

Social Aspects of Tourism Development in Darjeeling

TANKA B. SUBBA*

Abstract

This paper explores the impact of tourism on society in general and ethnic relations in particular. The tourism industry, as it has developed in Darjeeling hills today, has not benefited all the communities equally. Among the hill communities, it is mainly the Bhutias who have benefited while the maximum benefit is enjoyed by the plainsmen who not only control the administration but also own the hotels and buses. This has resulted in a strained relationship not only between the hill and plain communities but also between the hill communities themselves. While many factors have contributed to this straining of ethnic relations, tourism (being one of the most important arenas of socio-economic activities) is found to be the most responsible factor behind this.

Introduction

Darjeeling is well known all over the country and even outside as a favourite tourist resort. Scores of books have been written on this place since as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Many such early writings still hold considerable academic value though the writers themselves, excepting a few, were never academicians; they were mostly administrators. The area did not draw the attention of the professional academicians until very recently.

Tourism, being one of the most important arenas of socio-economic activities in Darjeeling (the other two are tea and timber), is considered to have an important impact on deteriorating ecological conditions, sickening of the tea gardens and above all on the changing ethnic relations. But little if any effort has so far been made to explore the interdependence between these phenomena.

The treatment so far has been isolated, as if such phenomena are exclusive and independent. Or they have sought to find the explanation elsewhere, in political ideology or other such spheres.

Not that the difficulty in linking these phenomena with each other is easily surmountable. One of the main difficulties is the lack of basic information on tourism in Darjeeling.

The first writing that appeared in this context directly is by P. K. Chakravorty of Geography Department of North Bengal University. This paper is based on a small survey conducted during June and October 1980-82. It discusses a number of difficulties concerning the tourism development in Darjeeling. The other paper by K. C. Chakravorti is also based on a survey, of 200 parties of visitors, conducted by a team of teachers and students of St. Joseph's College, Darjeeling. It gives many important informations on the age, sex, language, religion and occupation of the domestic as well as foreign tourists,

*Dr. T. B. Suba is Lecturer, at the Centre for Himalayan Studies, University of North Bengal, Darjeeling, 734 430.

Chaya Rani Paul, a research student of North Bengal University, has also written on the tourism development programmes in Darjeeling. Finally, mention may be made of an article by R. D. Rai. It makes an assessment of the geographical and infra-structural potentialities for tourism development in Darjeeling.

In the western Himalaya, tourism as a subject of research appears much more advanced for which major credit goes to Tej Vir Singh and Jagdish Kaur for their pioneering works in this field. However, tourism researches in the western Himalaya have remained more or less a monopoly of the geographers.

In this regard, this paper is only a humble beginning towards filling up the wide gap between the western and eastern Himalayan tourism researches. Life long acquaintance of this author with the area, and an active observation of the region and its people for the last six years, are the main bases of this study. Further, the author has also taken some interviews, of a few randomly sampled officials, tourists, businessmen and the local citizens. The total number of interviewees being only about thirty, the sample data can at best claim the status of a pilot survey. Thus instead of making a quantitative analysis here a qualitative analysis is opted for, and so obviously the conclusions are tentative.

The present paper is divided into five sections : the first section deals with a brief history of Darjeeling; the second seeks to depict the pre-tourism phase social texture ; the third relates to the development of tourism in Darjeeling; the fourth discusses the impact of tourism development on ethnic relations ; and the last is the conclusion.

Historical background

The present district of Darjeeling was once a part of Sikkim. The area

known today as the Kalimpong Subdivision was annexed and ruled over by Bhutan from 1706 till the Anglo-Bhutanese War of 1864 when the East India Company wrested it from the former. Part of the present Sadar and Kurseong subdivisions constituting about 138 square miles was gifted away to the British by the Raja of Sikkim in 1835 as a token of gratitude for restoring the land occupied by the Gorkhas since 1780. Siliguri, too, was annexed from Sikkim as late as in 1850.

Captain Lloyd and Mr. Grant were the first Britishers to step on the hilly terrains of Darjeeling in 1828. They were actually deputed to deal with the disputes arising between Sikkim and Nepal, as it was the duty of the British under the provisions of the Treaty of Titaliya signed in 1817. Lloyd spent six days in February 1829 in Darjeeling when he felt that the town would make an ideal place as Sanatorium for the afflicted soldiers. Accordingly, Mr. Grant was asked to convey the idea to Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General. Bentinck deputed Captain Herbert to examine the matter and later asked Lloyd to negotiate with Sikkim about it. In 1835, Lloyd was finally successful in obtaining the deed of grant from the Raja of Sikkim (O'Malley 1941).

Lloyd and Dr. Chapman spent the winter of 1836 and a part of 1837 in Darjeeling. After that it was finally decided to develop it as a sanatorium and Lloyd was appointed as a Local Agent to deal with applications for land, which began to pour in from the residents of Calcutta. By 1840, the Pankhabari Road was ready and there was a bungalow at Mahaldiram, and one hotel each in Kurseong and Darjeeling. There were soon as many as 30 private houses constructed by the Calcuttans. Craftsmen and other manual labourers too poured in from surrounding areas of Sikkim, Nepal and

Bengal to work in the construction of houses and roads. So, Darjeeling which was a village of about 100 people in 1839 had 10,000 persons in 1849. The credit for most of the developmental work in Darjeeling went to Dr. Campbell of Indian Medical Service who was transferred there as Superintendent in 1839 from his office in Kathmandu (O'Malley 1941).

The year 1866 marks important changes in the history of Darjeeling. Large chunks of forest land were cleared and turned into agricultural lands or tea gardens. Many new crops like cinchona, potatoes, cardamom and oranges were also introduced. The timber cleared from the forests was either utilized for constructing houses or taken to Calcutta for meeting the needs of ship-building industry, while the revenue income from tea and agriculture began to multiply. But all this could have perhaps not taken shape had the peace was not been restored along the Sikkim-Nepal borders by the year 1866. The annexation of Kalimpong in 1864 and its inclusion in the Darjeeling district a year after, was also partly responsible for such changes. The promises that Kalimpong held towards fulfilling the coveted desire of the British to open trade with Tibet made them initiate many developmental activities in the area.

In this context it may be worthwhile to recall that a proposal to conserve the forests of Darjeeling was first made in 1862 by Sir Dietrich Brandis. Subsequently, Dr. Anderson became the first Conservator of Forests in 1864. The forest reservations were first notified in the Official Gazette on May 13, 1865. The forest management rules under Act VII of 1865 published in the Calcutta Gazette in 1871 recognized two classes of forests open and reserved. Later, the Indian Forest Act (Act VII) 1878 was enacted to

replace the Government Forest Act of 1865 (Subba 1985). The 'reserved forests' mostly included areas along the rivers except in the Kalimpong subdivision where large tracts were 'reserved' even on mountain tops.

The Forest Acts remain almost untouched even after Independence, though the exploitation of forests by the public as well as the government went on increasing. However, the forests were not subjected to mechanized felling until the establishment of the West Bengal Forest Development Corporation (WBFDC) in November 1, 1974 (Subba 1985).

According to official the records, Darjeeling still has 33.1 percent of its total geographical area under forest, which is quite high as against the national figure of 22.7 percent. What needs to be mentioned here, however, is the fact that the 'area under forest' means 'area under forest administration' and not 'area under trees'. The 'area under trees' in Darjeeling is perhaps less than 15 percent at present.

One of the most notable developments after 1866 is the improvement of communications*. The opening of railway in 1881 is a landmark in this sphere. The first roads were those which made the towns accessible. The tea gardens have also played an important role not only in stimulating domestic trade in the area but also in extending communication network.

It may also be noted that Darjeeling has been, from the very beginning, a centre for European education. Besides making it a sanatorium, the British had the mind to develop its schools in the European pattern so that their children could

*From ecological point of view this has proved to be bane rather than boon for Darjeeling. It initiated extensive ecological devastation in the area.

study in a closeby hill station, and not thousands of miles away in England. It was with such intentions that they shifted St. Paul's School from Calcutta to Darjeeling in 1864 and established many more such schools there with boarding facilities. Though, initially they discouraged non-European students to take admission to their schools, the elites of Calcutta, Bombay and Delhi could get their children in, and visit the place once or twice in a year. Almost simultaneously began the taking of admission in the schools there, by very many students from aristocratic families of Bhutan, Nepal and Sikkim. Thus, Darjeeling developed gradually into an important centre of education and tourism.

From the administrative point of view, it was a non-regulated district until March 1937, meaning that the Acts and Regulations of Bengal did not come into force unless specially extended to it. The District had no representative in the State Legislative Council constituted under the Government of India (GOI) Act, 1919 because it was declared a 'backward' area. It began to send representatives to the Bengal Legislative Assembly only after the enforcement of the GOI Act of 1935. Any foreigners seeking to visit Darjeeling still require Restricted Area Permit, since it was declared a 'restricted' area in 1957.

Pre-tourism phase social texture :

When we talk of pre-tourism phase social texture in Darjeeling we understand roughly a span of time beginning in 1835 and concluding in 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 are already about 56 years old, for we have to heavily rely on the 1931 census. Arthur Jules Dash's *District Gazetteer of Darjeeling*, pub-

lished in 1947, does not provide us with caste-wise figures for 1941 and the details are given from the censuses 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 community-wise population figures.

Darjeeling's 138 square miles in 1839 is known to have very few communities. To quote O'Malley (1907) :

..beyond a few Lepchas and Limbus with their little clearings in the forests, an occasional raid from Nepal, or a stray visitor from the tablelands of Tibet, the Darjeeling Hills were practically uninhabited.

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 from 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 requiring more numbers were occupied by the immigrants from Nepal and Sikkim. Thus, by 1931, the District contained quite a number of races, tribes and castes as is evident from the Table (1).

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

*Information based on author's interview with tourism officials in December 1986.

Table 1. Population of Darjeeling according to race, tribe and caste

Race/tribe/caste	Sadar	Kurseong	Kalimpong	Siliguri	District
Muslims	1,122	350	332	6,924	8,728
Scheduled Castes	1,182	962	1,095	47,511	50,750
Plains Hindus	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	24	56	588
Total	1,47,538	60,032	79,031	90,209	3,76,810

*Includes British, Scot, Irish, American, Canadian and Australian.

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

represent only 0.6 percent, the Scheduled Castes 1.1 percent, Plains Hindus 3.4, Nepalis 86.8, Other Hillmen 7.0, and the Others 1.0 percent. Sub-divisionwise, the Muslims have almost 4 times higher population in Sadar compared to Kurseong and even higher compared to Kalimpong.

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 to 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 Darjeeling town, for example, there are 7.6 percent of the total Plains Hindus in the District ; 7.1 percent of the Nepalis but 14.9 percent of the Other Hillmen. In Kurseong town, only 2.9 percent of the Plains Hindus, 2.4 percent of the Nepalis and 1.2 percent of Other Hillmen reside. In Kalimpong town, 2.9 percent of the total Plains Hindus, 1.2 percent of the Nepalis, and 2.8 percent 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

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 nineteenth century. The rapidly expanding tea cultivation in Kurseong and Sadar subdivisions attracted many entrepreneurs who were at the same time the earliest tourists too. With the twentieth century stepping in, Kalimpong became a more prominent place due to the Indo-Tibetan trade and the visitors began to flock there in large numbers until the mid-twentieth century. Since the loads used to be carried either by mules or bullock-carts, trekking was the only way out for most visitors. Portage was also widely in vogue until the four-wheelers replaced the animal-drawn carts or mules, which took place only during the 40s.

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 was the least bothered. 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 informations. There was no undertaking, financial or otherwise, until 1964, when the Directorate of Tourism was established to look after the interests of tourists and promote 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 (operationally) 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 in the payroll of the West Bengal Government 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—1962 to 1985—when only a few foreigners visited the place. Even now, the restrictions are there to visiting many parts of the place. Kalimpong, for example, is permissible to visit for 2 days only. Tiger Hill, Lebong Race Course, Jorebunglow, Ghoom and Kurseong are open for a fortnight but with prior permissions from Indian Missions abroad, the Foreigner's Regional Registration Offices or Home Department of the State Government.

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

The average annual figure for Indian tourists visiting this place in the last ten years is about 1,30,000. Less than 15 percent of them come by air and about 23 percent by bus, while about 63 percent come by train. The major share of the home tourists consist of 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 tourist lodges and 2 youth hostels (both in Sadar town) under

* Information based on the present author's interview with tourism officials in December 1986.

the Corporation's management. Besides, there are hundreds of other vehicles privately owned or owned by North Bengal State Transport Corporation. Other lodges and hotels owned by the Corporation or private entrepreneurs number above hundred in Sadar town itself. A rough estimate of the total number of beds in the entire Darjeeling is 3,000. There are again more than 7 tourist information centres spread all over the area, at the railway stations, airports, towns or in Calcutta. Most of the bookings for tourist lodges are done in Calcutta itself.

A lot more is being done in the area to promote tourism. Trekking and mountaineering facilities are more and more organized and there is an earnest attempt to open up new places for diverting the crowd who would otherwise flood into Darjeeling or Kalimpong towns. Obscure, off-the-beaten-areas are being 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 feet, it was little known to the tourists until some 6 years back. Now it is one of the most frequented resorts. Its 1.25 kilometre long lake and the 80 feet long arch type over bridge are fascinating. Plans for boating, fishing and accommodation are being finalised. Similarly, Rissisum, Lava and Loley Gaon in Kalimpong are being gradually developed as tourist resorts.

But most of these places are still almost unknown to the tourists who keep flocking to Sadar or Kalimpong, thereby creating serious water scarcity during peak seasons. For water supply, Darjeeling is entirely dependent on Sanchel Lake with a total capacity of 32 million gallons. Even with Simdhap Lake built in 1931-82 with 15 million gallon capacity, the water supply is insufficient. While

the town's population has quadrupled in the last fifty years or so, only 15 million gallon capacity lake has been added. Kalimpong too, for long, depended on the reservoir at Delo Danra and the supply, specially during the peak season, is just not adequate. Until the Neora Project comes through, it cannot take extra population merely 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 on the roads, but the fares of the private vehicles double up during the season, and the harassment due to overloading is often unexcusable. The road condition is just too bad. The Hill Cart Road to Darjeeling is too narrow for buses and frequent traffic-jams are another big headache. The toy train from Siliguri takes almost double the time taken by bus to reach Darjeeling as the engine is reportedly over hundred years old and so only a few foreigners or local passengers get into it. The road to Kalimpong gets blocked by slides every now and then, and has frequent chances of closing down for days during the summer season.

Yet another problem with regard to development of tourism in Darjeeling is the permit system. Any foreigner seeking to visit the area 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 twenty thousand get clearance every year, many more do not and still a higher number cannot even try (Karkaria 1984). Nobody knows why the Central Government should be so stringent about issuing permits but it is a fact that getting the permit is really difficult. 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 this author that the Corporation incurred a loss of 30 crores in 1986 alone due to the political disturbances that year. The loss incurred to other businessmen could be even more.

From the above, it is clear that tourism can hold 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 a year? what are the ethnic and cultural backgrounds of these tourists? which classes they belong to? what kind of recreational and other facilities would they like to have? and so on. 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. That is all. 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 thus unknown.

Impact of tourism on ethnic relations

The impacts of tourism such as urbanization, shifting and/or diversification of occupations, cultural changes, normative changes, change in consumption patterns, environmental deterioration, etc. have been discussed in detail by Pizam and Milman (1986). Though a review work, their article gives at a glance, the details of the previous works done in this aspect of tourism studies. Similar impacts or consequences can be seen in Darjeeling too but the present paper

seeks only to show how tourism has brought about changes in ethnic relations—a field only partly touched by Gamper (1981). In his study of two south-Australian villages Gamper finds tourism to have brought together two different ethnic groups who had not otherwise interacted for thousands of years. The two groups had come so close now that the clothes they wore had become identical and even the house styles are similar.

The instance of Darjeeling is slightly different. The impact of tourism on ethnic relations can be seen here at two levels; one, at the level of the hill communities themselves, and another, at the level of hills vs. plains communities. At both levels, discernible changes are observed recently which are largely due to tourism.

Any discussion at the level of hill communities themselves would be incomplete without their demographic background. Thus, according to 1941 Census, the Nepals, formed 81.0 percent of the total hill population, Lepchas 14.1 percent and the Bhutias 4.9 percent. Though there are no current figures on this, the proportion has perhaps remained constant, with a little increase for Nepalis due to some immigrants even after 1941 and for Bhutias due to the mass exodus from Tibet in 1959.

The Bhutia, being a business community, is 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 Bhutias are, except a few who own vehicles or a few others who have come from Nepal to work in the hotels, lodges and restaurants there.

Most of the major business concerns like hotels and buses are being owned or managed by plainsmen who include the Bengalis, Punjabis and Marwaris. The Nepalis have to face a very stiff competi-

tion with them. The majority of the employees and almost all the top ranking officers in the WBTDC being Bengalis, the sense of participation among the locals in the promotion of tourism is not upto the expectation. The locals get employment as photographers, taxi or bus drivers, excluding a few clerks in the WBTDC. Most of the menial jobs in the hotels, restaurants and lodges are occupied by the immigrant labourers from Nepal who are prepared to work at a lower wage. The proterage in towns is also their monopoly.

To be brief, tourism has given employment to a large number of people in the Darjeeling hills where, as in any hilly terrain, agriculture holds little attraction and other industries are virtually nil. Such employments can be broadly categorised into direct and indirect. In both, the control of the plainsmen is more than it is generally believed and it is more so in the field of direct employment. The tenders for most construction works are called and sanctioned in Calcutta where very few from the hills can go and compete and so the local contractors have to often satisfy themselves with small local tenders. Even the vehicles are mostly owned by the plainsmen though no exact figure can be immediately given for the lack of data.

As a consequence, any step towards the promotion of tourism industry in Darjeeling has meant the promotion of the material interests of the plainsmen who have both capital and contacts. Even in the cultural front, the local citizens are found at the receiving end-picking up Bengali and Hindi. Most significant of all impacts in terms of cultural change due to mass tourism is the large scale borrowing of the culture of the Bengalis such as celebrating Saraswati Puja, Kali Puja and Durga Puja with thousands of idols brought from Siliguri,

which was unknown in Darjeeling hills until a couple of 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 (particularly of Bengalis) as well of as the foreigners. But on the other hand, the growing resentment among the hill people is only against the Bengalis 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 some political freedom from Bengal. Worst of all, the chances of the hills and plains people meeting together in equal terms seem bleak unless protection is meted out to the former.

Conclusion

It is indeed difficult to claim that the changing ethnic relations in Darjeeling are simply due to tourism. Moreover, in the absence of proper methodologies to show such a relationship, the above argument at best remains an argument and has to waddle across a long road before it is accepted. However, an assessment of other possible factors could help us to appreciate the role of tourism.

When we shift our attention to the second level of analysis, rather than demography, the growing domination by alien but powerful group of communities over the local communities seems instrumental. And since tourism offers formidable means to such a domination, it becomes significant.

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 of the people. But when we have to be precise about the cause of such a change, we may find the growing competition for limited resources as significant. Tourism being one of the major arenas of socio-economic activity, and a scarce means of material upliftment, it naturally invites stiff competition among the people. And when the residents find such an effective means of income controlled and monopolised by the outsiders, nothing else can be more significant to affect their relationship.

Therefore, the various turns and

twists taken by ethnic relations in the Darjeeling hills during 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 cultural shocks, the present movement would not have received such a massive popular support. Since they are virtually excluded from this industry, they can not afford to ignore the heavy losses due to other business communities and the Governments who control it.

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