas Mahals working at Kalimpong under the Deputy Commissioner, police work being controlled by an Inspector. In 1916 the Kalimpong Subdivision was created as a preliminary to working out development schemes in Kalimpong. The District was included in the Rajshahi Division until October 1905 when, as a result of the Partition of Bengal, it was transferred to the Bhagalpur Division. With the re-arrangement of the provinces it was retransferred to the Rajshahi Division in March 1912.

A similar transfer and retransfer took place of the jurisdictions of the District and Sessions Judge. The District was under the District and Sessions Judge of Dinajpur until October

1905 when it was placed under the Judge of Purnea and again in April 1912 it was brought under Dinajpur. The District is peculiar in respect of civil judicial powers. The Sub-divisional Officers of Kurseong, Kalimpong and Siliguri all have powers of a Munsiff and Small Causes Court Judge up to Rs. 50. Appeals from these Munsiffs and from the Munsiff at Darjeeling lie to the Deputy Commissioner. The Court of the Deputy Commissioner has been invested with jurisdiction under the Insolvency Act where declared debts do not exceed Rs. 5,000. The Senior Deputy Magistrate of Darjeeling was formerly vested with the powers of a Subordinate Judge, Munsiff and Small Causes Court Judge. But since March 1939, a Munsiff with powers of a Subordinate Judge and Small Causes Court Judge up to Rs. 500 has been posted in Darjeeling and he performs the work of a Magistrate in addition to his civil judicial work. The Sub-divisional Officer, Siliguri, had powers to dispose of rent and other suits under Act X of 1859. Appeals from the Subordinate Judge of Darjeeling lie to the District Judge of Dinajpur and to the High Court in Calcutta. By the exercise of these special powers the Deputy Commissioner could do something to secure the Hillman interests. He has in addition powers as Registrar of Births and deaths under Act VI of 1886 and powers to control the movements of Europeans across the frontiers of Nepal, Sikkim or Bhutan.

The authority of the Deputy Commissioner is greater in Darjeeling than that of the District Officers in other Bengal Districts by reason of his powers of control over a very considerable khas mahal (233 square miles), over most of the Bazaars in the District, over the work of the District Board as Chairman and over the Darjeeling Town Administration as Chairman of the Municipality. Administration in the District has peculiarities due to the special application of various enactments. The Bengal Tenancy Act is not in force and Act X of 1859 and Act VIII of 1879 regulate the rights and liabilities of the rural population. The Bengal Local Self-Government Act and the Bengal Municipal Act have special modifications adapting them to local conditions.

The Bengal Village Self-Government Act was in force only in the Siliguri Town area and the Chaukidari Act only in the non-tea rural areas of the Siliguri Sub-division and it is not in

force anywhere in the hills. A number of special amendments to the Motor Vehicles Act was found necessary to meet hill conditions. To regulate amenities in the small residential area of the abandoned Takdah Cantonment, one Union Committee has been established.

### **Roads, Railways and Communication:**

The importance of Siliguri, as pointed out earlier arises because of its proximity to Darjeeling and Duars. Before any part of what is now the Darjeeling District, had been made over by the Raja of Sikkim to the Government of the East India Company, means of Communication were very rudimentary, far narrow rough tracks through forests and occasional cane bridges over torrent rivers were all that existed. It was quite possible that the Sikkim authorities considered that southward communications were of less importance than those going northward, for the ruling Family was of Tibetan Origin and showed a fondness for summering in the Chumli village, finding even Sikkim too damp for its taste.<sup>15</sup>

The area, which was taken over from Sikkim was almost entirely covered by forest and indeed it was reported in 1830 to be totally uninhabited. Grant's memorandum of 1830 mentioned two routes then existing northward from the plains into Sikkim. One was by "Nagree" pass and the other by the "Bubbook Galah". A Third route by the Mahananda was mentioned as having been deserted and overgrown with Jungle. The pioneers who came to open up Darjeeling after it had been ceded in 1835 were confronted with an arduous journey from Calcutta before they reached the hills. Guide to Darjeeling published in 1838 mentioned 98 hours as the time the journey took from Calcutta to Darjeeling via Siliguri.<sup>16</sup>

54 hours Calcutta to Malda

16 hours Malda to Darjeeling

20 hours Dinajpore to Titaliya

8 hours Titaliya to the foot of the hills Terai and Siliguri

The whole journey to Darjeeling labeled five or six days and the discomforts were graphically described by Sir Joseph Hooker. Who in 1848 at a cost of Rs.240/- had occasion to perform the journey from Karalgola Ghat on the Ganges to the foot hills. The first measure taken to improve communication was the deputation of Lieutenant Napier to construct a road from Siliguri to Darjeeling. This was carried out from 1839 to 1842 and the road can still be seen winding its way by sharp ascents from Pankhabari to Kurseong and the onto the Dow hill and Ghoom. The section of this road from Pankhabari to Kurseong is part of what is now known as the Siliguri MatigaraKurseong Road.<sup>17</sup> This road was not practicable for wheeled traffic and the development of Darjeeling and cost of transporting military stores (Rs 2 per mound from Darjeeling was very heavy for those times) led to search for an alternative road. This alternative road is known as the Hill Cart Road and this road starts from Siliguri and ends in Darjeeling town. Work was started in 1860 and the road was completed in 1896 the specification was a road 24 feet in breadth with a general gradient of 3 in 100 and maximum gradient of 1 in 18. The road system was not only of local utility but also facilitated in national and Tran-frontier trade. The District Board is responsible for subsidiary lines of road communication and in addition there are roads of importance to the public maintained by the Forest Department and the villagers of Government Estates in the District. The various controlling authorities were shown in the list of District Roads given below. It was not thought necessary to give many details of the engineering of the roads listed; it should be understood that construction and maintenance of roads is troublesome and expensive in the hills and adjoining areas because of the mountainous nature of the land, the heavy rainfall and the liability to landslips and in the Terai because of heavy rainfall and flooding.

Meanwhile decision was taken to construct in road from the Ghat of Ganges to Siliguri at a cost of Rs. 14,68,000/-. This road was 126 miles long and connected Sahibganj to Siliguri. Therefore, Siliguri became the terminal point of the Ganges- Darjeeling Hill Cart Road. Importance of Siliguri grew as it became a junction of the two roads – one leading to the

North and the other to the South.<sup>18</sup> Before the completion of the Northern Bengal Railway, people wishing to reach Darjeeling were obliged to proceed from Calcutta to Sahibganj, a distance of 220 miles from Howrah terminus of the E.I.Railway, then by ferry steamer to Caragola, a journey of five hours and often more, where the unfortunate travelers were disembarked on the river side and were often obliged to wade a mile or more through the sand under a blazing sun. From there onwards the route laid along Ganges-Darjeeling road via Purneah, Kissanganj and Titalaya to Siliguri.<sup>19</sup> The visitors to Darjeeling jolted at *Dak Gharry* and on reaching Siliguri avoided any halt in evening or at night due to malaria mosquitos nightmares and the popular Lady Canning death story.

In 1860 the East Indian Railway had been extended upto Sahebjanj and thereafter it was only necessary to travel by road north of this point in order to get to Darjeeling. "The journey to the foot of hills could be performed from the Karagola (Ganga Ghat) either by Palki (Palanguin) or bullock cart or by Ganga from Siliguri to Darjeeling. This road was from Karagola passed through Purnea, Kishanganj and Tituliya to Siliguri."<sup>20</sup>

'The opening of the rail line from Calcutta to Raniganj in 1855 reduced the laborious cart journey to Darjeeling by 120 miles, and the East Bengal State Railway pushed steadily northward in the following decades.<sup>21</sup> Until the advent of the railways in the hills, '*Tongas*' continued to be the only faster means of travelling from the foothills to Darjeeling. The two most important factors in the development of the district have been the choice of Darjeeling for a health resort and the subsequent planting of tea in the hills. It was by chance or destiny that in 1878, Franklin Prestage, the man who made the hill railway possible, came to Darjeeling along with his brother-in-law Sulyard Bernard Cary. The same year the Northern Bengal Railway was inaugurated in the foothills. On that occasion the Lieutenant Governor Sir Ashley Eden had made the some remarkable speech, to quote '...the wearied and exhausted citizen of Calcutta within a short journey of what I have no hesitation in saying is the finest scenery and almost the purest air in the world. It brings the rapidly developing tea interests of Darjeeling and the *Doars* into direct communication with

the ports of export...the cotton goods, metals and salt of Europe and the indigo, tobacco and the tea of India to be exchanged with the gold dust and wool of Tibet, and the silks of China. I even hope that his dreams of social intercourse with Lhasa may be so fully realized that we may have, someday, the honor of carrying the Grand Lama to exchange religious views with the bishop of Calcutta.<sup>22</sup> According to Newnan's Guide to Darjeeling and its surroundings Sir Eden 'with his practical commonsense, recognized the fact that a light railway, if it could only be constructed to Darjeeling, would infinitely develop that town, as well as the country through which it passed, and also put Calcutta and the whole of Lower Bengal in rapid, cheap, and easy communication with its only existing sanatorium.'<sup>23</sup>

### **The Rail-Road Competition**

The course of trade and its volume depended much on the cost of transport. Costs of other means of transport would be more readily understood if consideration is first given to those of road haulage by bullock cart. There was a steady carting business in Siliguri during the colonial days. The Rangpo-Siliguri route which was approximately 46 miles , 7 annas per mound was charged and war time charges got doubled.

Coolie and pack transport were much more expensive than carting. In forests, for moving timber and wood coolie transport would cost from 3 to 12 times as much as carting. Pack transport ( by mules) were highly organised on the Tibet trade routes. From Phari Dzong in Tibet to Kalimpong via the Jalap La, a distance of 90 to 95 miles, Rs.6 per maund was the peace time rate. From Phari to Gangtok via the Nathu La, 65 to 70 miles, the rate was Rs.4 per maund. These rates are equivalent to about 12 pies per maund mile. The routes are severe and probably rates were cut to a competitive minimum. Rates in war time soared and at one time for the Kalimpong Phari trip touched Rs.35 per maund.

The road system of the District as well the Darjeeling Railway system both converged at Siliguri and practically the whole of the import and export trade from the plains passed through the Bengal and Assam Railway at Siliguri. A very much smaller volume of imports and exports took place via the Darjeeling- Himalayan Branch Railway to Kishanganj. In neither direction the roads were in a condition to carry an appreciable volume of trade, incoming or outgoing, and so practically all import or export took place by rail.

The Hill Cart Road from Darjeeling and the main line of the Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway carried the greater part of the produce of the Sadar and Kurseong Subdivisions, the supplies needed for the towns of Darjeeling and Kurseong and for the tea gardens and industries of these Subdivisions as well as the traffic from Nepal crossing the frontier at Simana Basti and northward (potatoes and chiratta). The Kishanganj branch of the Darjeeling- Himalayan Railway and the Terai road system serve the Terai tea gardens via Siliguri and there is a certain amount of traffic with Nepal through Naxalbari Station some of which passed through Siliguri.

The Kishanganj Section of the Railway was opened for traffic shortly before the war of 1914-1918. Its construction presented few of the peculiar engineering problems which had to be solved in constructing the main line. It lies wholly in the plains and did not use any road alignment.

Passenger fares charged by the Railway were as follows:-

Siliguri to Darjeeling (61 miles) 1st class Rs.10, 2nd class Rs.7 and 3rd class Rs.4 (Rs.4 for mail trains):

Siliguri to Guelle (29.5 miles) 1<sup>st</sup> class Rs.5-10, 2<sup>nd</sup> class Rs.2-13 and 3rd class Re. 1-6;

Siliguri to Kishanganj (69.5 miles) 1<sup>st</sup> class Rs.13-2, 2nd class Rs.6-9 and 3rd class Rs. 2-3.

Third class fares were thus one anna per mile for the Kishanganj branch and anna per mile for the hill sections. Rates were enhanced by 25 percent or more during the 1939-45 war.

Freight rates vary according to the class of goods carried. On the Tista Valley and Kishanganj branches war-time rates varied from 1 to 3.2 pies per mound mile according to the class of goods. From Siliguri to Dareling rates varied from 3.7 to 6.2 pies per/mound mile and downhill from Darjeeling to Siliguri upwards of 2.25 pies per mound mile according to the class of goods. Rates before the war were about 20 percent, less than those quoted.

It should be explained that freight rates on the hill were high. The fact however remains that for many years the railway had practically a monopoly of the handling of the import and export trade of Darjeeling town and the hill areas of the District and the only competition they had to face was bullock cart traffic which was only appreciable in the Tista Valley and in the Terai.

The advent of motor vehicles from about 1930, coupled with the improvement of the roads introduced a direct form of competition with Railways. The Government tried to limit the number of Lorries and busses plying for hire.

The problem of rail road competition in the area had by no means solved till independence.. War conditions severely tested the transportation system in the hills and had temporarily confused the issue. For instance the Railway system proved unable to handle the traffic needed to supply the greatly increased temporary war-time population of the Darjeeling town and had to be supplemented by extra mechanical road transport (some of its military) which did not operate on a strictly commercial and competitive basis.

For a long time consumers of goods complained about the cost of transportation. The construction of ropeways to cheapen costs hds been under consideration but had only

resulted in the construction of two minor public ropeways which operate as feeders to the railway system and did not appreciably reduce transportation costs from Siliguri to the hill areas of the District. The solution of the road-rail problem was complicated by the interest Government had in maintaining the traffic receipts and profits of the Railway and Government exercised their powers of limiting road transport on the Hill Cart Road with this interest in view.

The principal commodities moved by the Railway on the main line were rice and other food-grains, cement, iron, salt and building materials, Coal, provisions and miscellaneous merchandise in the upward direction and potatoes, tea, cardamoms oranges and timber in the downward direction.

In 1942-43 for instance there was an import of 7,104 tons of rice to Darjeeling, 1,007 tons of salt, 540 tons of sugar, 417 tons of grains and pulses other than rice, 773 tons of provisions and 2,769 tons of coal. Downward from Darjeeling in the above year, moved 1,080 tons of potatoes and 98 tons of tea.

Imports from below to Ghum included 3,505 tons of rice, 513 tons of salt, 434 tons of provisions and 1,167 tons of coal. Downward export from Ghum included 1,629 tons of potatoes, 2,190 tons of tea and 515 tons of timber.

The Siliguri-Kishanganj line handled timber, rice and jute while the Tista Valley branch carries imports of food-grains, salt, piece-goods, provisions and building materials and exports oranges, cardamoms, potatoes, timber and wool. The total, number of passengers traveling during 1942-43 over the different sections of the Darjeeling-Himalayan Railway was Main Line 3,08,872; Siliguri Kishanganj Extension 4,59,204; Tista Valley Extension. 35,988

### Conclusion:

Thus, Siliguri being situated in the border of hill district, Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan, Assam and Bihar served as a Vital link of communication after the establishment of the road system and railway line. Siliguri which was a small hamlet covered with Jungle became an important entry and exit points of the commodities meant for Assam, Bihar, Sikkim, Nepal and the hill districts. At the time of independence Siliguri had already established its future prospects as it became the most developing town in whole of North Bengal. The Growth rate of Siliguri for the period 1941-51 was 209.72 as per census datas of 1951.

#### Growth Rate of Towns in North Bengal (1941-51)

Name of Towns		Growth Rate
1. Siliguri		209.72
2. English Bazar		31.41
3. Coochbehar	1	07.76
4. Jalpaiguri		48.60
5. Darjeeling		23.44
6. Kalimpong		30.46
7. Kurseong		37.95
8. Dinhata		65.38
9. Matha Bhanga		41.54
10. Haldibari		101.66
11. Hili		20.05
12. Tufanganj		64.02
13. Mekhliganj		4.47

Source: Census of India 1951, Volume VI, West Bengal, Sikkim and Chandernagore.

The future of a city depends on their resilience. Siliguri was once messy, unplanned, organic, marshy, and feverish but still captured the imagination as a center for financial, business, cultural and social development. The following chapter will discuss about the social landscape of Siliguri with focus on population and peoples.

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