

Politics of Pictures:
Reviewing the Visual Representations of Colonial Darjeeling

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The hill station of Darjeeling, or Dorjeling, as it was initially called, was a nineteenth century colonial creation. From the very beginning, the story of Darjeeling's birth and development as a British enclave and its subsequent reputation as a major tourist attraction, becomes intricately connected to exploration, invasion and exploitation of a 'terra incognita' that gradually established a domination over its social, cultural, economic and geo-political landscape; firstly through the colonial practices of 'knowledge' such as travels, investigations and surveys and secondly, through active colonial interventions of 'improvement' like roads, settlements and industries.

In the context of the growth of the town from a British hill station in the 1830s to a major tourist attraction in the early decades of the twentieth century, the research focuses on the varied and numerous visual representations of Darjeeling produced by a plethora of professionals and amateurs, both foreign and Indian. Painters, photographers, travellers, author-illustrators, surveyors and officers, geographers, botanists, zoologists, anthropologists and archeologists who visited the hill station either in their professional capacities or for personal reasons, produced an extraordinarily rich body of visuals in the form of etchings, engravings, sketches, scientific drawings, paintings, photographs as well as documentary films.

There are engravings, paintings and sketches on Darjeeling done by Capt. W.S. Sherwill, Emily Eden, Edward Lear, Lady Canning, Upendrakishore Raychowdhury, Abanindranath Tagore, Nandalal Bose, Gaganendranath Tagore and Mukul Dey to name only a few. Nina Elizabeth Mazuchelli, 'a lady pioneer' who visited Darjeeling in 1875, and Walter Crane the famous illustrator had illustrated their own travel accounts that were published as books. Botanists like Sir J. D. Hooker and Marianne North had painted the flora as well as scenes around Darjeeling as part of their scientific pursuits. A number of professional photographers, for instance, Samuel Bourne of Bourne & Shepherd, T. Paar, Hoffmann & Johnston and Burlington-Smith sold their photographs as souvenirs of Darjeeling. Some travel books (for eg., Edmund Stirling's *A Descriptive reading of Darjeeling* or *India through the Stereoscope* by James Ricalton), came with lantern slides and stereoscopes to give the reader a 'real-life' experience of the place. In the early 20th C, many documentary films were also made on Darjeeling, its hill people and the unique Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, from both public and private initiatives. *Darjeeling 1930* a silent film by Arthur and Kate Tode, *Darjeeling* (1937) by Sir Stanley Jackson or *Darjeeling: A Foothill Town* (1937) are a few of such documentaries.

These and other such visual representations, taken together can be seen to engender a notion of a picturesque utopia called Darjeeling. The project contends that this 'picturesque' frame not only became the most powerful advertisement of Darjeeling as a tourist's paradise but also got established as the dominant 'lens' through which subsequent travellers of all kinds – including Indians - gazed at and represented the hill station. This picture-perfect image of Darjeeling has persisted beyond simple colonial boundaries and has gradually strengthened through time, perpetuating not only through paintings and photographs, but also through tourist brochures, advertisements of tea estates and popular films. Further, this picturesque reality has gradually become naturalised as Darjeeling's only reality. It has blinded, erased and overwritten the other, non-picturesque realities like exploitation, invasion, violence, poverty and disease of the hill station. The socio-economic realities of the region, the real problems of the native inhabitants have been rendered 'invisible' and 'non-existent' to the tourist – both foreign and indigenous.

In the context of this project, it is worthwhile to note that as early as 1907 the Hill people of Darjeeling had submitted a memorandum to the British Government demanding a separate administrative set up for the Darjeeling Hills. This demand for autonomy, for a separation from the province of Bengal (after Indian independence in 1947, from the state of West Bengal) continued through petitions, rallies, strikes and shutdowns; bringing about foundations of the All India Gorkha League and the Gorkha National Liberation Front and finally resulting in the tumultuous agitations of the Gorkhaland movement in the 1980s. Thus, In Darjeeling and its neighbouring regions, long after the unshackling of colonial fetters, the gulf between the hills and the plains, has not only become more entrenched but has snowballed into one of the most politically volatile ethno-lingual separatist movements of contemporary times. The research will relate to this present problem by studying the ways in which Darjeeling and its people had been continually represented by both foreigners and Indians during the nineteenth and the early twentieth centuries.