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Darjeeling- a journey through time – Colonialism and Establishment of Darjeeling

in India – by Pragya Ranjan – 05/04/2022

An interview with Dr Sonam B Wangyal regarding how Darjeeling came into being and assumed its present state



We all know about Darjeeling tea but little do we know about its history. The story of the establishment of Darjeeling has many twists and turns. There are only few works which are done on this topic and hence we have very limited sources to refer to. Set against the backdrop of the looming Himalayas and drenching monsoons, this interview will aim to delve into how Darjeeling was established as a hill station after the British acquired it from Sikkim's Rajah and how it developed its tea industry under Imperial British rule. Dr Sonam B Wangyal who has a passion for local History grew up in Darjeeling and witnessed many events first hand and has provided his valuable expertise on the region.

Dr Sonam, from where do you belong and what is your work experience?

I belong to Darjeeling and my schooling was also done in Darjeeling. Then, I went to Kolkata to do my Medical studies. After finishing it, for a very special reason I went to the border of Bhutan where I worked in a place called Jaigaon for about 30 years. In between I also worked with the United Nations in Africa.

Could you throw some light about how Darjeeling came to be occupied by Britishers?



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The capital of India/East India Company (EIC) at one point was Calcutta. All the colonies that the East India Company occupied, had their own hill stations. For example, Southern India had Mandapalli, Bangalore, Kotagiri, Ooty, and Kodaikanal, North India had Chail, Shimla, and in Maharashtra they had their own hill station. In the North, there were five or six hill stations. Central India had Mount Abu and Hazaribagh, while West India had Purandha and Mahabaleshwar. Eastern India had none. The capital city of the empire had no hill station. So they were desperately trying to find a hill station. They tried Shillong but the Khasi resistance became a spoiler. Cherrapunji was tried and it literally got washed away because of the rains. Darjeeling came into focus because of a treaty between East India Company and Sikkim that if any dispute occurred with Nepal and Bhutan then Sikkim would refer the case to EIC. Once there was a border dispute with Nepal, so EIC sent two people to settle the dispute. These people went to Darjeeling and found it to be an ideal place for a hill station because of its salubrious climate. They recommend EIC to take over this place. The Maharaja of Sikkim gave a small portion of Darjeeling to the Company.

But the portion given was totally surrounded by Sikkim which meant that in order to reach Darjeeling one had to cross Sikkim. Hence it became imperative to take over the whole of south Sikkim, which now forms the Darjeeling district. The famous botanist, Sir Joseph Gardner Hooker and superintendent of Darjeeling, Dr Campbell, went to Sikkim and even entered Tibet and were arrested claiming that they had permission from the Raja to enter Sikkim. No documentary evidence of the permit exists. The arrest gave the EIC the required excuse to enter and take over the southern part of Sikkim and by doing that they had access to Darjeeling.

What was life before and after colonization?

There were some improvements. Roads were made, railways came, schools opened up and tea industry was set up. Some of the best schools in India were built for Europeans and Anglo Indians which we eventually inherited. The tea plantations drew laborers from Nepal under the impression that money grows on tea leaves in Darjeeling. A lot of them were involved in road making as well.

How first tea arrived in Darjeeling and what made it one of the finest tea producers in the world?

Climate and location were the major factors. Earlier China had a monopoly over tea. The Chinese plant, *Camellia sinensis*, thrived very well in Darjeeling. It had better flavor than the one produced in China and the East India Company found that export in tea was a very lucrative business. There was no country in the world producing tea except China. Also, China only accepted gold or silver for payment and no other currency. EIC was buying such amounts of tea that soon it became short of gold and silver. During this period, the EIC was also taken over by the British Raj after the first war of Independence in 1857. So, the British government took over the China tea trade from EIC and developing Darjeeling tea not only freed gold/silver payment to China but it made India an exporter of high quality tea. As we all know, it turned out to be a big success.

What are the major problems faced by the tea industry in Darjeeling?

The problem is that the tea bushes that we have in Darjeeling are over hundred years old, so you can't expect the same kind and quality and quantity of tea produced year after year and decade after decade. Re-plantation is very slow or non-existent. The tea plantation owners are reluctant to invest in re-plantation. Laborers are becoming aware of their rights. They know that they need to have housing, hospitals, creches, and schools. These facilities cost money which pose a special challenge to the tea estate owners and so the laborers are kept in a deprived state.

Do you think that in the next few decades there will be a huge decline in Darjeeling tea gardens and it will be taken over by big commercial companies?

A good part of the plantations are already run by industrial giants like the Goenkas, Tatas, Birlas, Goodrickes etc. Even if new companies take over more tea gardens the

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ground realities do not change. The tea industry is a labor intensive industry. So they will eventually need local participation. Industrialists will have to satisfy the needs of the laborers as they know they can't treat them the way they used to earlier.

In recent years, Darjeeling is facing competition from Nepalese tea as they produce similar kinds of tea at low cost. Could you throw some light on that?

The word 'similar' is the crux of the matter. Nepalese tea might be 'similar' but is not the same. It is almost like Darjeeling tea but *not* Darjeeling tea. Some tea garden owners buy tea from Nepal and blend it with Darjeeling tea and sell it in the international market as Darjeeling tea. Nepalese tea has one advantage, its bushes are relatively new but in Darjeeling they are very old. Nepal has the same species, *Camellia sinensis* as in Darjeeling. Both do compete. One must also remember that 'Darjeeling Tea' sells as a brand and Nepal tea does not enjoy that advantage.

Kenya, Sri Lanka, Indonesia and South America also make very good tea. Despite this, not only the quality but the brand name of Darjeeling has remained there for over centuries. In fact, if you look into the old Oxford dictionary, the meaning of *Darjeeling* is written as 'Tea'. That's why Britishers say, "Let's have *Darjeeling*." The new dictionary enters *Darjeeling* as a 'district' in West Bengal and following that it returns it as 'tea' that we drink.

Could you describe any myths or folklore related to Darjeeling?

The original name of Darjeeling was *Dorje-ling* which means thunderbolt and the precious stone that can't be destroyed. There was a monk named Dorje from Sikkim who had made a monastery on a hill in the heart of Darjeeling. People used to call the hill as 'Dorje's place' or *Dorje-ling* which got anglicized to Darjeeling.

What was the fate of Darjeeling, particularly the tea estates after the independence of India in 1947?

Before independence normal rules which applied to the rest of the country, were not applicable to Darjeeling. It was deemed as a special area: non-regulated area and partially regulated area. This privilege was annulled after independence. Under the changed circumstances the British planters began selling their tea estates, European plantation Managers left for Britain, and Indian enterprises started to move in.

What is your take on the Gorkhaland movement? Do you support it or not?

Support can be given in various forms. We can support it physically by joining rallies and carrying the flag. We can support it by writing about the issue or we can be mute sympathizers. When Darjeeling was absorbed into East India Company, it was first put into Bhagalpur Division which is part of Bihar because of resemblance of language and other reasons. But again, EIC wanted Darjeeling under Calcutta. So, it was incorporated in Bengal for "administrative convenience" and from then it has been in Bengal forever. People are linguistically, culturally, physically, traditionally, gastronomically and from every aspect are different from the people of West Bengal. There is no historicity of any raja, nawab, or a general from Bengal having ever ruled over Darjeeling. The first demand for separate state came from Hillmen's Association, who put up a petition to the East India Company for separation in 1907 and it remains the oldest unfulfilled demand for sequestration from the state. Ever since there have been numerous political movements under different political flags, and throughout the common vein has remained the same, separation into a new state .

Dr Sonam B Wangyal is a Medical Doctor by profession and has a passion for local History. He has authored four books and writes for select journals. Pragya Ranjan is a young writer and a critic.

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