

## Kalimpong- A historical study of its rich trading past

Srija Rakshit

Research Scholar, Department of History, University of North Bengal, West Bengal, India

### Abstract

While most of the recent work on the Himalayan belt focuses on the British town of Darjeeling or the country of Nepal, a need to dig into the lesser researched regions is felt. One such strategic location, is the town of Kalimpong. Situated in the heart of the Himalayas, is the small town of Kalimpong, known previously for its extensive trade with the neighbouring countries like Bhutan, Tibet, Sikkim and the surrounding areas. Kalimpong once a centre for international trade, was widely known for the trading of items like musk, wool, fur, grain, etc. This study is an attempt to revisit Kalimpong's old glory and the reasons behind the diminishing of its once held international status. It focuses on the origin of the town and the constant tussle among the bordering countries, to gain its ownership. Apart from the interanl conflicts, Kalimpong was and still remains, a major bone of contention for the Chinese aggression, leading to its eventual decline. The study refers to both primary and secondary sources. Extensive field survey has been conducted for a better understanding of the situation. Various journals, thesis and papers have been referred to present an accurate statistics. Recent developments and schemes initiaed by the government of West Bengal, has also been touched upon in the following article. Finally a few measures have been suggested which is believed, would help in the economic revival of the town of Kalimpong.

**Keywords:** Kalimpong, Himalayas, Himalayan times, Tibet mirrors, Sikkim, Bhutan, Nepal, Tibet, China, trade, lepcha, Bhutia, anglo-bhutan war, jelepla pass, treaty of sinchula, british east India company, nathula pass, Chumbi valley, Lhasa, Darjeeling, Siliguri, hilly tract

### Introduction

Kalimpong's history dates back to the 18th century. Known then as Dalingkot, the region was successively ruled by the kingdoms of Sikkimese and Bhutan. It was in 1706 when the King of Bhutan won the territory from the Sikkimese monarch and named it Kalimpong. The small town that served as the Bhutanese outpost was sparsely populated at the time, the indigenous or native community being the Lepcha. Migrants from the Bhutia and Limbu tribes also lived in the area.

After the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864, with the signing of the Treaty of Sinchula in 1865, the Bhutanese ceded Kalimpong to the British East India Company. During this time the town was little more than a village inhabited by only two or three families. A year later it was added to the Darjeeling district, making it a subdivision of the latter. The alpine climate of this picturesque place forced the British to turn it into a summer holiday.

As an alternative to Darjeeling, Kalimpong soon became a popular tourist destination. Proximity to Nathula and Jeleppla passes was an added bonus. Speaking of rich trade history, before the annexation of Tibet by China and the Sino-Indian War, it used to be a gateway in trade between Tibet and India. Kalimpong provided easy access to the Khumbi Valley in Tibet via the Jeleppla Pass, which is about 100 km from the city of Kalimpong.

Therefore, trade with Tibet was conducted through Kalimpong. In Kalimpong, musk, wool, fur, grain, etc. were traded and transported by mule. The work attempts to draw attention to Kalimpong's rich commercial past and how a small town soon became a bustling city, a magnet for the country.

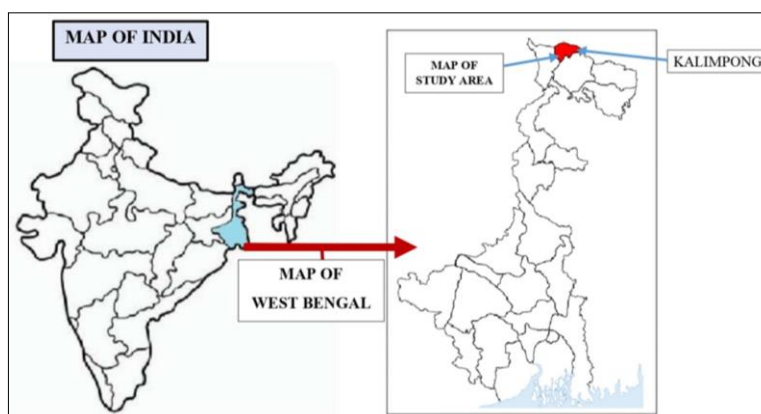


Fig 1

### Research Questions

1. How was Kalimpong established?
2. How did Kalimpong emerge as an international centre for trade?
3. Which were the major reasons with which Kalimpong traded?
4. What is the history of the emergence of the town of Kalimpong?
5. What were the major items of trade?
6. What made it suitable for being a centre of international trade?
7. What are the other attractions of the town other than trade?
8. What is the present situation of Kalimpong?
9. Can the previous glory of its rich trading past be re-established?
10. What are the recent steps taken by the government of West Bengal for the promotion of the town?

### Objective of the Study

The study aims to focus on the history of Kalimpong and its rich trading past keeping in mind the present developments of the town and how in today's time, Kalimpong still remains the centre of attraction for the country. It talks about the history of the formation of Kalimpong and its seizure by the British East India Company. Thus the major objectives are:

1. To study the history and the origin of town of Kalimpong.
2. To study the reasons for the emergence of Kalimpong as an international trade centre.
3. To uncover the problems that led to the decline of its glorious status.
4. The impact and the role the East India Company had in the promotion as well as the decline of its trading history.
5. The major regions with which it traded.
6. The other attractions in Kalimpong.
7. The decline of its trade.
8. Major initiatives by the government of West Bengal for the revival of its old status.

### Review of Literature

The Boy from Kalimpong is an interesting and informative book by Christopher K. Ahoy, an exceptional author. His story is about a boy who grew up in Kalimpong, about 162 km as the crow flies southeast of the world's highest mountain, Mount Everest., among the Rong, Lepchas of the autochthonous, 'Ronkup', 'Ronkum' or 'Rong'. The Lepcha people, designated by the UN as an ancient tribe and native to the region; and its 'Mayel-Lyang' country once bordered further with Tibet, eastern Nepal, western Bhutan and as far as Siliguri and Jalpaiguri in western Bengal and some parts of Duars than today. Give a brief mention about the surrounding regions of Kalimpong.

The Noodle Maker of Kalimpong: The Untold Story of My Struggle for Tibet by Gyalo Thondup and Anne F. Thurston is an incredible work on the life of the Dalai Lama. For more than half a century, noodle maker Gyalo Thondup has been a well-known figure in the Himalayan mountain town of Kalimpong. But it was not until 2010 that the townsfolk discovered his true identity: Gyalo Thondup is none other than the older brother of the Dalai Lama and his special envoy, a trusted interlocutor between Tibet and foreign leaders from Chiang Kai-shek to Jawaharlal Nehru, Zhou Enlai to Deng Xiaoping. Thus it talks about the history of Kalimpong and its relations with Tibet.

Five movements towards a fugue on the subject of Kalimpong. Kalimpong is an artist project in book form by the London-based artist Shezad Dawood. This book provides an important insight on the then Kalimpong, under British rule.

Unforgettable Kalimpong by Monali De talks about how Kalimpong was flooded with foreigners in the early fifties when China was invading Tibet. This sudden influx of foreign nationals led Pandit Nehru, the Prime Minister of India, to announce that Kalimpong was a 'Nest of Spies'. The author, a school girl then, got the opportunity to meet and know these colourful foreigners and wrote about her interactions with them. She spent her happy childhood in pristine Kalimpong, a child's paradise, in the company of several illustrious and famous characters. There were princes, princesses, writers, poets, academics, and scholars as well as simple ordinary people such as ayahs, servants, and locals.

Graham of Kalimpong by James Rutherford Minto also touches upon the boundaries of Kalimpong and its trading history with those countries.

Sikkim, Darjeeling & Kalimpong a book by Wendy Brewer Lama talks about the three hill stations and their importance in the Himalayan belt.

The Rainbow Road from Tooting Broadway to Kalimpong by Sangharakshita. This book traces Sangharakshita's development from a childhood dominated by illness and books to homeless wandering and ordination as a Buddhist monk. It takes us from the streets of wartime London to the dusty villages, ashrams and mountain caves of India.

Annual Report of the Demonstration Farm St. Andrew's Colonial Homes, Kalimpong by Bengal (India) Dept. of Agriculture provides us with a detailed history of the region and its relations with the neighbouring lands.

## Hypothesis

The present work tries to assert the truth or falsify the following proportions:

1. Ancient Kalimpong actually had trade realtions with Bhutan, Tibet, Sikkim and other neighbouring lands.
2. Ancient Kalimpong was a rich centre of trade in musk, wool, fur, food grains, etc.
3. Kaimpong has lost its old glorious position in the current trading scenario of India.
4. The current schemes by the Government of West Bengal could help revive its trading economy and boost further developments of the town.

## Analysis of the Study

### Section 1

The earliest recorded history of Kalimpong is small and confusing. It was only after the Anglo-Bhutan War in 1864 that Kalimpong's history was recorded. Before that, there are some records of the history of Kalimpong, but these records are very contradictory and almost impossible to authenticate. Only after the Treaty of Sinchula on November 11, 1865 did Kalimpong become a place of some importance and importance. One thing about the history of Kalimpong is certain: "that it was part of the Sikkimese kingdom or 'Donzong', inhabited essentially by three main communities: the Lepchas (who called themselves 'Rong' or gorge people), the Bhutias and the Limbus (Tshongs).

Scholars believe that the first Chogyal (divine ruler) of Sikkim brought a consolidated government over all of Sikkim, including the area now known as Kalimpong. One of the later rulers, Tensung Namgyel (born 1664 and enthroned 1670), was married three times. His first wife, a Tibetan, bore him a daughter, Pende Amo. The second wife, a Sikkimense, bore him a son, Chador Namgyel, and the third wife was the daughter of a Limbu king.

Chador Namgyel, (born 1686) succeeded his father in 1700 when he was only 14 years old. This offended his half-sister Pende Amo, who was not only older but also the first daughter of the royal family. She led an invasion of the Bhutanese who invaded the kingdom and the young king had to flee to Tibet. In 1706, Chador Namgyel, now a young man, returned to Sikkim and the Bhutanese were forced to evacuate the entire kingdom west of the Teesta River. although the Bhutanese still held their position at Fort Damsong in and held the territory of the kingdom east of the mighty Teesta River.

The area that was still under the Bhutanese rulers was basically what is now Kalimpong. After the Anglo-Bhutan War of 1864 and the Treaty of Sinchula signed the following year, all territory east of the Teesta River as well as the Doars were ceded to British India and this ceded territory was annexed to the Western District Doars. The following year this area was transferred to Darjeeling District. The main reasons behind the sudden development of Kalimpong were:

Kalimpong became an important centre for trade with Tibet due to the closeness of the town to the Jelep Pass which allowed access to Central Tibet. The British government decided to open up Kalimpong as an alternative Hill Station to Darjeeling. The coming of the Scottish Missionaries who did significant work for the development of Kalimpong, and The British Government opened up Kalimpong for settlers from other places who came in large numbers and with their hard work and skill made Kalimpong what it is today.

Kalimpong offered easy access to the Chumbi Valley of Tibet via the Jelep Pass, which is about a 100 km away from Kalimpong town. Hence trade with Tibet was channelized through Kalimpong. Musk, wool, fur, food grains, etc, that were carried on mules, were traded in Kalimpong. This sudden economic prosperity of the town attracted the plainsmen and others to flock into Kalimpong. The decision to develop Kalimpong as a hill station too prompted well-to-do families from the plains and as well as British Officers to frequent and build summer cottages in Kalimpong.

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The economic development of Kalimpong took a back seat following the Chinese aggression in 1962 after which trade through Jelep was closed. Today, Kalimpong relies mostly on the business generated by the educational institutes, tourism and agriculture but it still retains its peaceful and relaxed way of life. The 2011 census puts the population of Kalimpong sub-division (now a full-fledged district) at 2,51,642 while the population of the town is 49,403.

In 2017, the Honourable Chief Minister of West Bengal, Mamata Bannerjee, out of genuine love and appreciation for Kalimpong, upgraded Kalimpong into a district after which it has been put on the fast track to development.

### Section 2

The history of trade through Kalimpong, particularly the wool trade between Lhasa and Kalimpong in the 20th century, has been documented by various historians and recorded in ancient videos, fictional accounts and important oral traditions from Tibetan, Marwari, Newar, Muslim Tibetan and various other trade groups in Lhasa and Kalimpong (see for example Dhondrup 2000; Hilker 2005; Tuladhar 2004). through harrowing tales and images of mule caravans and their muleteers braving blizzards in Phari, or porters carrying bales of musk and crates of imported goods along the busy 10th Mile in Kalimpong. Wool, one of the most ubiquitous commodities

in Kalimpong in the 20th century, was piled in bales on mules and yaks in Tibet, making the journey of months (more or less, depending on the season and road conditions). Himalaya to Kalimpong.

Animal skins, silver coins, brown sugar, yak tails, and medicinal herbs also traveled the route, while clothing, pens, household items, and electrical appliances traveled in the opposite direction from Calcutta port by railways and mule caravans to Kalimpong, the stage for mules traveling to Tibet travel (Harris 2013; van Spengen 2013). Kalimpong's geographic, social, and economic position as a contact zone provided the framework for the "spatial and temporal co-presence of people whose geographic locations and historical paths intersect today," such as Marwari and Newar traders, Chinese traders, the Tibetan elite, and the British missionaries (Pratt 2003, 7), for example in the *Himalayan Times* and the *Tibet Mirror*.

Take, for example, a 1952 advertisement for Kalimpong Youth for Christ, in which locals listened to a talk by Rwandan medical missionary Dr. Joe Church and his "African Christian Colleagues" or an advertisement for language courses in Tibetan, Chinese, Hindi and Bengal. There were also articles reporting on the expansion of global infrastructure, such as the news that Dutch airline KLM was expanding its routes in Europe, transporting baby elephants, pythons, tigers,

s and bears from Kolkata to Milan. In the *Mirror of Tibet*, similar advertisements - for pens made in Europe, electronic devices of all kinds, but also wool combs and butter churns - give an indication of the different groups and different backgrounds of traders, missionaries,

Masters, nobles and locals who formed the extensive networks that converged in this region in the 20th century. But as described in the introduction to this volume, Mary Louise Pratt's term "contact zone" does not only refer to the co-presence of groups that embody large power asymmetries, such as that between the colonizer and the colonized. The term also opens up space for looser power relations from a micro perspective, such as B. between local Tibetan and Indian unions.

One such example is the susceptibility of the eastern Himalayas to landslides and flooding, as I will describe below.

In addition to advertisements, lists of commodity prices were featured in most issues of the *Tibet Mirror*. While black yak tails saw changes that affected the wool trade. Such vacillations in availability and price are significant; a closer look at archival and oral sources shows that these fluctuations were not based simply on supply and demand, and severely impacted the life of the town. As an example, one might take a look at the small dip that the graph depicts towards the end of 1950. During the summer months of 1950, severe flooding and subsequent landslides had washed out many parts of the Darjeeling Himalayas. Along the Lhasa-Kalimpong trade route, Yatung in Tibet had become inundated with water and its inhabitants had been evacuated, and all road traffic was suspended between Kalimpong and Siliguri. The Darjeeling Railway had been severely damaged by landslides, with the warning that it might never function again. The nearby Ropeway over the Teesta River, which was used to bring goods—mostly bales of wool—from Durpin to the railhead at Siliguri, snapped. Because the roads and transport networks were such a lifeline for the sustainability of the transnational economic connection between Kalimpong and Tibet, an article in the *Himalayan Times* suggested repairing the local infrastructure immediately after the disasters, lest delicate relations with Tibet continue to be exacerbated.

In October 1954, the market for commodities in Tibet began to soar as a result of the increasing demands of Chinese troops in Lhasa and the surrounding areas. In Kalimpong, a note of hope lingered in the air; India had signed a trade pact with China, trade through Kalimpong to Tibet was on course to resume, and Agrawal made optimistic declarations to the Kalimpong Chamber of Commerce that "there is every reason to believe that this upward trend will continue in the near future" (*Himalayan Times*, October 17, 1954, 9).<sup>18</sup> The Losar (Tibetan New Year) celebrations in Kalimpong in 1955 were reported to be held with "great enthusiasm," precisely because of the increase in demand for commodities from India for the rapidly growing, Chinese-run city of Lhasa. Around this time, the Trade Agency of the People's Republic of China in India was opened at Kalimpong, with Lobzang Yampel Pangdatsang as the first Trade Agent. Further hopes were also raised by the possibility of Kalimpong-based traders working in collaboration with those in Lhasa, with the aim of maintaining the longstanding trade links and networks between Tibet and Kalimpong. Increases in profits for smaller traders, muleteers, and porters also went hand-in-hand with the rise in ownership of personal automobiles and the completion of fully motorable roads along the trade route in 1955 and 1956. Features and articles in both the *Tibet Mirror* and the *Himalayan Times* began to be accompanied by a notable increase in advertisements for jeeps and cars, specifically models by Ford and Studebaker. Indeed, many items that were in serious demand in Tibet reflected the increase of rapid infrastructure building of roads: tyres, inner tubes, and equipment for yak and horse carts, for example. In addition, the increase in the availability and movement of commodities through Kalimpong led to fierce competition between different brands of the same coveted product. One popular Indian item that was sought-after in Lhasa was toothbrushes. Aryan Toothbrushes was one brand that prided itself on finding markets in Tibet and beyond, and found itself in heated competition with the Brite toothbrush company. A real sense of dread was beginning to become noticeable in Kalimpong towards the end of 1958; there were no new jobs for young people. This was compounded by another rapid decline of morale in the spring of 1959 as the Dalai Lama left for India. More restrictions on traders—including an export duty that was reintroduced on yak tails, wool, musk, and carpets—was coupled with an announcement that China would take action against anyone not purchasing from Chinese stores; this forced many Indian traders to shut down their businesses in Tibet, particularly in Yatung. When the 1954 Sino-Indian Trade Agreement expired at the end of 1959, it was not renewed, and as a result, "Indian merchants in Tibet are now confronted with the inevitable



conclusion that the Indo-Tibetan trade is dead” (Himalayan Times, July 24, 1960, 3).<sup>28</sup> Tensions came to a head in Kalimpong in 1960 when Chinese traders were asked to leave Kalimpong because they were considered to be “dangerous elements,” and by late August 1962, the only Indian merchant left in Yatung returned to Kalimpong, marking the end of the network of traders who spent their lives shuttling between Lhasa and Kalimpong (Himalayan Times, September 4, 1960, 1).<sup>29</sup> Soon afterwards, the first breach of the border leading to the Sino-Indian War essentially closed off all mountain passes between Tibet and India, bringing to a close all interaction across the border for nearly half a century to come.

### Limitations of the Study

The study however detailed it might be, is limited by the lack of sufficient data and information. Being situated in a hilly tract, it made it inaccessible for people and thus the non availability of written sources. The continuous wars in the neighbouring lands and especially the Chinese incursions, makes Kalimpong a highly unstable region. The region is also prone to landslides and other geographical adversities, which is a major limitation of the study. Moreover, most of the work of the Himalayan Belt is surrounded around Darjeeling, thus limiting the availability of sources on the mentioned area. Recently the Gorkhaland Territorial issues have also added up as a hindrance in the conduction of research of this region.

### Conclusion and Suggestion

After the devastating landslides and the destruction to local infrastructure in 1950, there was a grave understanding that Kalimpong’s severance from Tibet would sound the death knell to its important economic, social, and geopolitical position in the Himalayas; “here we have only one type of trade—the trade with Tibet in absence of which Kalimpong has no importance from business point of view—which is a serious problem for the trading community of the locality to consider” (Himalayan Times, December 2, 1951, 2). The understanding that Kalimpong must have a life of its own and that it should not be defined solely by its links with Tibet was underscored by numerous articles, books, and suggestions for setting up local cooperatives or introducing other products as alternatives to the wool trade. The Himalayan Times and the Tibet Mirror featured supplements that drew attention to “industrial possibilities” in the town, including harnessing water power in the region and increased facilities for tourism, so that its total dependence on the Tibet trade could be eased. In the 1960s, B.C. Roy (the Chief Minister of West Bengal) suggested, in his great distress at the impending stoppage of Indo-Tibetan trade, that small cooperatives should be set up in Kalimpong to improve horticulture and sericulture. Several of these cooperatives were indeed successful; cheese and milk manufacturing dairies were set up, such that Kalimpong became famous for its lollipops and cheese, and some former traders moved into the horticulture or tourism industries. It is unsurprising perhaps that these twentieth-century steps toward revitalisation continue to be echoed through the sentiments of several Kalimpong residents and former traders in the 2000s, reflecting the resilience of a town acutely aware of its position and potential and not as a mere victim of border closure and the decline of trade, as portrayed in many sweeping accounts of the region. Residents mentioned the great potential for a revitalised economy of consumer products and produce such as oranges and ginger that could set Kalimpong apart from the outdated “tea, timber, and tourism” slogans of nearby towns such as Darjeeling and Gangtok. But the precariousness of Kalimpong’s position in the hills is a continued concern; residents worry about the environmental repercussions of increased roadwork, dams, and the inevitable failure of infrastructure during every monsoon season. It is precisely these kinds of immediate, everyday dealings with more-than-human material life—oranges, dairy cooperatives, monsoons, rivers, and roads—that have characterised the contemporary history of Kalimpong, and it is by paying closer attention to these mundane aspects of material life that we can continue to follow the dynamic, fluctuating life of the town and its transnational connections.

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