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Visual Representation and the Making of Darjeeling in the Colonial Period: Power, Landscape and the Colonial Gaze

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Abstract

This paper explores how visual representation shaped European ideas about Darjeeling and the Himalayan region during the colonial period. It argues that photography was not a neutral record of reality, but a powerful tool that supported colonial power, imagination and control. Through photographs that appeared truthful and objective, Darjeeling was presented as a peaceful, beautiful and healthy hill station.

The study focuses on the works of two important British photographers, Samuel Bourne and John Claude White. Bourne's photographs followed the Romantic idea of the sublime, showing the Himalayas as grand and spiritually uplifting landscapes where nature dominated and human figures appeared small. These images suggested the reach and authority of the British Empire over distant and majestic spaces. In contrast, John Claude White's photography served official and administrative purposes. His images of landscapes, rulers, monasteries and local communities transformed people and cultures into visual records that supported colonial knowledge and governance.

The paper also examines how colonial photographers constructed an exotic image of Darjeeling by highlighting scenic beauty while ignoring labour exploitation and social hardship. Circulated widely in Europe, these photographs shaped popular imagination and helped justify colonial presence. The paper concludes by stressing the need to read colonial visual representation and critically analyse their political meanings and recover marginalized voices.

Keywords: Colonial photography, Darjeeling, Colonial gaze, Himalayas, Imperial power, Exotic landscape

Introduction:

Darjeeling is often remembered through visualised images like green rolling hills, tea gardens, cool climate, green forest and distant snow peaks. These images appear natural and timeless. However, most of these visual ideas were formed during the British colonial period, particularly in the second half of the nineteenth century. Photography played a major role in shaping this visual memory.

Colonial photographs of Darjeeling were not neutral records. They were created by European photographers for colonial audiences using European ideas of beauty and landscape. These images helped define how Darjeeling was seen, written about, projected and governed. They presented the region as a calm and healthy retreat for Europeans and as a landscape improved by British rule. In this way, photography became a tool of imperial power. Thus, there is a need to analyse critically how the visualisation and photography contributed to the making of Darjeeling under colonial rule and how images framed landscape, people, culture and history to support colonial authority and imagination.

Colonial landscape and visual strategies:

Hill stations were one of the most important colonial inventions in South Asia. The British developed towns in higher elevations as places of recreation and health for Europeans and for retreat from the heat and disease of the plains. Darjeeling, acquired by the British in 1835, was soon promoted as a sanatorium due to its cool climate and high altitude.ⁱ

British officials who visited Darjeeling early often described the hills as empty, wild, uninhabited or unused tract of land. They reported and proposed to the authority as the best tract for health sanatorium for British soldiers. The officials also realised the strategic importance of the place to keep an eye on northern frontiers of the British Raj. This idea justified colonial occupation. Roads, bungalows, botanical gardens, club houses, churches, missionary schools, military cantonments were constructed soon followed by tea plantations and narrow-gauge railway. The landscape was reshaped to resemble European hill towns, especially the Alps.ⁱⁱ These visual representations echoed and amplified these material changes. Pictures that showed neatly terraced tea gardens and European-style buildings conveyed the sense that colonial rule brought order, improvement, refinement and civilisation to a wild or backward place. In short, images participated in a politics of improvement which emphasised that empire had transformed nature into a productive and beautiful landscape.ⁱⁱⁱ

Colonial gaze: Power, politics and people:

Visual representation helped stabilise this transformation. Paintings, engravings and later photographs presented Darjeeling as clean, ordered and beautiful. Photography arrived in India in the 1840s and quickly became an important colonial tool. It was used for surveying, documentation, science and tourism. By the 1860s, photography was widely used to record landscapes and people across British India.^{iv} It carried the authority of science and truth. Because photographs appeared mechanical and objective, they were trusted more than drawings or paintings. However, photographers still made choices – what to include, what to exclude, where to stand and how to frame the scene. These choices were guided by colonial values. Thus, thereafter images began to manifest that the British had improved nature and created civilisation in the hills.

Landscape photography followed European aesthetic traditions, especially the picturesque and the sublime. The picturesque preferred balanced compositions and gentle scenery, while the sublime focused on vastness and veneration. Himalayan photography combined both, making the mountains impressive but also visually controlled.^v

Colonial photographs of Darjeeling were circulated widely in Europe and outside. They were sold as album prints, displayed in exhibitions and reproduced in books and journals. British audiences consumed them as images of exotic beauty and imperial success.^{vi} These

images shaped public opinion. They justified colonial presence by showing order, beauty and prosperity. They also shaped tourism, encouraging Europeans to visit hill stations. Thus, photography did not remain in albums rather it actively shaped colonial policy, economy and memory.

One of the most cited photographers of nineteenth century India was Samuel Bourne. Between 1863 and 1870, he produced hundreds of photographs of northern India and the Himalayas. His works were widely sold by the firm Bourne & Shepherd and circulated in albums and exhibitions.^{vii} His images of Darjeeling and nearby mountain scenes are often cited as exemplary of Victorian landscape photography in South Asia. Bourne's work is notable for its careful composition, technical mastery of the wet-plate collodion process, and strategic use of viewpoint to dramatize mountain forms and human presence.^{viii} The following photograph can be taken as glaring example of the visual strategy.



Darjeeling, Observation Post by Samuel Bourne c.1880

(Source:[https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chowrasta_\(Darjeeling\)#/media/File:Darjeeling_MET_DP71_242.jpg](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Chowrasta_(Darjeeling)#/media/File:Darjeeling_MET_DP71_242.jpg))

Here Bourne presents a carefully composed view of Chowrasta, heart of the town. The photograph shows a clear pathway in the foreground, European-style buildings on the slopes, and mist-covered hills in the distance. There is no sign of congestion or disorder. The image suggests calm, health, and control. The Mall Road, a key colonial social space, acts as a visual guide into the scene. Indigenous settlements are absent. This absence is important as it visually removes local life and centres European presence. The photograph constructs Darjeeling as a European space, suitable for leisure and governance. It turns a contested colonial town into a peaceful resort.

Local people appear in many colonial photographs, but rarely as central subjects. They are often unnamed, uncaptioned and placed at the edges of images. In some photographs of Joh Claud White, the indigenous figures are posed in traditional dress. The image appears

ethnographic. The subjects are presented as types but not as individuals.^{ix} Such images supported colonial anthropology and racial classification which attempted to suggest that local people belonged to nature while Europeans belonged to culture and progress.

Visual representations did not simply reflect existing change rather they also encouraged investment and migration that transformed Darjeeling physically. Photographs circulated in exhibitions, periodicals, post cards and travel albums in Britain and India, where they evoked interest among planters, civil servants, entrepreneurs and middle-class tourists. Pictures that showed neat tea gardens and comfortable European houses helped sell the idea that Darjeeling was a good place to invest and to live. As tea estates expanded in the 1840s and 1850s and transport links improved, the town's image as a prosperous colonial hill station became self-reinforcing where images stimulated settlement and settlement produced more images and thus the cycle continued.^x

Colonial planning and sanitation projects also used visuals as proof of progress. Photographs of cleared slopes, planted trees and new buildings were used in official reports and promotional brochures to demonstrate the benefits of British rule. In this way, images played a public-relations role for the empire as evidence that colonial governance brought health, industry, prosperity and civility to regions like Darjeeling.^{xi} These images began to shape public opinion which tried to justify the colonial presence. They also shaped tourism encouraging Europeans to visit hill stations.

The Orientalist Frame:

It is important to place Darjeeling's visual history within the broader theory of Orientalism and colonial representation. Works on Orientalist photography show how images often produced a binary between the modern West and the timeless Orient by representing colonized places as exotic, backward or picturesque in ways that justified colonial intervention. In the case of Darjeeling, the Orientalist frame was modified, the hills were presented as akin to European landscapes, an Alpine Arcadia transplanted to Asia. But even this transformation reproduced colonial hierarchies, the presence of European-style buildings, the centrality of British visitors in photographic frames and the marginalization of local subjects as scenery all reinforced a racialized order. Thus, even when the hills were made to look European, the underlying message remained imperial and the colonizer could remake and manage nature and people alike.^{xii}

Scholars have pointed out that Orientalist photography is not a simple story of domination but local actors and viewers also engaged with photographs, buying prints, posing for studios and using images for their own networks. In Darjeeling, local labourers and tea workers appear within many images where they were essential to the material economy being represented. Yet the visual logic of many published views minimized their agency and transformed them into components of a colonial scenicity.^{xiii}

Conclusion: Enduring legacy:

The images produced in the colonial period have had long-term consequences. They helped to fix a popular image of Darjeeling that persists in tourism brochures and postcards with popular imagination of neat tea gardens, mountain views, rolling hills and cool atmosphere that seems timeless. These visual memories shaped tourist flows and economic choices well into the twentieth and twenty-first centuries. Even after independence, the visual archive continued to influence how Darjeeling is marketed and remembered.^{xiv} Contemporary

debates about heritage, conservation, local identity and history of the area often take place against this older visual legacy.

At the same time, contemporary scholars, curators, and activists have worked to re-examine and complicate these visual histories with recovering marginalized voices, challenging simplified picturesque readings and recognizing the environmental and social costs of colonial transformation. Such efforts aim to broaden public understanding of Darjeeling's past and to make visual heritage a site for more inclusive histories.^{xv} Moreover, not all images conformed to the picturesque ideal. Some photographers recorded hardships, ruins or scenes that unsettled the neat story of improvement. Building a full visual history means attending to the diversity of images and to the ways that different viewers read photos differently. Still, the prevailing visual logic in widely distributed views favoured representations that supported colonial aims.

Thus, Darjeeling's colonial visual history shows how photography and related visual practices helped to create an image of the hill town that supported colonial ideologies of health, and aesthetic mastery. Photographers like Samuel Bourne produced powerful views that combined the sublime and the picturesque with signs of human order and these images were circulated widely and fed investment and tourism. At the same time, the visual record is complex as the local actors participated in photographic economies and not all images served the same ends. Recognizing both the power and the limits of colonial visibility helps us to understand how Darjeeling was perceived and projected and how those processes shape the present.

Visual analysis therefore offers a crucial tool for historical understanding. By reading photographs alongside official reports, travel writings, memoirs, family letters etc and material changes on the ground, historians can trace the many ways representation and power worked together to produce landscapes of empire.^{xvi} For Darjeeling, the result was an enduring image an *Alpine arcadia* of tea gardens and peaks, whose origins lie deep in the photographic and colonial practices of the nineteenth century.

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