



## SOCIOLOGICAL CONSEQUENCES OF TOURISM IN DARJEELING

T.B. Subba

Darjeeling in the present paper refers to the three hilly sub-divisions i.e. Sadar, Kurseong and Kalimpong of the Darjeeling district of the West Bengal. In the east it is bounded by Bhutan, in the west by Nepal, in the north by Sikkim state and in the south by the Jalpaiguri district. It lies between 26°31' and 27°13' north latitudes and between 87°89' and 88°53' east longitudes. The total area, including its Terai sub division (Siliguri) is about 1920 sq km. The Sadar town is the district headquarters.

This small area is well-known all over the country and even outside as an attractive tourist resort. Scores of books have been written on Darjeeling. Many such early writings still hold considerable academic value though the writers themselves, excepting a few were never academicians. Unfortunately, the area did not receive the attention of professional academicians till very recently.

Apart from tea and timber, tourism is the dominant economic function in Darjeeling district. This industry has, however, closely influenced the ecological setting and the ethnic relations of the various cultural groups. But no article or book on Darjeeling has ever sought to explore, the interdependence between these phenomena. There are isolated articles on the environment and society of Darjeeling but they have not been examined comprehensively. Not that the difficulty in linking these phenomenon with each other is easily surmountable but one of the main difficulties is the inadequacy of information on tourism in Darjeeling. Being a "restricted area", the foreign scholars could not come and study

there, and the scholars from the neighbouring universities showed very little interest in this region until the establishment of the Centre for Himalayan Studies of the North Bengal University.

An attempt has been made in the present paper to examine and then to discuss the social texture during the pre-tourism phase; the growth and development of tourism in Darjeeling, and the sociological consequences of tourism.

### **Pre-tourism phase social texture**

When we talk of social texture of the pre-tourism phase in D'arjeeling, we understand roughly a span of time beginning in 1835 and lasting till the decade after India's independence. But the earliest figures on various castes and communities in the district date from 1872 onwards and the latest figures of 1931 census are already about 56 years old. Arthur Jules Dash's *District Gazetteer of Darjeeling* published in 1947 does not provide us with caste-wise figures for 1941 and the details are given from the census of 1921 and 1931 only. A. Mitra's 1951 census is considered to be the most reliable volume ever brought out on West Bengal but incidentally it does not provide us with caste or communitywise population figures.

Darjeeling's 138 sq miles in 1835 is known to have a population of 100. In the words of O'Malley: "...beyond a few Lepchas and Limbus with their little clearings in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the table-lands of Tibet, the Darjeeling Hills were practically uninhabited (1907:29)".

The dense forest all around with virtually no communication facilities were perhaps responsible for such a low population but it should also be mentioned that about 1200 Lepchas, then forming two third of Sikkim's total population, were made to flee Darjeeling and take refuge in east Nepal by the Raja of Sikkim about a decade before annexation.

Be that as it may, it is clear that the Darjeeling hills had not only a very low population but even ethnically there were very few groups. But with the coming of the British and the large scale development works initiated by them; many more ethnic groups began to settle there. There were many immigrants from Calcutta and even more from Bihar who had come to work as clerks, teachers, or craftsmen. The less skilled jobs but requiring more numbers were occupied by the immigrants from Nepal and Sikkim. Thus, by 1931, the district contained quite a number of racial groups, tribes and castes as may be seen in Table 1.

If we take into consideration only the three hill sub-divisions, the

Table I. Population of Darjeeling According to Race, Tribe and Caste

Race/tribe/caste	Sadar	Kurseong	Kalimpong	Siliguri	District
Muslims	1,121	350	332	6,924	8,728
Scheduled castes	1,182	962	1,095	47,511	50,750
Hindus of the Plains	4,417	2,608	2,607	29,644	39,276
Nepalis	1,32,767	53,936	62,333	5,572	2,54,608
Other Hillmen	7,010	1,549	11,451	73	20,083
Indian Christians	72	94	205	359	730
British'	474	179	186	45	884
Anglo-Indian	126	193	600	16	935
Europeans	145	66	8	9	228
Asiatics	223	95	214	56	588
Total	1,47,538	60,032	79,031	90,209	3,76,810

'Includes British, Scotch, Irish, American, Canadian or Australian.

Source: O'Malley, *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*, 1941 : 62.

Muslims represent only 0.6 per cent, the Scheduled castes 1.1 per cent, Plains' Hindus 3.4, Nepalis 86.8, other Hillmen 7.0, and the others 1.0 per cent. Sub-divisionwise, the Muslims have almost 4 times higher population in Sadar compared to the other two sub-divisions; the Scheduled castes are almost equally distributed, with a slightly lower figure in Kurseong; Plains' Hindus are almost double in number in Sadar compared to their strength in the other two sub-division. Other Hillmen are very few in Kurseong compared to the Sadar and even fewer compared to the Sadar and even fewer compared to Kalimpong; and the Others (British, Anglo-Indians, Europeans, etc.) are distributed all over the three sub-divisions.

The preponderance of the Muslims and Plains' Hindus in Darjeeling is, however, concentrated almost entirely to its urban area though a few Bengalis, Biharis and Marwaris are scattered in the tea and agricultural areas as well. Kurseong has very few 'Other Hillmen' because it is cut off from Sikkim and Bhutan and is close to Nepal. On the other hand, Kalimpong has quite a large population of this category because it is contiguous to Sikkim and Bhutan and away from Nepal. The Indian Christians are more in Kalimpong due to the concentration of the Lepchas there.

Now if we look at the distribution of the various groups in the urban centres of the three hill sub-divisions, certain interesting features emerge. In the Darjeeling town, for example, there are 7.6 per cent of the total Plains' Hindus in the district; 7.1 per cent of the Nepalis but 14.9 per

cent of 'Other Hillmen'. In Kurseong town, only 2.9 per cent of the Plains' Hindus, 2.4 per cent of the Nepalis and 1.2 per cent of Other Hillmen live. In Kalimpong town, 2.9 per cent of the total Plains' Hindus, 1.2 per cent of the Nepalis, and 2.8 per cent of Other Hillmen, are found.

The above data show that in the early decades of this century, there were more of Plains' Hindus in the Sadar town as compared to Kurseong and Kalimpong. The Other Hillmen too had a very high share of their population in this town compared to the other two towns.

### **Development of Tourism**

As pointed out at the outset, Darjeeling was a favourite tourist resort from as early as the mid-nineteenth century. The British, Europeans and Anglo-Indians in Calcutta made it a point to visit Darjeeling every year, during April-May or October-November. Along with them came the Bengali aristocrats from Calcutta and Dhaka. With its growing fame as the 'Queen of Hill Stations', and European educational centre, more people from the country began to visit here and in the process many of them even settled down there. The communication facilities being inadequate, the number of visitors were, however, obviously limited.

When we look at the general history of the region, it appears that a major share of the visitors from outside went to the Sadar town, via Kurseong, almost till the end of the 19th century. The rapidly expanding tea cultivation in Kurseong and Sadar sub-divisions attracted many entrepreneurs who were at the same time the earliest tourists to this place. With the 20th century stepping in, Kalimpong became a more prominent place due to the Indo-Tibetan trade and the visitors began to flock there in large number until the mid-20th century. Since the loads used to be carried either by mules or bullock-carts, trekking was the only way out for most visitors. Porterage was also widely in vogue until the four-wheelers replaced the animal-drawn carts or mules, which took place only during the 1940s.

The Sadar town, on the other hand, had better facilities of communication from a much earlier time and therefore facilitated more outsiders to visit the place. But the incoming tourists were managed privately by the businessmen and the government seemed the least interested. In 1958, Tourism Department of West Bengal Government came into being but the only job of this Department was to supply the visitors with basic information about the places of tourists' interest. There was no undertaking, financial or otherwise, until 1964, when the Directorate of Tourism was established to look after the interests of tourists and pro-

mote tourism in a formal way. About a decade passed like that, without much of development work with regard to tourism.

Tourism in Darjeeling was for the first time organized and systematized after the establishment of West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation in November 1975, one year after the establishment of West Bengal Forest Development Corporation. At present, there are about 105 regular and 10 casual employees under this Corporation and an additional 50 are on the payroll of the West Bengal Government in this district. But there is still no separate ministry of tourism in this district. But there is still no separate ministry of tourism in West Bengal and the entire administration is looked after by the Ministry of Forest and Tourism.

Darjeeling and its adjoining areas were closed to foreign tourists for a pretty long time between 1962 to 1985 when only a few foreigners visited the place. Even now, the restrictions are there in visiting many parts of that locality. Kalimpong, for example, is permissible to visit for 2 days only. Tiger Hill, Lebong Race Course, Jorebunglow, Ghoom and Kurseong are open for 15 days but with prior permissions from Indian Missions abroad, the foreigners' regional registration officers or Home Departments of the State Government.

Despite all this, the average number of foreigners visiting Darjeeling over a year in the last ten years is 22,000. Of this total about 33 per cent land at Bagdogra Airport for going to Darjeeling, another 33 per cent or so come by train, about 17 per cent via Nepal and yet 17 per cent by bus. They come from all over the world but more from countries like Germany, USSR, USA and Holland.

The average annual figures for Indian tourists visiting this place in the last ten years are about 1,30,000. Less than 15 per cent of them come by air and about 23 per cent by bus whereas about 63 per cent come by train. The major share of the home tourists are middle class Bengalis from Calcutta.

For conveyance, the West Bengal Tourism Development Corporation at present runs 9 buses, 3 cars, 4 jongs and 2 jeeps. There are 11 tourists lodges and 2 youth hostels (both in Sadar town) under the Corporation's management. Besides, there are hundreds of other vehicles privately owned or by North Bengal State Transport Corporation. Other lodges and hotels owned both by the Corporation and private entrepreneurs in Sadar Town alone go above 100. A rough estimate of the total number of beds in the entire Darjeeling comes to nearly 3,000. There are again more than 7 tourist information centres spread all over the area, in the railway stations, airports, towns or in Calcutta. Most of the book {ngs

for tourists lodges are done in Calcutta itself.

A lot more is being done in the area to promote tourism. Trekking and mountaineering facilities are getting better organized and there is an earnest attempt to open up new places for diverting the crowd which would otherwise flood into Darjeeling or Kalimpong towns. Obscure, off-the-beaten-track-areas are explored and developed to attract the attention of tourists. Mirik, for example, is one such place. Though an excellent scenic spot situated at about 5,800', it was little known to the tourists until some 6 years before. Now it is one of the most frequented resorts. Its 1.25 kilometre long trek and the 27m long arch type over-bridge are fascinating. Plans for boating, fishing and night accommodation are being finalized. Similarly, Rissisum, Lava and Loley Gaon in Kalimpong are being gradually developed as tourist resorts.

But most of places are still almost unknown to the tourists who keep flocking into the Sadar or Kalimpong town, thereby creating serious scarcity during peak seasons. For water supply, Darjeeling is entirely dependent on Sanchel Lakes with a total capacity of 32 million gallons. Even with Simdhap Lakes built in 1981-82 with 15 million gallon capacity, the water supply is insufficient. While the town population has quadrupled during the past 50 years or so, only 15 million gallon has been added to the capacity of the lake. Kalimpong too has for long depended on the reservoir at Delo Danra and the supply specially during peak seasons is just not adequate. Until the Neora Project comes through, it cannot accommodate extra people due to lack of water supply. Nor has there been any improvement in the technology of water supply in the district.

The transport facilities have been improved in the sense that there are plenty of buses, jeeps and cars to ply on the roads but the fares of the private vehicles shoot up during the peak season and the harassment due to overloading is often unexcusable. The road conditions are also precarious. The Hill Cart Road to Darjeeling is too narrow for the buses and frequent traffic-jams cause another big headache. The toy train from Sillguri takes almost double the time taken by bus to reach Darjeeling as the engine is over hundred years old and only a few foreigners or local passengers get into it. The rails and the engine are operated with piece-meal repairs now and then and no replacement has been done till date. The road to Kalimpong gets blocked by slides every now and then has frequent chances of closing down for days together during the summer and rainy seasons.

Yet another problem with regard to development of tourism in Dar-

jeeling is the permit system. Any foreigner seeking to visit this place has to make three sets of applications: a restricted area permit for Darjeeling, a special permit (Kalimpong Permit) for Kalimpong, and an inner-line permit for Sikkim. About 20 thousand tourists get clearance every year; many more do not and a still higher number cannot even try (Karkaria 1984). Nobody knows why the Centre should be stringent about issuing permits. This is surprising in view of the foreign exchange earned by India through tourism (750 crores during 1982-83). Though Darjeeling's contribution to the foreign exchange from tourism is difficult to work out, S. Bhattacharya of the WBTD Office in Siliguri told me due to the political disturbances that year, the loss incurred by other businessmen could be even more.

From the above it is clear that tourism holds an important place in the economy of Darjeeling. But in the absence of adequate data, perspective planning has not been possible till date. Nobody knows, for sure, the answers to the questions like: How many beds are available? How many Indian tourists come over every year? What are the ethnic or cultural backgrounds of these tourists? Which class they belong to? What kind of recreational and other facilities they would like to have? When we do not know about all this, knowing the impact of tourism becomes even more difficult. What we are aware of is the 'demonstration effect' of the tourists. When we see the college students doped by smack or ganja we blame the tourists. But the invisible impacts of tourism are yet unexplored and unknown.

### **Sociological consequences of tourism**

The impact of tourism on ethnic relations of Darjeeling district can be seen at two levels: one, at the level of the hill communities themselves, and another, at the level of hills vs plains communities. At both the levels, discernible changes have been observed recently which are largely due to tourism.

Any discussion at the level of hill communities themselves would not be meaningful without their demographic background. Thus, according to 1941 Census, the Nepalis formed 81.0 per cent of the total hills population, Lepchas 14.1 per cent and the Bhotias 4.9 per cent. Though there are no current figures on this score, the ratio has perhaps remained unchanged, with a little increase of Nepalis due to a sprinkle of migrants even after 1941 and Bhotias due to mass exodus from Tibet in 1959 after the Chinese occupation of Tibet. The ethnic relations between these three communities are in itself an interesting aspect of study.

The Bhotias, being a business community are the most dependent on tourists while the Lepchas are mostly rural dwellers and have little to do with tourism. The Nepalis too are not so dependent as the Bhotias except a few others who have come from Nepal to work in the hotels, lodges and restaurants here. As such whenever there is a strike or 'Bandh' it is always called by the Nepalis, whether for language recognition or at present the demand for statehood. The Bhotias are generally found to rumble amongst themselves although not openly opposing it. Since their interest is at stake they cannot participate in anything that dispels peace in the area and wards off the tourists. While, under the leadership of Ladenla in the 40s they had jointly fought with the plainsmen under the banner of Hillmen's Association, they have parted (at least emotionally) company with the Nepalis today.

There is a tacit ill-feeling between hills and plains' communities too. Most of the major business concerns like hotels and buses are being owned or managed by plainsmen who include the Punjabis and Marwaris; the Nepalis who are in absolute majority have to face a very stiff competition with them. The majority of the employees and almost all the top ranking officers in the WBTDc being the Bengalis, the sense of participation among the locals in the promotion of tourism is not up to the expectation. The locals generally get employment as photographers, or as taxi and bus drivers. Most of the menial jobs in the hotels, restaurants and lodges are occupied by the immigrants from Nepal who are prepared to work at a lower wage. Consequently, the portage in towns is also their monopoly.

It may also be mentioned that there is not a single tea garden owned by a local individual and more than 50 per cent of them have been declared 'sick' recently. One of the major reasons for this is that the owners do not reinvest the profit from the gardens on the development of the same but on more lucrative businesses like hotels and buses. This has led to further unemployment and frustration among the Nepali youths and made them more inimical to the plainsmen who are not only the owners but the brokers too.

In brief, tourism has given employment to a large number of people in the Darjeeling hills whereas in any hilly terrain, agriculture holds little attraction and other industries are virtually absent. Such employments can be broadly categorized into direct and indirect. In both, the control of the plainsmen is more than desirable and it is more so when it comes to the arena of direct employment. The tenders for most construction works also are called and given in Calcutta where very few businessmen from the hills can go and compete. The local contractors are left to

execute only petty contracts. Even most vehicles are owned by the plainsmen though no exact figure can be immediately given due to lack of data which, however, was difficult to gather due to the on-going agitation.

As a consequence, any step towards the promotion of tourist industry in Darjeeling means the improvement of material interests of the plainsmen with more capital and contracts and trampling of the hill people's interests. Even in the cultural front, the local citizens are found at the receiving end-picking up Bengali and English. Most significant of all impacts in terms of culture of celebrating Saraswati Puja, Kali Puja and Durga Puja with thousands of idols bought from Siliguri, which only the Bengalis and Marwaris used to perform until two decades back.

Finally, a development that seems paradoxical may be noted. On the one hand, the hill people are adopting the habits and culture of the plainsmen (mainly Bengalis) and the foreigners as well, on the other, there is a growing resentment against the Bengalis alone and not other communities or foreigners, who too have rubbed off a number of bad habits to the local youths. The culmination of the anti-plainsmen feeling is found in the recent political movement for a separate statehood. The hill people share a feeling that their interests will not be fulfilled without political freedom from Bengal. Worst of all, the chances of the hills and plains' people meeting together in equal terms seem bleak unless either protection or self-rule is meted out to them.

### **Tourism and changing ethnic relations**

As far as the hill communities are concerned, the emergence of the Nepalis as a dominant race certainly has a trail of consequences. This has, for example, led to the Lepcha-Bhotia friendship, burying their age-old enmity and putting up a joint front against the Nepalis and the solidarity within a highly heterogeneous Nepali society. However, this is nothing new and there is nothing static about it, for ethnic solidarities have sometimes relied on language whereas on other occasions on religion. However, when we shift our attention to the hills vs plains communities, neither demography, nor language and even religion, is found important. The growing domination by an alien but powerful group of communities over local communities seems to have created more social tension in the region.

The historical, linguistic, cultural and ecological differences are also responsible for the gap between the hills and plains' people for these factors play an important role in building the personality. But when we have to be more precise about the cause of such a change, we may find

the growing competition for limited resources as very significant. Tourism being one of the major arenas of socio-economic activity, it offers maximum scope for such a competition. Being a scarce means of material upliftment, it naturally invites stiff competition among the people. And when the residents find such an effective means controlled and monopolised by the outsiders, nothing else should be more significant to affect their relationship.

Therefore, the various turns and twists taken by ethnic relations in the Darjeeling hills in the last two decades can be largely attributed to tourism. Had the Nepalis been well integrated into the tourist industry and had they not been made a mere insulator for absorbing culture shocks, the present movement calling strikes would not have received such a massive popular support. Since they are virtually excluded from this industry they can afford to ignore the heavy losses due to other business communities and the Government who control it.

## References

- Chakravorty PK 1983-84 *Tourism in the Darjeeling Himalaya*. North Bengal University Review 4-5: 137-147
- Karkaria BI 1984 *Tourism in Darjeeling-I: All the Waysan Uphill Task*. The Statesman March 24, Calcutta
- Karkaria BI 1984 *Tourism in Darjeeling-II: Nature Trails with Concrete Comforts*. The Statesman, March 25 Calcutta
- McIntosh R & Gupta S K 1980 *Tourism: Principles, Practices, Philosophies*. (Third Edition). Ohio
- O'Malley LSS 1907 *Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling*. New Delhi
- O'Malley LSS 1941 *Gazetteer of the Darjeeling District*. New Delhi
- Pizam A & Milman A 1986 *The Social Impacts of Tourism*. Tourism Recreation Res. 11: 29-33
- Singh TV 1980 *Tourism in the Himalaya: Some Experiences in Tourist Ecology*, pp. 199-210 In Singh TV & Kaur I (eds.), *Studies in Himalayan Ecology and Development Strategies* New Delhi
- Singh TV & Kaur I 1983-84 *Mountain Tourism: How Good or How Bad: Case Studies from the Himalaya* JOHSARD 7 & 8: 81-96
- Subba TB 1985 *Forest Conservation in the Himalayas: with special reference to North East India*. Himalaya: Man & Nature 9: 5-7; 8-10.
- Subba TB 1986 *Immigrants and Refugees in India's Himalayan Borderland: A study in Emerging Ethnic Conflicts*. XI World Social. Cong., New Delhi