Darjeeling Himalayan Railway – Dream, Development, Promotion and Integration in the Cultural Landscape

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Abstract

Being a biodiversity hotspot Darjeeling is rich in natural wealth. The Bengal Natural History Museum was one of the earliest museums in India. Ghum monastery is important hub of Buddhist cultural heritage. ‘Darjeeling Tea’ is produced here. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company was formed in 1881. The steam railway serves valuable functions. It is an integral part of the socio-economic-cultural landscape of Darjeeling. The railway is used in several Indian films very effectively. DHR, a World Heritage Site, is an outstanding example of hill passenger railway. The paper will highlight this innovative transportation system, socio-economic dynamics of the integrated man-machine-nature complex for sustainable heritage management in the cultural landscape of Darjeeling in volatile real-politic.

Keywords: Darjeeling, Bio Diversity, Cultural Heritage, Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, History & Technological Innovations, Natural & Cultural Landscape.

Darjeeling, the name derives from a monastery called Dorje Ling which was built by the local tribal community Denzonpas in 1765. It was on behalf of the Chogyal of Sikkim. ‘Dorje’ means thunderbolt and ‘Ling’ means place. In 1815, the monastery was destroyed by the invading Gurkha Army. Darjeeling, a small hilly hamlet in the eastern Himalayas, with about 150 families of Lepcha communities scattered around, was handed over to the British East India Company in 1815 by the Nepal King. The Gurkha Army invaded Darjeeling in 1790s from Nepal; they attacked the Sikkimese capital of Rabdentse. After Anglo-gorkha war, Nepal ceded one-third of its territories to the British under Sugauli Treaty in 1815, which included the land area between the Mechi and Teesta Rivers. Under the Treaty of Titalia the British returned the land area between the Mechi and Teesta River to the Sikkimese Chogyal. Migration of the Lepchas to Nepal took place after the assassination of
Bho-Lod who was the Prime Minister of Sikkim. The Treaty of Titalia, which was negotiated by Captain Barre Latter in February, 1817, guaranteed security of Sikkim by the British and returned Sikkimese land annexed by the Nepalese over the years and on the other hand British were given trading rights and the rights of passage up to the Tibet frontier. It was signed between the Chogyal (monarch) of Sikkim and the British East India Company. It followed the Anglo-Nepalese War, 1814-16. Due to the treaty Sikkim was transformed into an effective channel of Indo-Chinese diplomacy. Treaty of Peace and Friendship (1950) between the Government of India and The Government of Nepal is a bilateral treaty which establishes the strategic relationship between these two countries. Now Darjeeling is treated a pivotal role in establishing close relationship between these two South-Asian countries.

The settlement at Darjeeling really began in 1828 with British Interest By 1835; in 1828 the British East India Company officials decided to make Darjeeling in the border of India and Sikkim a sanatorium for the ailing soldiers; it was separated from Sikkim. It then consisted of a monastery on observatory Hill clustered with about 20 huts and a population of about 100 people. Planning began in 1839, to lay out the Darjeeling town and construct a hill road connecting Siliguri, Pankhabari, Kurseong, and Darjeeling. By 1840, Darjeeling Town had about 30 buildings, and a few respectable houses. Mother Teresa was involved in the first convent school, established in 1846. At the beginning of the 19th century, western education created a conducive environment for women education and social change. In Darjeeling, Scottish Missionaries undertook the construction of schools and welfare centres for the British residents. Loreto Convent was established in 1847. Later After 1864 Darjeeling became the Summer Capital of the Bengal Presidency that led to initiation of a hill station with modern amenities like schools, churches, etc.

Darjeeling, being part of the biodiversity hotspot of the Eastern Himalayas, is very rich in natural wealth like variety of plants, timbers, orchids, butterflies, snow leopards, red pandas, and various other animals. The Llyod Botanical Garden and the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park are signatures of Darjeeling. The Bengal Natural History Museum was one of the earliest of such museums in this part of world.
Ghum monastery nearby has been an important hub of Buddhist cultural heritage in India. Himalayan Mountaineering Institute along with the Everest Museum under its ambit has been a premier institute in India for adventure sports.

Britishers also initiated commercial cultivation of high-class tea in the region in early 19th century that led to establishment of several tea gardens around producing the world famous ‘Darjeeling Tea.’ The tea plantation was formed through the confluence of multiple historical, political and ecological factors. The formation of expeditious road and railway construction eclipsed the tea promotion in Darjeeling.

After train services reached the plains of Siliguri in 1878, Franklin Prestage, an agent of the Eastern Bengal Railway (EBR), foresaw the utility of a rail link between the hills of Darjeeling and the plains. He submitted a scheme for the construction of a two feet narrow gauge railway line from Siliguri to Darjeeling. The scheme was mainly driven by hard economic considerations, i.e., the huge difference in the cost of essential commodities between Darjeeling and Siiliguri, the need to carry out tea for export and also inability off existing road to handle the growing traffic. Darjeeling also has long been a place for trade and pilgrimage. Prestage received final sanction for his project in April, 1879 and formed the Darjeeling Steam Tramway Company. But the idea of operating the line as a steam tramway was soon abandoned and in September 1881, the company adopted the designation of Darjeeling Himalayan Railway (DHR). The name was remained effective until it was taken over by the Government of free India on October 20, 1948. Throughout that period Gillanders Artbuthnot & Co., One of the oldest managing houses in Calcutta, handled its financial, legal, and purchasing interests. On October 20, 1948, the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is purchased by the Indian Government and is absorbed into the Indian Government Railways. In 1988-89, the line is closed for 18 months due to civil unrest. In 2006, the historic Elysia Building, Kurseong is rededicated after thorough restoration to DHR. In 2007, the DHR gets its full time director.

The narrow-gauge (600 mm) railway drawn by steam engine through the jig-jag hilly terrains of 88 km from New Jalpaiguri to Darjeeling very soon became extremely popular for both its uniqueness and utility. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, popularly known to be as ‘toy train’ is small but it serves very real, valuable, necessary
commercial and social functions. It has been an integral part of the socio-economic and cultural landscape of Darjeeling. The Batasia Loop is an interesting example of engineering. At this loop the train takes a very unique turn. This railway is the first, and still the most outstanding example of a hill passenger railway. It applied ingenious engineering solutions to the problem of establishing an effective rail link across a mountainous terrain of great beauty. The Ghoom Station is the highest point reached by the railway (7,407 ft.), and from here there is a descent for four miles down a spur to Darjeeling Station (6,812 ft.). Loops are the speciality of DHR. It helps in gaining height for the rail line skirting along the mountain with the radius of curve as minimum as possible. There are 132 unmanned level crossings in the route. Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is a work of genius technological achievement of 1881; it has social and cultural importance. It has outstanding universal appeal. It is an example of the outcomes of the industrial revolution. It should be saved for posterity. It is still fully operational and retains most of its original features. UNESCO declared DHR as one of the World Heritage Sites in 1999. The developments of railways in the 19th century had a profound influence on social and economic developments in many parts of the world. This process is illustrated in an exceptional and seminal fashion by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is an outstanding example of the influence of an innovative transportation system on the social and economic development of a multicultural region, which was to serve as a model for similar developments in many parts of the world. Currently four modern diesel locomotives handle most of the scheduled services. The daily Kurseong-Darjeeling return service and daily tourist trains from Darjeeling to Ghum are handled by the vintage British-built B class steam locomotives; the head quarter is in the Kurseong town.

Darjeeling Himalayan Railway is an essential part of identity of Darjeeling. The railway and all its movable and immovable assets are entrusted to the Ministry of Railways, Government of India. The Northeast Frontier railway handles the day to day maintenance and management of the railway. The railway is an essential part of Darjeeling to handle high rate of tourists. Darjeeling is a very attractive tourist belt and huge numbers of tourist come here every year to enjoy the beauty of the area.
with a ride on Toy Train. Large number of foreigners come here world over to whom Toy Train is a special attraction along with a sip of Darjeeling tea.

The district Darjeeling comprises four subdivisions, i.e., Darjeeling Sadar, Kurseong, Kalimpong and Siliguri. Basically Darjeeling and its adjoining areas experiences assimilation of culture, it may be termed as creolisation of culture. Lepchas are the native people of Darjeeling. Nepalese and Bhutias are migrated from Nepal and Bhutan respectively, whereas tribal people and people from Bihar concentrated here as workers in the tea gardens and also some are engaged in tourism industry. Agriculture is the main occupation of the people. Some are also engaged in cinchona plantation. Over the years, the tea industry absorbed huge number of workers, both male and female. At present there are 69 working gardens and number of permanent workers is about 50000 besides a temporary force of 30000 workers. The economy is mainly dependent on tea and tourism.

India is in the 2nd position in the world in tea production. Darjeeling tea is normally made from the small-leaved Chinese variety of *Camellia sinensis var. sinensis*. After the enactment of Geographical indications of Goods (Registration & Protection Act, 1999) in 2003; Darjeeling tea became the first Indian product to receive a GI tag, in 2004-05 through the Indian Patent Office. This tea is available in black, green, white and oolong. The white variety has a delicate aroma. It is hand-picked and rolled, then withered in the sun, making it a rare tea; it brews to a pale golden colour and has a mellow taste with a hint of sweetness. It is grown upto an altitude of 2000 meters in Darjeeling.

Darjeeling is synonymous with some of the finest and most expensive tea in the world. The tea landscape was formed through the confluence of multiple historical, political and ecological factors. The first tea garden to be started in Darjeeling was Makaibari near Kurseong town and Alubari near Darjeeling town. Presently tea industry is going through a very hard time. In 1835, a member of the Indian Medical Service, Arthur Campbell, was appointed as agent of the leased tract, and became the first superintendent of the sanatorium in 1839. Dr. Campbell brought Chinese tea seeds in 1841 from the Kumaon region and started growing tea on an
Captain Samler was the first tea planter who started the Aluberi tea garden in 1856. Darjeeling oolong teas are prepared from finely plucked leaves, usually from two leaves and a bud and withered in sun and air, then either hand-rolled and pan-fired at a certain temperature or in machine. This oolong tea is of 2 types – clonal and china type. The China type is well accepted worldwide and Clonal oolong has a spicy or flowery taste but is not well accepted. For the cultivation of oolong teas needs 3000 ft. altitude above sea-level and average temperature should be 5 to 20°C throughout the season. When this is sold, they are graded by its size and quality and grouped into 4 main categories, i.e., whole leaf, broken leaf, fannings, and dust. There are 78 tea estates recognised by the Tea Board of India. This covers about 17,500 hectares of land and produce over 9 million kg of tea every year. About 50% of the people of the district are engaged in this trade.

With the establishment of the Northern Bengal State Railway in 1878 and connection with Darjeeling in 1881 with the name Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, the popularity of Darjeeling as a hill station spread world over. Many were amazed by the floral and faunal diversity of the place. As per record of that period, the mammalian species comprised between 80-90 species including some of the rare Cats, Pandas and the Himalayan flying Squirrel. Nearly one-fifth of the total species of birds, 100 species of snakes were present in the area. In 1923, Bengal Natural history Museum was established. Mr. Charles M Inglis, an amateur ornithologist was appointed as the first curator of the museum. Recently the museum was sifted to Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park.

Presently the district has suffered from serious crisis due to the decline of tea industry; livelihood of the people has been challenged because no other industry has been flourished here except tourism. Political tensions are always there in this hilly region. Tea industry is facing problem nowadays. Rapid increase in tea garden population is a major cause of worry and unhealthy relation between the labour union and management in a matter of serious thought. The historic movement for Gorkhaland in the 1980s by the Nepali speaking inhabitants has a serious impact on the tea industry. Very low wage of the tea market is also considered which cause out-migration of native villagers. Above all 66% of the tea shrubs are over 50 years
and 50% of shrubs are over 100 years. But replantation is a difficult job, after replantation it will take at least 5 years to reach a stage when leaves can be plucked.

Darjeeling district is a multicultural, multi-ethnic and multi-lingual region. Majority of the population of the district are inhabitants of the rural areas and the unique feature of the area is that sex ratio is high in the rural areas than in urban areas. There are two major museums in the area. First one is the Bengal Natural History Museum and second one is the Everest Museum. The Bengal Natural History Museum mainly portrays the flora and fauna of the region and the Everest Museum represents the adventure sports, i.e., mountaineering and episodes of different expeditions. Erstwhile East-Himalaya (within the arena of Indo-Burma Mega Diversity) comprises varieties of rhododendron, different species of mosses and lichens, orchids, pine, timber yielding plants, butterflies, varieties of stream fish, salamanders, snow leopards, red pandas etc., The Llyod Botanical Garden and the Padmaja Naidu Himalayan Zoological Park are signatures of Darjeeling.

India has got two tea museums i.e. Tata Tea Museum of Nalluthanni Estate of Kerala and Dodda betta tea Museum of Ooti in Tamilnadu which are playing a vital role in Tea World. But the district does not possess any tea museum.

A ride to Darjeeling by ‘Toy Train’ is utmost adventure to a tourist. The railway is used in several Indian films very effectively and aesthetically with its distinguished and colourful natural landscapes. No one can ever forget the romantic scene in the famous Bollywood film Aradhana (1969) with the heroine (Sharmila Tagore) in the ‘toy train’ followed by the hero (Rajesh Khanna) in an open jeep meandering along the hilly road side by side expressing his first love in the backdrop of mesmerising scenic beauty, singing ‘meri sapno-ki-rani kab ayegi tu’ with captivating tune of a mouth-organ. Such was the impact. Examples are plenty. In other Indian films like ‘Barfi’, Parineeta, or Raju Bon Gaya Gentleman uses DHR. The BBC also has made a series of three documentaries; the first one covers The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway which won the UK Royal Television Award in 2010. A film also directed by Wes Anderson ‘The Darjeeling limited’ features a long distance train trip by three brothers loosely based on The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway.
India is a pluralistic society where we have a number of religion, languages, and culture. Article 51(A) of Indian Constitution refers to values which have been part of Indian philosophical and religious traditions, which governs personal and social conduct. Our ancient dictum indicated that we should live together, move together and grow together. Inclusive society inculcates peace, tolerance, and non-violence and moral richness. The museums of the day need to take interest in social work and self-reliance.

The paper tried to highlight very briefly the example of this outstanding and innovative transportation system, which influenced development, plantation & trading of Darjeeling Tea, labourer’s migration & settlement, and pros & cons of socio-economic dynamics of the integrated man-machine-nature complex for sustainable heritage management in the cultural landscape of Darjeeling in a highly volatile current real-politic of the region.