



WAY TO DARJEELING

Colonial Experiments to Develop Calcutta-Darjeeling road communication system till the initial years of introduction of Railways

-By-

Biswarup Saha, Asstt. Professor, Jamini Mazumder Memorial College, Patiram, Dist- Dakshin Dinajpur, Pin-733133, West Bengal, Mo-9775804992, Mail- biswarup.t.saha@gmail.com

Darjeeling, often regarded as the ‘Queen of Himalayas’, is one of the best hill stations of India, created by the Colonial Government. It has deserved the hottest priority among the tourists- both national and international since the middle of the nineteenth century. Presently, it is the north end district of West Bengal.

The history of exploration and development of Darjeeling by the English East Company is not only fascinating but eventful. It is perhaps quite right to assume that no towns or hill stations, established and developed by the colonial Government in India has not inherited so many multifarious reasons as Darjeeling. Traditionally, Darjeeling was under the jurisdiction Sikkim. The Gorkhas in Nepal having been arisen under the leadership of Prithvi Narayan in the Eighteenth Century, the independence of Darjeeling was subjugated into the hands of the Gorkhas. According to E.C. Dozey, “prior to the year 1816 the whole of the territory known as British Sikkim belonged to Nepal, which had won it by conquests from the Sikkimese”.¹ Accordingly, a ‘Gorkha’ camp was also established at Darjeeling. But, the Treaty of Sagauli (1815) which brought an end to the First Anglo-Nepalese War provided the Nepalese to surrender the authority of Darjeeling. Side by side, by the agreement of Titalya Pact on 10th February, 1817, signed between the English and Sikkim, the English East India Company handed over the area to the king of Sikkim and promised to protect the sovereignty of king of Sikkim over the said area.² In reference, it may be stated that the Company had a golden opportunity to annex the kingdom of Sikkim with Darjeeling at that time. But avoiding that, the sovereignty of Sikkim was restored and protected by the English East India Company. The motive behind the action of the Company, of course is easily understandable. In fact, it was more logical before the Company to maintain the independence of Sikkim as a buffer state between the

northern boundary of the territory of the English East India Company and that of the boundary of Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet.³

Surprisingly, for a long decade after the Treaty of Titalya, not a single reference of Darjeeling has been found from the official records of the English East India Company. Captain Lloyd, the explorer of Darjeeling in his report to Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General of Bengal, clearly mentioned that he was the first European who stepped in Darjeeling.⁴ In spite of remaining so closer to the territory of the Company, why the English East India Company was ignorant about Darjeeling, though not known, but the causes are not too hard to predict. In fact, from the early days of the Company's regime in Bengal, the North-Eastern foreign policy of the English East India Company was spinning round Tibet. Since the Seventies of the Eighteenth Century for about half a century Bhutan seems to acquire the focal point of attraction as the Company strived much endeavors by heart and soul to open up Tibet through the ways of Bhutan. Buxaduar in the East and Delmacotta in the West were regarded at that time as the gateway to Bhutan. Thus, importance of Sikkim and Nepal before them was nothing. In addition to this no supporting document has been available in favour of their familiarity to any place of Darjeeling district except Delmacotta. However, it is the farce of history that the Treaty of Titalya enabled them to link with Darjeeling.

The Treaty of Titalya gave the opportunity to the English East India Company to intervene any types of disputes between Sikkim and Nepal.⁵ By virtue of this, the king of Sikkim appealed to Lord William Bentinck to solve the boundary dispute between Sikkim and Nepal in 1928.⁶ Accordingly, Captain Lloyd was appointed.⁷ Consequently, as the official document of the English East India Company provides, Captain Lloyd with Mr. J.W. Grant, the Revenue Resident of Malda, had stayed at Darjeeling for six days in February, 1828.⁸ That visit by these Company officials could be treated as the first communication between the English East India Company and Darjeeling. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Captain Lloyd at his first sight apprehended the importance of Darjeeling. In his report, dated 18th June, 1829, he urged for setting up a sanatorium for the employees of the Company at Darjeeling.⁹ Besides, through his report he regarded Darjeeling as a suitable centre for future trade with Nepal, Bhutan and Tibet due to its Strategic location and urged the Government to set up a military cantonment at Darjeeling. Similarly, he requested the Government of Bengal to occupy the place as he hoped that the immigrated population who ran away would come back with others to settle permanently at Darjeeling due to attraction to Company's regime and in near future they would accept Christianity. Mr. Grant, Commercial Resident of Malda also through a separate letter to Bentinck requested to set up sanatorium and military cantonment at Darjeeling.¹⁰ He was also in favour of inclusion of Darjeeling under the jurisdiction of the English East India Company for its strategic location.

Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General of Bengal did not ignore the appeal of the said Company employees. Rather, he sent Captain Herbert, Assistant Surveyor General of the English East India Company with Mr. Grant as his guide to Darjeeling for enquiring the matter more specifically in 1830.¹¹ This time also the reports of these two officials went in favour of establishing a sanatorium and a cantonment. Even when the subject was drawn to the Court of Directors, they also approved the proposal for setting up a sanatorium and a permanent military cantonment at Darjeeling for the first arrived tender aged English military recruits who would arrive India for first time to serve the English East India Company.¹² Thereafter, Lord Bentinck had no way for delaying. He appointed Captain Lloyd once again to negotiate the king of Sikkim. In return of friendship Darjeeling was gifted by Sikkim to the English East India Company on 1st February, 1835 without any terms of return. In this connection, it is interesting to note that Lloyd proposed to accept Darjeeling in return of money, but was refused by the king of Sikkim. Thereafter, the Company settled to pay rupees three thousand yearly from 1841 which had been increased by Rupees six thousand from 1846 as a loss of revenue to the king of Sikkim.¹³

Although, Darjeeling was adopted without any confrontation, the English perhaps hesitated whether Darjeeling would be suitable place or not for setting up a sanatorium. For that reason, General Lloyd and Dr. Chapman were sent to Darjeeling for continuing further enquiry on weather and other geographical details.¹⁴ They spent several days at Darjeeling in the winter of 1836-37 and again supported for the cause of establishment of a sanitarium. On the basis of their detailed report, the final decision of setting up of a sanatorium was resolved. Accordingly, General Lloyd was appointed as Local Agent to set up infrastructural development and for land settlement to the agreed inhabitants of Calcutta. In 1839 the post of Local Agent was abolished and Dr. Campbell was appointed as the Superintendent of Darjeeling.¹⁵ In the same year Lt. Napier was appointed to set up a town and to construct a Hill Road at Darjeeling.¹⁶

It was very usual for the English as well as the Europeans settling in India, for special attraction towards hill towns. It was physically troublesome for the Europeans coming from cold countries to suit the weather and climate of tropical India. Though, the administrators of the Company were well acquainted with the concept of hill towns in India, none of these were easily communicable from Calcutta, the official headquarter of Indian administration of the English East India Company. At that time, most of the hill stations on the lap of Eastern Himalayas which were developed as hill towns afterwards, were beyond the jurisdiction of the Company. In 1760 when the English East India Company got the suzerainty over Chittagong Hill Tracts, the Company officials of Eastern Bengal mainly of Dacca used to spend holidays at hill and sea bounded pleasant environs of Islamabad hill of Chittagong. Even, Major Rennell, the first Surveyor General of the English East India Company when staying

at Dacca, preferred to pass his leisure with his wife at Islamabad.¹⁷ But, within a short while the climate of Islamabad being unhygienic, the Europeans lost their eagerness.¹⁸ Side by side, those who were unfortunate to afford the hills they also used to spend some days either by hunting or by pleasure trip in a boat by rivers in search of spending some days according to their wish.¹⁹ Yet, it can easily be assumed that the monotonicity of spending months after months in a foreign land would tire and agitate them even back then as it would today. In that situation, many of them fall in sickness repeatedly or went home on leave. In both cases, the Company and the concerned employees faced huge financial and other losses. Thus, the administrators of the Company always dreamt for a hill town in the lap of the Himalayas. Hence, consideration of Darjeeling as a proper place for setting up a hill town seems to be practical and perfect.

Lloyd as the Local Agent of Darjeeling handed notice for having land from his office. Though it is impossible to collect accurate data regarding the issue, it can be imagined that the quantity is within the limits of finger counts. At the time of appointment of Dr. Campbell, there were not more than twenty families living between Himalayan Terai and Darjeeling.²⁰ Because, at that time a few people were acquainted with Darjeeling. Possibly, that is why C.V. Bailey wrote a book (1838) which seems to be the first publication on Darjeeling in 1838 hoping to motivate the people of Calcutta towards Darjeeling. As a result, 'population rose from about 100 in 1839 to about 1000 in 1849'.²¹ In succeeding years, the numbers were increasing accordingly.

It was not easy in those days to reach Darjeeling from the plains as it today. In those days, it was 'long and tedious'.²² Major Rennell, first surveyor General of the English East India Company in the last quarter of Eighteenth Century, noticed a direct road from Murshidabad to Delmacotta in the border of Bhutan.²³ Total length of that road from Calcutta and Murshidabad were 344 miles and 228 miles respectively. That road reached Dinajpur town through Nawabganj and Chapiganj of Malda district by crossing the Ganges at Godagari. Side by side, another road starting from the same point, reached Purnia through Malda.²⁴ It was extended upto Dinajpur by a separate road of 85 miles long.²⁵ Amongst these two, first was most populous and passable throughout the year. Infact, this 185 miles long old military road was constructed for military convenience between Berhampur and Rangpur through Dinajpur.²⁶ It was used for maintaining communication between Murshidabad and Dinajpur during the Nawabs of Bengal.²⁷ After the exploration of Darjeeling when the necessity of roads for convenience was arisen, that pre-mentioned Murshidabad-Dinajpur Road was chosen. A more direct road coined as the Darjeeling Road through Dinajpur was projected by the Government in 1840.²⁸ That road was constructed by the 'convict labour'²⁹ who extended the road from Dinajpur through Purnia, Kishanganj, Tetulia till the foot of hills. Besides, the Barasat-Murshidabad Road opposite the Ganges through Krishnanagar was also kept under proper maintenance for communicating

Calcutta.³⁰ In the meantime, the Hill Road from Pankhabari to Darjeeling Chaurasta, which had been started to construct by Lt. Napier in 1839, was completed by 1842.³¹ Side by side, a direct road from Jalapahar Cantonment to Darjeeling Chaurasta termed as 'Calcutta Road' was opened for traffic by General Lloyd by January, 1839.³²

Within a few years of establishment of Darjeeling as a sanatorium, it not only got tremendous popularity among the employees of English East India Company of Calcutta, but among the English upto Allahabad. At that time though Simla was a reputed place for the concerned employees as a hill town, but at the same time it was gradually losing its popularity due to over crowdedness. As a result, Darjeeling was receiving huge number of tourist year after year. Thus, the road from Godagari to Darjeeling via Dinajpur got tremendous popularity within few days. But, a traveller on this road had to cross many unbridged rivers and rivulets.³³ Similarly, the condition of that road was also very deplorable.³⁴ Consequently, high-ranking Government officials who travelled on that road, repeatedly brought to notice to the Government to maintain the road properly.³⁵ They were so powerful and official portfolio holder that Government could not avoid their recommendation. Naturally, by order of the Company, the Executive Engineer of Darjeeling sent a plan and estimate of the work to the Military Board through the Superintending Engineer of Rajshahi Division.³⁶

Long before the exploration of Darjeeling, Major Rennell in his book mentions a road from Caragola, to Buxaduar via, Purnia and Tetulia. In the early years of the Company's rule when a military cantonment was set up at Berhampur, that road was frequently used for sending troops to North Bengal. This was 'Napier Line'.³⁷ It is interesting to note in this connection that in the middle of the nineteenth century when the Company Government decided to construct a new road for communicating Darjeeling with Calcutta, debate arose on the proposed route of the road amongst the higher officials of the Company. But, interestingly, while the military officials of the Company wished to follow up the 'Napier Line', the officials attached with the law department recommended for the 'Dinajpur Line'.³⁸ The motive behind their arguments seems to be clear. While the military line wished to use the road for sending troops quickly from Berhampur cantonment to different parts of North Bengal, the judicial line recommended to adopt the 'Dinajpur Line' due to availing two administrative centres and quick access of a vast area which was reputed for agriculturally and commercially rich.³⁹ At the same time, Dr. Campbell recommended for improving the road through Purnia by a slight modification in route between Purnia and Kishanganj via Kutighat-Bysakuthi-Kashba, rather than pre-existed route via Lalbarighat-Bibiganj-Berelighat.⁴⁰ However, all of them recommended to follow a route which would be shortest and comfortable. The Company authority, finally chose the 'Dinajpur Line' and for developing the road specifically for constructing road bridges, maintenance and other works Rupees 4226 was allotted.⁴¹ From the letters of Superintending Engineers of First, Second and

Third Circle of the Lower Provinces of Bengal to the Chief Engineer from 1854 to 1858, it was evident that the allotments were also granted time to time for the same works.⁴²

It was clearly perceived since the beginning of the second half of the nineteenth century that the Karagola-Purnia Line would be the main line of communication between Calcutta and Darjeeling in near future. Because, at that time that road was frequently used by the Military Department for sending force from Berhampur to North Bengal due to tug of war with Bhutan and Sikkim. Consequently, the military authority usually recommended developing the road. Besides, the Company Government after the establishment of Public Works Department decided to follow up a specific road policy throughout the province for imperial consideration. It was decided that a trunk road interlinked by other minor roads of the districts would maintain as the network of communication throughout the province.⁴³ On the basis of that permission for construction of a new road termed as the Darjeeling High Road from the Ganges to Darjeeling was granted.⁴⁴ The road was opened for traffic in 1866 except a bridge over the Ganges at Sakrigoli. In the meantime, the railway having been reached at Munger of Bihar, the travellers used to avail the road first by railway upto Sahebganj, then crossing the Ganges at Caragola and then by palki or cart throughout the road.⁴⁵ From then onwards, the old road through Dinajpur was gradually abandoned.

The above paragraphs are basically related to the road communication network which only communicated the plain of Bengal with the foot of hill. It has been mentioned earlier that the first road in Darjeeling hill was constructed by Lt. Napier was the Hill Road between Pankhabari and Darjeeling which was opened for traffic in 1842. It was the 'Old Military Road'.⁴⁶ Rupees 8 lakhs were then expended for the construction of that road. It was extended upto Darjeeling Chaurasta through Pankhabari, Kurseong, Dow hill, Sinchal, Jorbunglaw and Ghum. That was 40 miles long and nearly 300 bridges were there on the full length of that road.⁴⁷ But, that road was too steep and narrow that it was regarded inadequate to meet the demand of increased traffic for Darjeeling town. Hence, decision to construct a new cart road of 25 feet wide and comparatively less steep was taken in 1861.⁴⁸ That road was opened for traffic in 1869. Major George E. Bulger, in his famous travelogue (1869) has depicted a pleasant description of his visit to Darjeeling through a part of that road.

The rivers of Darjeeling district are not navigable. Therefore, there was no direct river route between Calcutta and Darjeeling in those days like it today. Yet, the passengers could travel a major part of his journey till the foot of hill through rivers except in winter. The most common route was then from Calcutta going upwards through Bhagirathi fell at Mahananda. Then the passengers could avail the country boats within the limits of 30 miles from the foot of hill from June to September; and within 60 miles upto Daltonganj in other months of a year. The travellers used to travel rest distance by foot or by palki or by any other means.

Let us have a look on the means of conveniences which were used by the travellers for their visit to Darjeeling. From Rennell onwards the word 'stages' have been frequently used in the official and unofficial documents of the Company. It is a term used by the Postal Department, which means the place of interval where the bags of parcels were transferred from one Dak bearer to another. Since the initial years when the postal system had been introduced by the Company Government, the Postal Department also introduced the palki services on the principal roads where postal stages were available. In these stages, the travellers were also accommodated by food and other necessities at the Dak Bungalows. In 1850's it has been found that the higher officials of the Company used to travel through palkis of the Postal Department for their journey to Darjeeling.⁴⁹ Side by side, bullock carts, pony and some other types of conveniences were also available.⁵⁰ When railway was opened at Sahebganj, same types of descriptions have been found available in the travelogues of the travellers bound for Darjeeling. An example of that type of descriptions is-

"Prior to the year 1869 the only means of transit was by the East India Railway as far as Sahibgunge (219 miles from Calcutta) with a 5 hour river-crossing to Karagola Ghat, thence by bullock cart, to the river opposite Dingra Ghat; and from there by one of the following modes of transit-gharry, or palky dak, pony or hackery cart, to the foot of hills past Purneah, Kissengunge and Titalya ... until Siliguri was reached; and thereafter a tedious journey of 48 miles through the Terai via Pankabarie, Kurseong, Dow Hill and Jorebungalow when the traveller landed tired and worn out at the Chowrasta, Darjeeling".⁵¹

The rivers were crossed by the ferries. While the vehicles of the plain found incapable of carrying passengers and luggage in the hill, coolies were made available from Pankhabarie to carry luggage upwards.⁵² Sometimes, the coolies took the ill-afford travellers upto Darjeeling through doolies.⁵³ The New Cart Road having been opened for traffic in 1869, the tangas carried the travellers upto Tung.⁵⁴ In 1880, when the railway was opened upto Tung, passengers dropped in the station and reached Darjeeling by hiring tanga. The system was remained unchanged until railway was extended upto Darjeeling in July, 1881.

It is evident from the above discussion that the exploration and annexation of Darjeeling for developing it as a sanatorium and hill town; had played a significant role for the development of road communication system in North Bengal. Since Darjeeling was adopted by the English East India Company, it seems to be the pre-defined strategy of the Company Government towards the development of road communication system of North Bengal to develop Calcutta-Darjeeling communication system. Till the introduction of Northern Bengal Railways, it was the question of lakh Rupee how to reach Darjeeling comfortably and through shortest way. Many surveys were conducted and hundreds of letters were despatched. Therefore, different routes in different times got the priority. Besides, availability of railway communication upto Munger, final occupation of Darjeeling after the culmination of war with Bhutan and Sikkim, and advent of Darjeeling as the 'Summer Capital' of Bengal Government, led to the prominence of the Ganges-Darjeeling Road

from 1850's to last of 1870's. But that road also failed to sustain its glory for a long run in the Age of Railways in North Bengal. The passengers availed the railways mostly since it was introduced upto Siliguri and further upto Darjeeling. Yet, there was no reason to think that the travellers could enjoy the journey uninterrupted. Before the opening of Sara Bridge or Hardinge Bridge, they had to cross the Ganges at Pakshi Ghat by ferry.⁵⁵ Besides, they had to change train at Siliguri for boarding at Toy Train. Many times, the train would stop at midway due to heavy landslide. Eventually, the passengers had to hire tanga to reach their destination i.e. Darjeeling or the Queen of Himalayas.

Notes and references:

1. Dozey, E.C. A Concise and Complete history of the Darjeeling District since 1835, The Art Press, Calcutta, 1917, p-2.
2. Ibid.
3. O'Malley, L.S.S. Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling, First Reprint, Government of West Bengal, Calcutta, 2001, p-24.
4. From the Hooghly to the Himalayas- Being an illustrated handbook to the chief places of interest reached by the Eastern Bengal State Railway, The Times Press, Bombay, 1913, p-34.
5. Dash, Arthur Jules. Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling, Superintendent of Government Printing, Bengal Government Press, Alipore, p-37.
6. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, p-25.
7. Ibid.
8. Ibid.
9. O'Brien, R.D. Darjeeling or Sanatorium of Bengal and its surroundings, W. Newman and Company Ltd. Calcutta, 1883, p-13.
10. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, pp-25-26.
11. Dash, Arthur Jules. Bengal District Gazetteers Darjeeling, Superintendent of Government Printing, Bengal Government Press, Alipore, p-37.
12. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, p-26.
13. Dash, Arthur Jules. op.cit, p-38.
14. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, p-27.
15. Dozey, E.C. op.cit, p-3.
16. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, p-34.
17. Markham, Clements. R. Major James Rennell and the rise of Modern English Geography, Cassell and Company Limited, London/Paris/Melbourne, 1895, p-58.
18. Ibid.
19. Wilson, C.R. The Early Annals of the English in Bengal, vol. I, W. Thacker & Co. London, 1895, p-64.

20. Lothian, A.C. (Ed.). A Handbook for travellers in India, Pakistan, Burma and Ceylon, Seventeenth Edition, John Murray Ltd., London, 1955, p-315.
21. Dash, Arthur Jules. op.cit.
22. O'Malley, L.S.S. op.cit, p-166.
23. Rennell, James. A Description of the Roads in Bengal and Bihar, 1778, p-26.
24. Ibid, p-60.
25. Ibid, p-223.
26. The Bengal and Agra Annual Guide and Gazetteer for 1842, vol. II, William Rushton and Company, Calcutta, pp-98-99.
27. The Ganges and Dinajpur section of that road as mentioned by F.W. Strong as the 'Murshidabad Road' (Strong, F.W. Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Dinajpur, The Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1912, p-89).
28. The Bengal and Agra Annual Guide and Gazetteer for 1841, vol. I, William Rushton and Company, Calcutta, p-427.
29. Strong, F.W. Eastern Bengal District Gazetteers, Dinajpur, The Pioneer Press, Allahabad, 1912, p-87.
30. The Bengal and Agra Annual Guide and Gazetteer for 1841, vol. I, op.cit.
31. Dash, Arthur Jules. op.cit, p-179.
32. Dozey, E.C. op.cit, p-4.
33. Letter to the Editor of the Bengal Harkaru by Crede, Experto on 'Travelling to Darjeeling' dated September 25, 1856.
34. Ibid.
35. Jackson, W.B. 'Report on Darjeeling' in Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, no. XVII, Calcutta Gazette Office, Calcutta, 1854, p-24.
36. Ibid.
37. Lt. Napier constructed the 'Old Hill Road' from Pankhabari to Darjeeling in 1842. He proposed to expand the road upto Purnia through Titalya and Kisenganj which would communicate the 'Ganges Darjeeling Road'. Total line proposed by him was regarded as the 'Napier Line'.
38. Jackson, W.B. op.cit, p-25-26.
39. Ibid, p-26.
40. Ibid, p-25.
41. Letter to J.P. Grant, Secretary to Government of Bengal from A. Campbell, Superintendent of Darjeeling, dated 5th March, 1852, quoted from Jackson, W.B. 'Report on Darjeeling' in Selections from the Records of the Bengal Government, no. XVII, Calcutta Gazette Office, Calcutta, 1854, Appendix no-XVIII.
42. West Bengal State Archives Consultations on Register of Letters received from Superintending Engineer, Second Circle, 1856-57 vol. iv, Letter no. 3000, dated, January 09, 1856, proceedings no 143/4 dated 21/01/1857 and

Letter no. 3306, dated, January 27, 1857, proceedings no 254 dated 21/02/1857.

43. Townsend, Meredith The Annals of Indian Administration, J.C. Murray, Serampore, 1856, p-420.
44. *ibid*, p-421.
45. From the Hooghly to the Himalayas, *op.cit*, pp-30-31.
46. Dash, Arthur Jules, *op.cit*.
47. Dozey, E.C. *op.cit*, p-4.
48. *Ibid*.
49. Bulger, Major George E. Notes of A Tour from Bangalore to Calcutta; thence to Delhi and subsequently, to British Sikkim during the early part of 1867, The Regimental Press, Secunderabad, 1869, p-46.
50. Dozey, E.C. *op.cit*, p-8.
51. *Ibid*.
52. Bulger, Major George E. *op.cit*, p-43.
53. Stocqueler, J.H. The Hand-Book of India, A Guide to the Stranger and the Traveller, And A Companion to the Resident, H. Allen & Co., London, 1844, p-483.
54. Dozey, E.C. *op.cit*, p-26.
55. From the Hooghly to the Himalayas- Being an illustrated handbook to the chief places of interest reached by the Eastern Bengal State Railway, *op.cit*, p-25.

.....