

DARJEELING: MORE THAN QUEEN OF HILLS

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The research paper discusses the transition of a rural territory of the Sikkim's Princely state in the north eastern Himalayas into a sanatorium town under the British colonial rule. The points of discussion are how the changing pattern in the settlements' affected the rural population of the region, by transforming the economic and cultural lifestyles of the region. The colonial legacy influenced the socio-political and economic relations among the local and migrant communities in the region bringing overlapping of the socio-cultural weave as well as in the acculturation process among the native rural communities.

Keywords: *Bhutia, British, Darjeeling, Gurkha, Lepcha*

Great Scholar Rahul Sankrityayana who spent some memorable years of his life in Darjeeling wrote about this dreamland as follows:

Nagadhiraaj Himalaya vishwa ki sundartam girimala hai, prakriti ne mano apne saare saundarya ko himanchal bhoomi ko pradankar diya hai. Himalaya ki sushma sabhi jagah ek jaisi nahi hai, isme vaichhitraya paya jata hai. Almora, Naaital ke Himalaya ka drishya doosra hai, kinnar ka use bhhinna hai, Dorjeling apna prithak saundarya rakhta hai¹.

DARJEELING: EMERGENCE OF A CULTURAL CONFLUENCE ZONE

To write the history of a place which integrates not only to itself as a town but a heritage and belonging of several dynamic cultural belongings become profusely difficult. A similar situation occurs to a historian when she enters a region which is far ahead to its neighbouring cultures yet so much dependent on its inception original identities. To pen down thoughts about the society which evolved due to imperial efforts and retained the finesse of both incoming cultural influences and charisma of its own is what all about Darjeeling is.

When T.B. Subba wrote; *"It should be borne in mind that the history of Darjeeling we read today is not written by trained historians. Most of what goes in the name of history was*

¹ Rahul Sankrityayana, *Dorjeeling Parichay* (Hindi), Calcutta, Adhunik Pustak Bhavan, 1950, p.1

written by botanists, traders and administrators.”² The statement of Prof. Subba presents a satirical comment to the historians that in spite of being such a potential area of learning and repository of heritage and knowledge, the touristic influence of Darjeeling undermined the scholarly understanding of the region with a historical point of view. The paper is a small attempt to understand a charismatic land where I entered in 2006 and continued to pursue the region again in hope to explore more. Each time I ventured there was all the more mysterious and unwinding treasures of knowledge which became difficult to conjoin in few pages.

Darjeeling is more than what we see in the town, though the town itself says the stories of diverse episodes of adventures, human endeavour, bravery, courage, spirituality thoughts and treachery. Even then as we secede a little more downwards towards the hills and moors of the east and west belts we come across a confluence of cultures which grew silently in the valleys and even now evolving itself with the indigenous perceptions and promising winds of change from the town of Darjeeling. *Dorjeeling* a town which evolved itself from the *Gunari Bazar*³ to become one of the contented place of exile and solace for all those who were suffering from the dissonance, corruption and atrocities of the nature and authority.

DARJEELING: THE ONUS TURNED BLESSING TO NATIVES

It was said that the king of Sikkim who owned the territories of Darjeeling considered this land as worthless and difficult to safeguard it from the marauding Gorkha warriors of Nepal.⁴ In the late nineteenth century the Bhotiya kings of Sikkim were several times defeated by the Gorkha forces and their consisted battles with the fierce Gorkha were difficult to be resisted by their Lepcha dominated armies⁵. The ferocious battles made the defeated king to live in the exile at Tibet for several years till the attempts of peace and dominance were regained by the Britishers in the nineteenth century.⁶

The *rajah*⁷ of Sikkim and his subjects had in no way a very congenial life to boast about of utopian society.⁸ In fact, the southern region of the Sikkim kingdom was densely forested with meagre population of two thousand people and discouraged by the slavery and atrocities of the royal administration twelve hundreds of the Lepchas fled to Nepal⁹.

² T.B. Subba, *Ethnicity, State and Development*, Delhi, Vikas Publishing House, 1992, p.28

³ Rahul Sankrityayana, *Op.cit.*, p. 25

⁴ Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *An Account o the Kingdom of Nepal and the territories annexed to this Dominion by the House of Gorkha*, New Delhi, Rupa and company, 2007, p. 111

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112-113

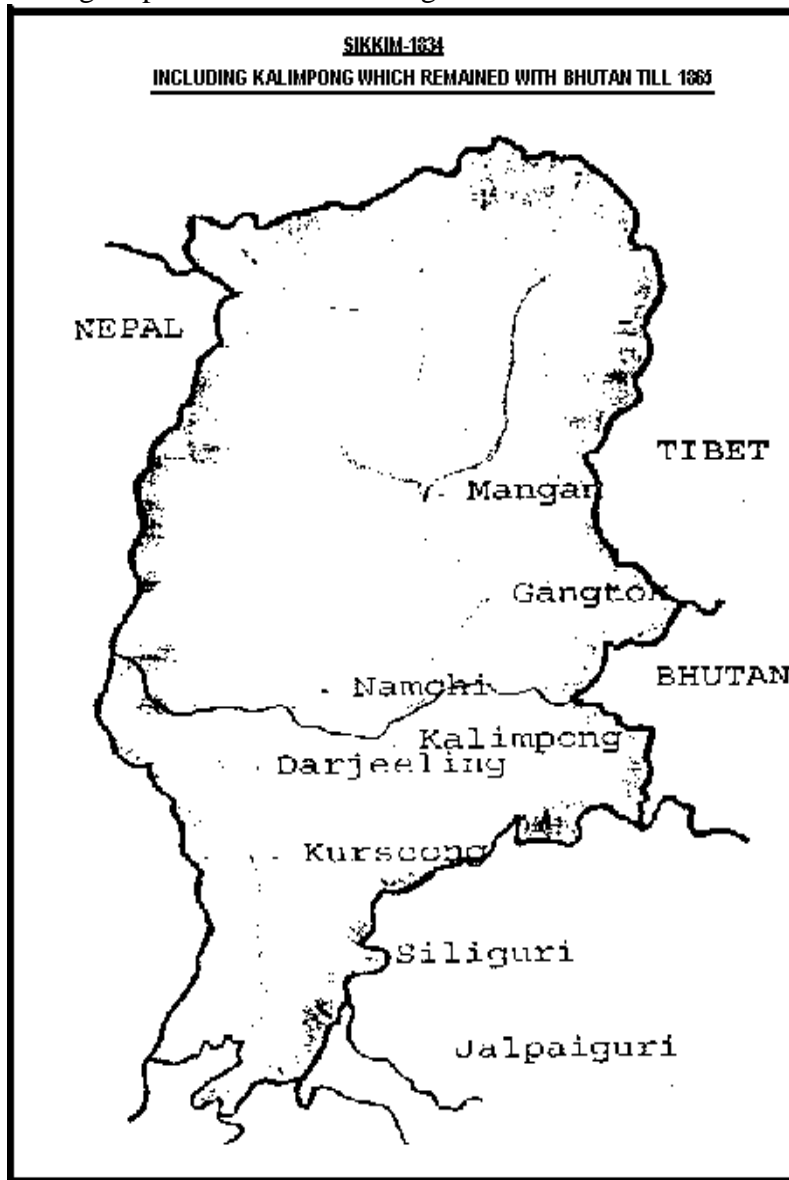
⁶ L.S.S. O' Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, Calcutta, The Bengal Secretariat Book Depot, 1907, p. 19

⁷ *Rajah* is a common term used for the king in Darjeeling even today.

⁸ Rahul Sankrityayana, *op.cit.*, p. 25

⁹ *Ibid.* p. 25

In the following map could be seen the region under the dominion Sikkim rajah;



Although the principality of Sikkim was dominated by the Lepcha community the king belonged to the Bhotiya, the strength of his entire army consisted of the Lepchas, who inhabited the mountains of the region between rivers Tista and Ringit¹⁰. Apart from these communities there lived in the valleys and mountains of Tista and Ringit; Magars¹¹, Gurungs, Jariyas, Newrsa, Murmis, Kirats, Limbus, Lepchas, and Bhotiyas. Magars and Gurungs because of their proximity with the Hindu kingdoms of Kali river region adopted various

¹⁰ Francis Buchanan Hamilton, *op. cit.*, p. 110

¹¹ The Magars also known as Mangars along with these communities there are similar 42 communities which are considered to be indigenous communities of the region who settled since generations as other than natives of India and British Burmese population in the region. Kumar Pradhan, Darjeelingma Nepali Jatiri Janjatiya Chinarika Nayan Adanharu, (Nepali text), Lalitpur-Nepal, Social Science Baha, 2004, p. 29

customs of Hindus¹² and acquired the traits of rajput warrior clans¹³. Till today they consider themselves as *Kshetris*; a regional terminology used to identify them as kshtriyas¹⁴.

The rulers of Sikkim were Bhotiyas', they were originally from Tibet-Lhasa, considered to be aristocratic family of their native land, and they took the title of Gelpo and continued to rule the Sikkim for a considerable period¹⁵. The chief under whose supervision the *Dorjeeling* territory on behalf of Sikkim rajah was taken care off till 1782 was known as Rup Chring, he resided at Darjeeling and had there a fort, or a strong house of brick.¹⁶ In 1788 again the Gorkhalese forces invaded Sikkim and the territory of Darjeeling and considerable part of Sikkim was annexed from Sikkim rajah by the Gorkha forces, the overpowered king went to Tankiya in Tibet.¹⁷ As a result the chiefs of the Lepcha community retired to a stronghold situated between the two branches of Tista¹⁸, from where they continued to annoy the Gorkhalese. The place where Lepchas settled themselves came to be known as Gandhauk or present Gangtok¹⁹ the loyalty of Lepchas to Bhotiya rajah brought him back to the scene of Sikkim again in 1809 in the dominions obtained by these Lepchas. These Lepchas were in no way an easy subject to Gorkhalese under their chief Nam-si they maintained an absolute independence. Seeking the troublesome situation Gorkhalese judged it prudent to give Lepchas a governor, or at least a collector of their own whose name was Yu-kang-ta, he gallantly defended the conserved dominion and with return of Sikkim rajah helped in the restoration of the in the Gangtok region²⁰. The supremacy of the Sikkim rajah were always and Lepcha chiefs were always tried to be curtailed by the Gorkha forces which were stationed at North Sikkim and Dorjeeling. The gone astray king of Sikkim could only regained his lost territories after support from his Lepcha, Limbu and Kirat supporters who stood with him stalwartly²¹, his dominion regained their status with the Anglo-Nepalese war²² when British took over all the territories of Sikkim and Darjeeling from Gorkha forces and ceded it back to Sikkim raja through the treaty of Titliya of 1817 AD²³. The Article-3 of the treaty mentioned that the rajah of Sikkim refer to the arbitration of British Government in any disputes or questions that may arise between his subjects or those of Nepal or any other neighbouring states and to abide by the decisions of the British government. Through this clause the foreign affairs and subordination of the Sikkim rajah to the British became evident and the titular governance came into power.²⁴

The repercussions of the treaty were experienced within a decade when the Sikkim-Nepalese skirmish began again in 1827. This time Captain G.W.A Lloyd and J.W. Grant, the commercial resident of Malda; went to look after the situation and on the way they spent six days at the old cantonment of Gorkhas' at Dorjeeling. The absolutely solemn and serene

¹² Francis Buchanan Hamilton, op.cit, p. 24

¹³ Kumar Pradhan, op.cit., p. 15

¹⁴ During my fieldwork in Darjeeling district in 2006-2007 I came across several people of Newar, Magar and Gurung communities who claimed themselves to be kshtriyas

¹⁵ Francis Buchanan Hamilton, op. cit, p. 111

¹⁶ Ibid., p.112

¹⁷ Ibid., p.113

¹⁸ Ibid., p.113

¹⁹ Ibid.,p.113

²⁰ Ibid., p. 114-115

²¹ Rahul Sanskritayana, op. cit, p. 23, Francis Buchanan Hamilton, op. cit, p. 113

²² Rahul Sanskritayana,

²³ Sonam B. Wangyal, Sikkim and Darjeeling: Division and Deception, Jaigaon, Dolma House, 2002, p. 213-214, Appendix-2, and Rahul Sanskritayana, op.cit, p. 23

²⁴ Ibid., p. 213

location of the this small deserted village of *Gunari Bazar* prompted the two young officer to develop the place as a sanatorium for the desperate lower income group Britishers of East India Company residing in the damp climate of Bengal²⁵.

Soon after the return of the two officers to their head quarters' in Calcutta the negotiation to develop the small village of Dorjeeling into a sanatorium grew. On 1st February' 1835 rajah of Sikkim ceded the Dorjeeling to Britishers the lease deed goes as follows:

The Governer-General having expressed his desire for the possession of the Hill of Darjeeling, on account of its cool climate, for the purpose of enabling the servants of his Government, suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages, I, Sikkimputtee Rajah, out of friendship to the said Governer General, hereby present Darjeeling to the East India company, that is the land south of the Great Runjeet River, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Little Ranjeet Rivers, and west of the Rungno and Mahanuddi Rivers²⁶.

– *A Campbell, Superintendent of Darjeeling and In-charge of the political relations with Sikkim.*

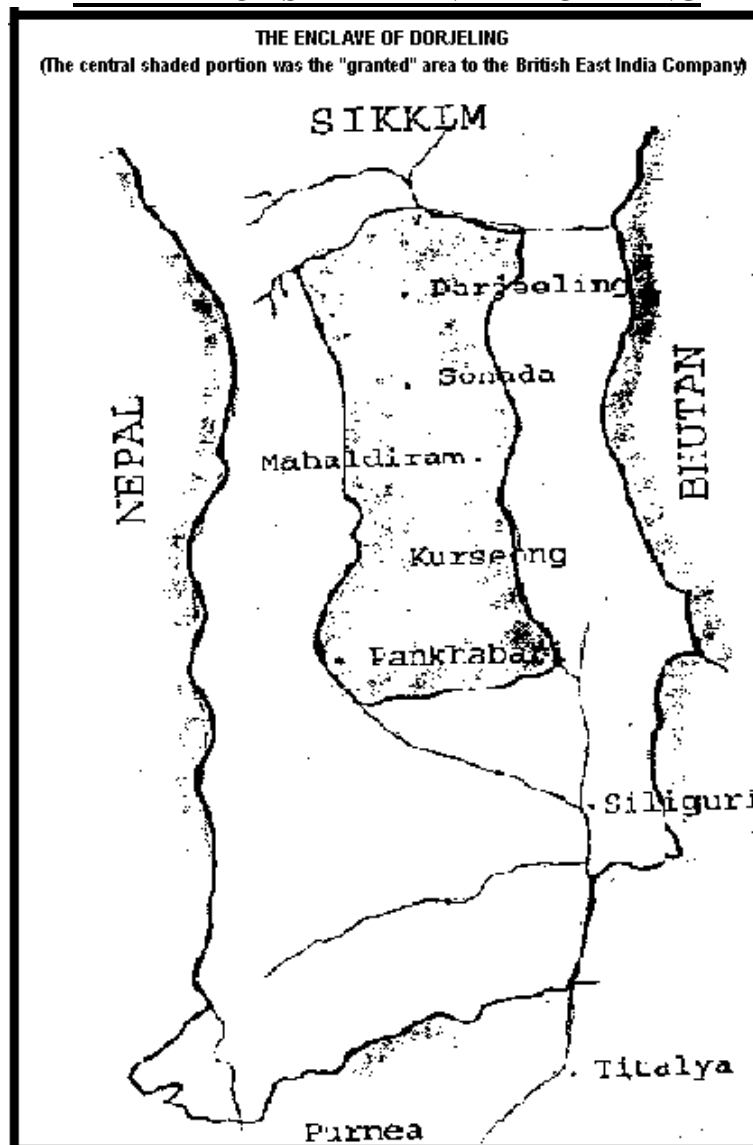
Initially rajah gave the entire region as gift to the British East India Company, considering the region to be a wasteland but as the prosperity and domination of the Darjeeling surpassed Sikkim then in 1841 under influence of Nigme the trusted minister of rajah, rajah insisted the company to pay a revenue of Rs. 3000 which was again increased by Rs. 6000 in 1846²⁷.

²⁵ Fred Pinn, *The Road of Destiny: Darjeeling Letters 1839*, Calcutta, Oxford University Press, 1986, p. 1 and Rahul Sanskrityayana, p. 24

²⁶ Sonam B. Wangyal, *Op.cit.*, p. 218

²⁷ Rahul Sankrityayana, *Loc.cit.*, p. 25

THE MAP OF SIKKIM AND DARJEELING



Henceforth, Darjeeling became the rented sanatorium to British east India Company, but in 1849 the misrule of Minister Nigmay reached its pinnacle, annoyed with his misrule many of the slaves and Lepcha people fled the Sikkimese territory and came to settle in Darjeeling. The loss of faith of his subjects aggravated the eccentric minister and he demanded return of the slaves. Making relations uncompromising when Sir Joseph Hooker and Campbell went for a tour in the Sikkim they were made prisoners but were released unconditionally²⁸. The aggravated situation demanded a limitation of the Sikkim states authority on British rule of Darjeeling. As a result continuous campaigns were arranged and ultimately under treaty of Tumloong of 28th March' 1861 the rights of the Sikkim rajah were controlled to an enormous extent and British received indirect sovereignty over dominions of Sikkim²⁹.

²⁸ LSS O Malley, *Loc. Cit* ,p. 25

²⁹ Sonam B. Wangyal, p. 220-225

DORJEELING TO DARJEELING

The pronunciation and acoustic differences made Dorjeeling to be called as Darjeeling, Dorjeeling is a Tibetan language term the literal meaning of the word is; *Vajradweep* or *a land of strength*. There are several *Viharas*³⁰ which are known as *Lings* in the Tibetan language with a core inside the building of *Vihara*, these *Lings* belong to the Tamang communities spread over various places in Tibet and Sikkim. One such *Vihara* was located in the observatory hill of Chowrasta, Darjeeling. The name of this *Vihara* was “Dorjee” and as the places besides the locality of these *Lings* also came to be known as *Lings* thus, Dorjeeling name came to existence³¹.

Britishers misspelled the village as Darjeeling, henceforth the religious nomenclature though gained acceptance but with corruption³². Another accepted term among native people of Dorjeeling for their region was *Gunari Bazar*³³, its because the Sikkim Rajah got made some small huts of bamboo called *Gunari* for its people in the Dorjeeling where people used to come and live, thus *Gunari Bazar* term became popular and still people use *Gunari Bazar* as a common term to refer to Darjeeling.

Under British occupation Darjeeling grew immensely and the small village which used to have hardly a population of some hundred people who were mainly of Lepcha community grew by hundred folds making the natives to secede to the regions of relative isolation in the eastern and western hills of Rivers Rammam and Tista valley. Campbell refers that there was a population of 10, 000 people in 1850, in 1872 the population was 94, 712 which grew to 26, 55, 50 in 1911 and continues to gallop³⁴.

The tranquil governance and progress of the sanatorium town of Darjeeling led to the formation of a progressive town in which people of various backgrounds settled in search of livelihood and peace.

The constitutes of the population in Darjeeling now constituted various communities among which were (as per 1931 census);

Indigenous communities (Lepcha, Limbus)	: 218935
Biharis	: 24540
Sikkimese	: 5321
Other Indians	: 8277
Nepalese	: 59016
Asians	: 2052
Europeans	: 616
Miscellaneous	: 878
<hr/>	
Total	: 319635

The growth of population brought cultural interaction and intermingling of various cultural aspects. Somehow before the independence of India Darjeeling continued to be a perfect and preferred sanatorium and the Britishers gave it a look of a complete colony. Till today we find the remnants of the colonial hegemony in the town planning and building architecture³⁵. The Britishers constructed several palatial houses, hotels and several educational and public

³⁰ Viharas are the places where Buddhist monks live and meditate

³¹ Rahul Sanskritiyaya, *Loc.cit*, p. 157

³² *Ibid.*, p. 157

³³ *Ibid.*, p. 25

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 33

³⁵ Field visit by the researcher of the paper to Darjeeling in 2006-2007

buildings which increased the status of Darjeeling from being small village to a well established town with almost all the social and palatial amenities³⁶.



A view of Darjeeling³⁷

Darjeeling and organized administration under Britishers: Under British rule Darjeeling acquired the status of an independent town and region and the security of its boundaries was a major concern for the Britishers. Hence, when Dukpas; the Bhutanese residents of the eastern neighbours of Darjeeling created troubles to the people of Darjeeling then an emissary was under Sir Ashley Eden sent to Punakaha, the capital of Bhutan in 1863 but this mission failed disastrously. To further bring peace to the region a final battle was fought as the Bhutan war 1866 and along with the *Duars* a new sub division under Darjeeling was created which came to be known as Kalimpong subdivision³⁸.

The Bhutan war established the authority of the British Empire in the Eastern Himalayan region and also on the entire bordering regions of Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and Tibet. Simultaneously, it made the native people to become all the more secluded who further seceded in the hills as they were unable to confine themselves with the growing domination which though gave them peace but not the freedom of expression in the imperial culture.

The Tibetan and Buddhist learning with local rich heritage of indigenous knowledge were now made to shift down the lanes. The Bhutias were made to live in the sub valley as Bhutia Basti³⁹ and Yolmos were restricted to grow *aaloo* potatoes for the colonial market from their Allobari.⁴⁰ The rich repository of treasured books which was kept since generation in the Darjeeling at Chowrasta was now shifted to sub valley of Bhutia Basti and all the cultural

³⁶ Fred Pinn, *Loc. Cit*, p. 9-11

³⁷ Picture taken by Bina Sengar, May' 2006 at Kakjhora-Darjeeling

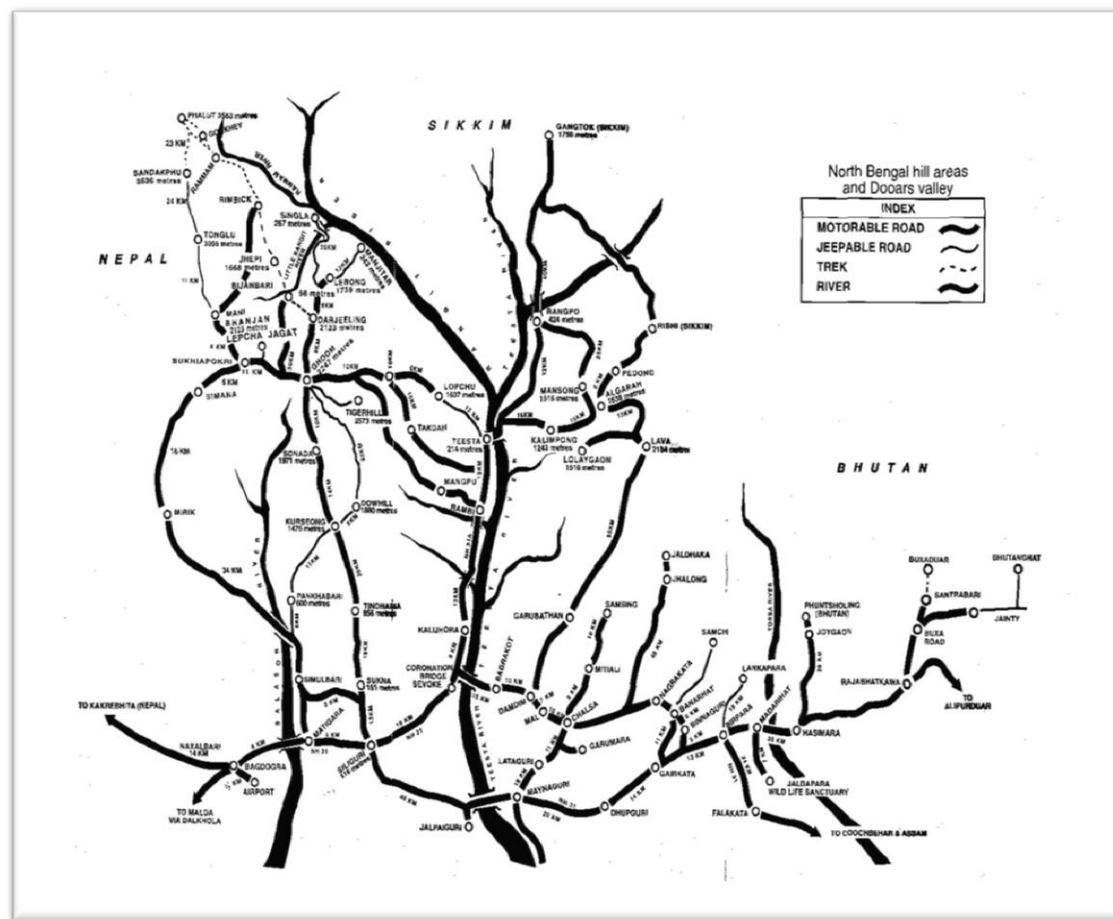
³⁸ LSS O Malley , *Loc. Cit*, p. 27-28, and Rahul Sankrityayana, p. 28-29

³⁹ Rahul Sankrityayana, *Loc.cit.*, p 165-167

⁴⁰ Bina Sengar, field note to Allobari during May-2006 and May-2007

rich heritage of Lepchas and Limbus were marginalized to the banks of rivers Rammam of Ringit or to the eastern territories of Sankphu and Rimbik⁴¹.

THE ROAD MAP OF DARJEELING⁴²



HERITAGE IN THE BACK GROUND

The offerings of the hill district of Darjeeling are immense once the Buddhist scholarly center of learning in the past two centuries became more of sanatorium for British people and later to become a touristic destination for new emerging middle class and elite Indians. Darjeeling gradually lost its scholarly essence though Kalimpong continued to maintain the scholarly linkages with Tibet but with the annexation of Tibet by China and gradually closure of Silk route it declined too. The perpetual politicization has gradually reverberate the serene and a vibrant culture of the thriving cultures of Bhutias, Lepchas, Limbus and Tamang communities and their indigenous practices to furtively survive in the hills. The need of the hour is to revive and understand the traditions of living cultures and the concept of

⁴¹ Bina Sengar, field notes to Rimbik during May' 2006

⁴² Map taken from Trekkers map of Darjeeling-Department of Tourism-West Bengal, In the map could be seen territories of Rimbik and Rammam and Ringit valley

Indigenous knowledge which is living with the people living in the auspices of the trekking hills.

Argument says that Darjeeling is not just the tourist sanatorium it is one of the richest centers of learning and thrives on the rich heritage of traditions of learning and belonging Buddhism and indigenous religions, it is a zone of excellence in knowledge.

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