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Christian Missionaries and Night Schools in Darjeeling: A Historical Analysis

Niyati Rekha Sharma, *Asst. Prof, Dept. of Sociology, Mahishadal Girls' College, West Bengal, India*

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Abstract

The paper seeks to examine the educational contribution of Christian missionaries in the Darjeeling hills, with special focus on the emergence and role of night schools as a form of non-formal education. Christian missionaries are well known for their zealous endeavour when it comes to the formal education system. The study redirects its attention to the initiatives of the missionaries in the region, which complement formal schooling and specifically aim to address the needs of those excluded from mainstream education—particularly tea-garden labourers, women, adult learners, and school dropouts. The present work has incorporated historical records, missionary writings, and oral narratives as a part of research investigation to trace how night schools functioned as flexible learning spaces where working individuals could access basic literacy, numeracy, and social awareness after daily labour hours. The study argues that missionary initiatives in non-formal and night schooling in the hill regions long before government programs for adult education were established. In India, with its teeming millions of people, where formal education has not been able to reach all sections of society, such non-formal initiatives played a vital gap-filling role. The study examines the manner in which these institutions fostered education by acting as agencies of empowerment and social mobility. While missionary formal education is widely recognized, night school as one of the aspects of non-formal education represents an equally significant intervention in the educational and social development of the Darjeeling hills.

Keywords: Christian Missionaries, Night Schools, Darjeeling Hills, Non-formal Education, Adult Education, Social Mobility, Social Transformation, Historical Context

1.1. Introduction:

Access to quality education in society plays an important role in supporting the well-being of individuals and the progress of society as a whole. The process of education significantly influences and shapes an individual's thinking faculty, feelings and understanding of the world around us. By shaping an individual's intellectual and cognitive abilities, the process of education positively influences the social, cultural, political, and economic domain of the overall community involved in it. The idea of "education" encompasses a wide range of activities, such as teaching, learning and the

gradual building of knowledge. It also helps individuals to develop positive values, useful skills and constructive habits in their day-to-day life, which in turn support their overall growth. In 1959, Talcott Parsons, a prominent American sociologist, outlined one of the most familiar functionalist arguments about education in his piece titled 'The school class as a social system: Some of its functions in American society.' According to Parsons, the school acts as a "focal socializing agency" after the child has received primary socialization within the family. It prepares children for their future roles as adults in society and functions as a link between the family and the larger social world. While the family evaluates a child based on particularistic standards— that is, rules and expectations specific to that family— the wider society operates through universalistic standards, where individuals are judged in the same way as everyone else. In the process the family-based particularistic expectations are changed to the universalistic standards of societal rules, which helps the child adjust, participate, and integrate more fully in the larger community. Schools act as important agents of socialization and role allocation, both of which are essential and eventually enable an individual to develop the competencies needed for participation in the workforce. Hence, schools are the representation of not only a subsystem of society but also a small-scale version of the larger social structure or society itself (Parsons, 1959).

Night schools, encompassing evening classes, adult literacy programs, and work-based evening instruction, are typically classified as non-formal or adult education rather than components of the formal education system. This mode of education provides flexibility while concentrating on a certain demographic group (mostly adults). Alongside, it lacks and has no adherence to a standardized schedule like in the case of the traditional formal mode of educational institutions and often does not provide immediate pathways to formal certification or accreditation.

Non-formal education refers to educational activities organized outside the regular school system. It is straightforward and adaptable, and it can be provided at any location suitable for the learners. It is primarily intended to address the fundamental educational requirements of underprivileged populations and is accessible to individuals of any age. This program is open to out-of-school children, working children, and girls unable to attend school for the entire day. Non-formal education comprises organized and structured learning activities that take place outside the formal school system. It is deliberately designed to offer targeted educational opportunities to specific groups within the population. These encompass a wide range of initiatives, such as those aimed at improving adults' literacy rates, educating farmers and agricultural extension agents, providing non-traditional pathways to vocational skill training and educating communities about health and cooperatives. Simply put, learning and teaching that takes place in settings other than traditional schools is known as nonformal education (Coombs & Ahmed, 1974, p. 8). UNESCO (1997) states that "Any organized and sustained educational activities that do not correspond exactly to the definition of formal education. Non-formal Education may therefore take place both within and outside educational institutions, and cater to persons of all ages. Depending on country contexts, it may cover educational programmes to impart adult literacy, basic education for out-of-school children, life-skills, work skills and general culture. Non-formal Education programmes do not necessarily follow the 'ladder' (A series of stages by which programme can be made)

system and may have different durations, and may or may not confer (Have discussions) certification of the learning achieved" (p. 41).

1.2. Genesis of the Darjeeling Hills and the Christian Missionaries:

The British East India Company saw potential for administrative and strategic growth in the Darjeeling Hills in the early nineteenth century; the region gradually emerged as a distinctive geopolitical and sociocultural entity. The area was traditionally under the ebb and flow of sovereignty between the Sikkimese and Nepalese kingdoms and had a small population prior to colonial invasion. Although the Raja of Sikkim regained a significant portion of the land after the Anglo-Nepalese War (1814–1816), the Treaty of Sugauli (1815), and the Treaty of Titalia (1817), the British maintained a keen interest in utilizing the highlands for administrative, military, and health-related objectives (Chatterji, 2007; O'Malley, 1907).

By the early 1830s, Darjeeling, with its cool climate and strategic position overlooking the Siliguri plains and the Himalayan range, had enormous potential to build a sanatorium, according to the British. To investigate the Darjeeling hills, the Governor General sent Mr. Grant and Captain J. D. Herbert, who was the Deputy Surveyor General of Bengal at the time. Lt. General Lloyd was sent by the East India Company to negotiate with the Raja of Sikkim for the cession of the Darjeeling Hills in exchange for equal land or money after the scheme was approved by the Court of Directors. The Raja of Sikkim initially rejected it. Lloyd was appointed to mediate a new border dispute that broke out in 1834 and 1835. Lloyd used this occasion to finally persuade the Raja of Sikkim to execute a deed of grant o February 1, 1835, ending the negotiation. "The Sikkimputtee Rajah, in the interest of friendship with the Governor-General, hereby presents Darjeeling to the East India Company, that is, all the land south of the enormous Runjeet River, east of the Balasur, Kahail, and Little Runjeet rivers, and west of the Rungno and Mahanuddi rivers." The Governor-General has expressed a desire to acquire the hill of Darjeeling due to its temperate climate, which would benefit government officials suffering from illness. The handing over of the hill area of Darjeeling to the British, initiating systematic colonial expansion, road building, and the establishment of a civil station. This settlement facilitated demographic transformations, the establishment of tea plantations, and the influx of several missionary organizations accompanying the developing colonial administrative framework. Bungalows at Mabaldirm, hotels in Kurseong, and subsequently in Darjeeling, along with approximately thirty private residences, began to emerge. Similarly, to fulfil their standard social requirements, a sanatorium, educational institutions, clubs, and hotels were established (Dozey, 1922; O'Malley, 1907; Pradhan, 2017; Ramachandra, 1989; Subba, 2011).

The topography of this colonial urban area in the hills is cantered around the church, the district or state government offices, private English schools, clubs and theatres for the leisure of the British. Factors such as climate, geography, and architectural complexity endowed the hills with a sense of pride in their distinctiveness and superiority over the remainder of the Indian subcontinent. The sparsely populated hills provided solace as they established their own 'small area of England' (Kenny, 1995, p. 695). The enthusiasm for hill stations among Anglo-Indians demonstrated their desire for a social environment far from the dirt, grime, and congestion of the plains (Kenny, 1995, p. 695). Hill stations were widely regarded by the British as the sole favoured locations in the entire subcontinent, where the

selection of educational institutions and familial connections became particularly significant. The British strategically viewed the upbringing of children in the remote territory as an impediment to their enduring presence. The building of schools in the highlands enabled the British to foresee the enduring presence of their society in the colony without the apprehension of moral decline. Furthermore, English-style boarding educational institutions were imitations of schools in England (Kennedy, 1996).

The Charter Act of 1813 is regarded as a landmark in Indian history. This act granted Christian missionaries the freedom to disseminate Western education throughout the Indian subcontinent. It is essential to recognize that, historically in England, education was predominantly ecclesiastical in nature, administered by the church and intended for its congregation. It was only upon acknowledgment of the benefits and necessity of extending education to the laypeople to enhance and broaden the church's influence and authority that knowledge was widely transmitted (Basu, 1963, pp. 195–196). During the period of the East India Company's Charter of 1813, education in England was predominantly governed by the Church. Therefore, the Charter aimed to disseminate Western education in India with the assistance of Christian missionaries. The foundations of Christian missionary work appear to closely resemble those of the British Empire within the framework of Indian society. Accordingly, Christian missionaries were charged with the primary responsibility as an agency to civilize the "heathens" due to their perceived cultural resemblance to the colonizers. The colonial authorities, accompanied by Christian missionaries, sought to portray themselves not as ruthless oppressors but as protectors of indigenous populations and preservers of their culture through the propaganda of a 'civilising mission' (Panikkar, 2007; Sitlhou, 2009).

Consequently, under such favourable conditions, Christianity and its mission ventured into the hills to dominate the region through education. Since 1797, the efforts of Protestant missionaries among the Nepali and Lepcha communities had begun to influence the Darjeeling area, especially as Nepali was the language most widely spoken there during the nineteenth century. The early "Bootan Mission," along with William Carey's visit to the Bhutan border, helped pave the way for the "Nepala" New Testament to be translated into Nepali at Serampore in 1812. In 1815, Mr. Latter of the Church Mission Society (CMS) instructed Mr. Schroeter to travel to Titalya, a stretch of land under British control after the Anglo-Nepal War, and then attempt to return to Sikkim. Although Schroeter was expected to eventually make his way to Tibet, this aim was never fulfilled. The mission ended in 1822 following the deaths of both missionaries involved (Perry, 1997). Darjeeling's strategic position and fertile landscape made it an appealing base for missionary work. Later groups, including the Foreign Missions of Paris— a Roman Catholic society— identified the highland area, especially Pedong (then within British Bhutan), as an important route for reaching Tibet through the South Tibet Mission and furthering their long-established goals. Although they did not succeed in entering Tibet, their presence contributed to the spread of Christianity and basic education among the Lepcha, Bhutia, and Nepali-speaking communities. They did their part by translating religious texts into local languages and opening schools for the people living in the surrounding areas. The Scandinavian Alliance Mission (SAM), a Protestant group, also wanted to get to Tibet. They settled at Ghoom, about six kilometres from Darjeeling town, where they focused primarily on the Tibetan community (Perry, 1997, p. 34). Various missionary organizations, while advancing their

own goals, also contributed— both directly and indirectly— to the dissemination of education within the Indigenous communities of the Darjeeling hills. G. Kottuppallil observes that "since the Middle Ages, mythical narratives regarding the remote territories of India, Tibet, and China have captivated Western Europe." Vivid, dramatic, and often romanticised accounts by early travellers like Marco Polo stirred the curiosity of explorers and missionaries alike, motivating them to venture into these distant regions in search of the riches and potential Christian allies that were believed to exist there (Kottuppallil, 1991, p. 106). While traditional and indigenous educational methods, such as monastic systems, Pathsala, Tol, and Maktab, were popular in the hills, the advent of modern education occurred solely with the arrival of this Christian mission. Illiteracy was prevalent among the populace, although the mission addressed this obstacle and other disparities with considerable commitment and perseverance (Dewan, 1991). Likewise, in the latter half of the nineteenth century and continuing into the early twentieth century, educational institutions established by Christian missionaries from various denominations began to take root across the Darjeeling hills.

1.3. An Overview of Modern Education inIndia and Contextualizing the Night Schools in the Hills:

Macauley's well-known Minute of 1835 is often seen as a turning point in the introduction of modern education in India. However, its scope was quite narrow, as it mainly aimed to produce a middle class that could serve as an intermediary between the colonial administration and the wider population. Later, the Wood's Despatch of 1854 became equally significant because it stressed the importance of expanding education among the masses. This initiative created a sense of hope for a long phase of educational growth, during which the government gradually stepped back from directly running schools. Missionary organisations, helped by generous grants-in-aid, were then able to expand their work across the country. However, this moves stirred debates and agitations in England, where many demanded that India should follow a strict policy of religious neutrality in education. The Indian Education Commission was established in 1882 in response to the ongoing protests and the counter-agitation from missionary groups. Later, by 1902, the missionaries themselves adopted a more cautious approach— choosing to focus on a small number of well-managed institutions rather than trying to dominate the entire educational system of India (Naik & Nurullah, 1974). The Bengal branch of the Christian Vernacular Education Society for India, founded in 1858 and consisting of various missionary agencies, persisted in its mission to furnish the Indian populace with enhanced opportunities for acquiring knowledge, both secular and religious, in their native languages. The objective of the Bengali branch of the association was primarily to enhance the existing schools rather than to construct new ones. The Baptist Missionary Society established an extensive network of educational institutions for the impoverished and marginalized populations of Bengal, particularly in the hilly regions and among indigenous tribes (Mukhopadhyay, 1984, p. 141).

The earliest Christian educators to arrive in the Darjeeling hills were Rev. William Start and Rev. Karl G. Nieble, who came in 1841–1842 as part of the German Moravian Mission. A few years later, in 1846, the Catholic Mission established its presence in the region, which soon led to the founding of Loreto Convent School in the same year. This institution was primarily set up to serve the educational needs of the domiciled European community

living in the hills. As the nineteenth century neared its end, the region experienced a surge of vigorous missionary engagement. Among these, the Church of Scotland Missionary Society (Scottish Mission) played an especially influential role in promoting education among the native communities— Nepalese, Lepchas and Bhutias. The British Government even relied on this mission as a key partner in expanding primary education into remote rural settlements and tea garden areas, where schooling facilities were largely absent. Despite objections from Protestant groups, Roman Catholic missionaries also stepped forward to work among the local population, gradually becoming part of the broader educational landscape of the hills (Annals of Loreto Convent Darjeeling, 1846, p. 4; *Bengal Catholic Herald*, 1846, p. 38; Dewan, 1991, pp. 81–82, 89–92, 108–109; Francis, 2016, pp. 45–51; O'Malley, 1907, pp. 170–171; Perry, 1997, pp. 31, 40).

Christian missionaries, apart from their broader educational initiatives in the Darjeeling hills, left a lasting imprint through their pioneering efforts in initiating night schools as one of the nonformal modes of education. Evidence for this claim can be found in early historical records. Evidence for this claim can be found in early historical records. O'Malley, in Bengal District Gazetteers: Darjeeling, notes that "Night schools have always formed a special feature of the Mission's educational work. These offer facilities for a class who, while out at work all day, desire to spend a few hours improving their minds at night. They are especially popular on tea gardens" (O'Malley, 1907, p. 173). Similarly, A. J. Dash's Bengal District Gazetteer: Darjeeling (1947) records that "There are 57 tea garden schools including 17-night schools…as soon as they are able to do anything useful, children are put to work on the garden to earn money and supplement the family resources instead of being sent to school" (Dash, 1947, p. 269). Further insights are provided by Dewan, who observes that "The early schools founded by the Scots Mission invariably included some night schools for the labourers who would be at day time engaged in the field and in the tea-gardens…adult educations was provided in 75 night schools of the primary school standards…Nine hundred and three students received instruction in in these schools during the year ending 31st March, 1944…Reading, writing arithmetic upto the lower Primary standard and simple hygiene were taught" (Dewan, 1991, p. 201). Taken together, these accounts reflect the broader social realities of the hill communities in the early twentieth century, particularly the marginalised and poverty-stricken enclave societies of the tea gardens.

Although formal government-run night schools per se were not a major early strategy of the Government of India before independence, the concept of night schools in India emerged in the late 19th century as a social reform initiative to educate working-class and adult learners who could not attend regular day schools. Before independence, the Indian Education Commission of 1882 reported on night schools and adult literacy efforts in several provinces (Bombay, Punjab, and Bengal), showing growing official attention to such classes, often with government support for grants and teacher allowances for night schools in mill areas. For example, in the Bombay Presidency there were night schools as early as the 1870s, including night classes for mill workers established by religious and reform associations, teaching adult literacy (reading and writing), and evening classes for those unable to attend regular schools. Broadly speaking, in the pre-independence era, it mainly focused on the 3 R's, that is, reading, writing, and arithmetic. After independence, adult education became an official government programme. In the decades after 1947,

adult literacy and continuing education were progressively brought under state and central planning frameworks, though not always explicitly as "night schools." By the 1970s and 1980s, the National Adult Education Programme (NAEP) and other schemes were developed by the Government of India to improve literacy, sometimes including flexible and evening learning approaches (Dutta, 1986). As the independence movement evolved, the notion of adult education expanded. The historical analysis indicates that in 1920, adult education included awareness elements. As previously said, the three Rs were provided through night schools. To enhance adult education, numerous awareness programs directly relevant to learners' lives were conducted through public lectures, discussions, and film screenings, in addition to literacy initiatives. They concentrated on health concerns, economic matters, and similar topics. Libraries were established to maintain the literacy skills acquired by individuals. Furthermore, community development initiatives were executed. Prior to this period, adult education was an unofficial endeavour. In response to the escalating fervour of the freedom movement and the mobilization of the populace, adult education was formalized as an official program by the 1940s (Shah, 1999). Post-independence, India embraced a welfare-oriented strategy for development. This necessitated structural adjustments across multiple domains. The effective execution of the Mass Literacy Campaign during the pre-independence era (1938-47) had already galvanized the populace. This also necessitated the formulation of a distinct policy for adult education. Upon attaining independence, India's literacy rate was 12.2 percent. In earlier programs developed during the pre-independence era, the concept of adult education was excessively limited. In the post-independence era, it was determined to expand this concept. Consequently, health and hygiene, recreation, enhancement of vocational skills, advancement in social, cultural, and economic life, and citizenship education were incorporated into the idea and designated as "social education" (Dutta, 1986, p. 59).

The District Census handbook of Darjeeling, 1961, shows that the first-ever high school for adults in the district was at the School Kumuddini Homes Kalimpong. It provided education to the adults, including those who worked in the daytime and attended the school in the evening. In 1972-73, three such adult high schools were set up in the Darjeeling Sadar and Kalimpong subdivisions. The primary objective of these schools was to provide free coaching to men and women so as to prepare them for the School Final Standard. One of these high schools was being run by the **Scottish Universities Mission Institution (SUMI**). The success of this night school is reflected in the school magazine, ***Sumite***, 1974, as it mentions the school having been officially running for the last three years, and it boasts of the excellent result in the Board of S. F. Examination, with 30 successful candidates out of 37. Under the Government of West Bengal Plan for the Darjeeling hill area 1980–85, the Development and Planning Department of the Hill Affairs Branch took up a project for the provision of part-time education, and it was being implemented in the hill areas of Darjeeling through the establishment of non-formal education centres for children of the age group 11–14 (Dewan, 1991, pp. 278–279). Under the social education programme of the Government of West Bengal after independence, a concrete drive to materialize and spread social education began with the implementation of adult education centres and night schools, managed either by the public bodies or private organization receiving aid from the government, and through social education

centres and community centres through folk entertainment units run by the social education wing of the Department of Education (Dewan, 1991, pp. 283–284).

Table 1.1. Adult Education Centres and Night Schools in the Hill Region of Darjeeling District (1950–51 to 1965–66)

Thana	1950–51	1955–56	1960–61	1965–66
Darjeeling	2	2	2	1
Sukhiapokhari	1	–	4	1
Pulbazar	–	6	8	7
Rangli–Rangliot	1	1	4	4
Jore-Bungalow	–	1	4	3
Kalimpong	3	12	13	12
Gorubathan	–	7	5	5
Kurseong	1	1	–	4
Mirik	–	3	1	3
Total for the hill areas	**8**	**33**	**41**	**40**
Total for the district	**9**	**34**	**44**	**44**

Source: Adapted from *Education in Darjeeling Hills: An Historical Survey, 1835–1985* (Table 27, p. 284), by D. B. Dewan, 1991, Indus Publishing Company.

Table 1.1 illustrates the spread of adult education centres and night schools in the hills of the Darjeeling district post-independence during 1950–51 and 1960–61. The period 1965–66 shows a slight decline. Alongside, it highlights the consistent records of higher numbers of centres in the regions of Kalimpong and Pulbazar. This trend indicates a greater focus on adult and non-formal education in these areas. Overall, the data reflect a growing post-independence emphasis on adult education in the hills, particularly to meet the needs of working and marginalised communities.

To give a clearer picture of the night school in the Darjeeling hills, the oral narratives have been presented. Mahendra Pradhan, former Headmaster, Turnbull High School, Darjeeling: In 1977, the Government of West Bengal (GoWB) initiated an ambitious and compassionate programme of adult education under its non-formal teaching policy, aimed at school dropouts, working youth, and adults from economically disadvantaged families. Most of them had been compelled to abandon formal schooling due to poverty and the need to support their families during the day. This initiative offered them a second chance at education, dignity, and social mobility. Under this policy, eligible candidates— irrespective of age— were admitted directly into Class IX or X and were allowed to appear for the Madhyamik (Secondary) Examination externally through the West Bengal Board of Secondary Education. Age was not a barrier; students aged 20, 25, and even 30 years and above enthusiastically returned to classrooms. Overall, we can say that this night school can be tagged as the silent revolution in the Darjeeling hills. However, this silent educational revolution met a tragic interruption. During the Gorkhaland movement (1986–1988), marked by armed struggle and heavy paramilitary deployment, the safety of night-school students became a serious concern. Owing to escalating security risks, the Night School was ultimately abandoned (Interviewed: August 9, 2020).

In a similar vein, Mr. Shiwakoti (58), a resident of lower Rose Bank and the senior assistant teacher at Turnbull High School, Darjeeling: One of the most remarkable centres of this movement was the Night School at Turnbull High School, Darjeeling, managed by the Diocese of Eastern Himalaya, Church of North India Mission. The District Social Education Department reimbursed stationery costs and provided a modest honorarium of Rs. 50 per month to volunteer teachers—an amount more symbolic of dedication than compensation. With the proactive leadership of Mr. I. P. Rai, District Social Education Officer, and under the policy framework of GoWB, this night school became a benchmark institution for spreading higher education among the marginalized. Its impact was transformative. Many students who had once dropped out went on to secure positions in government services, police, defense forces, municipalities, panchayats, and as primary and high school teachers. Some even rose to become state civil service officers. The success of the night school and this programme owed much to the dedication of educators such as the late Mahendra Pradhan, headmaster, and the late Hemchandra Pradhan, assistant headmaster of Turnbull High School, whose efforts illuminated the lives of countless unsung heroes of society. Today, the children and grandchildren of these learners proudly carry forward their legacy, firmly established in modern society (Interviewed: October 6, 2024).

Mrs. Rupa (60), an ex-student of a night school who completed Class 10 in 1988 and is currently a resident of Rajbari, Darjeeling, recalled that night school classes were held from 5:00 p.m. to 9:00 p.m., making it possible for working individuals to attend after their daily labour. She noted that Sundays, public holidays, festival days, and winter vacations were observed, which reflected a structured yet flexible learning environment for every student on those days. Having dropped out of school at an early stage, she rejoined education after marriage by enrolling in a night school in 1988. She remembered the dedication of the teachers, particularly one teacher, Nayan Sir, who taught multiple subjects and played a significant role in motivating students. Mrs. Rupa emphasized that the quality of teaching in night schools enabled learners to understand lessons effectively, as many of the teachers were also regular day-school teachers. She associated her ability to later support her daughter— who studied in an English-medium Catholic institution, Loreto Convent, Darjeeling— with the education she received through the night school. According to her, night schools attracted many learners who had a strong desire to study but were constrained by economic responsibilities, household duties, or the need to support their families. She further observed that several night school students went on to secure respectable employment, while many primary school teachers also attended night schools to upgrade their qualifications. Reflecting on the present situation, she expressed concern over the absence of similar educational opportunities in the hills today. In her view, night schools once functioned as a vital educational asset for the hill communities, especially for adults and working learners seeking a second chance at education (Interviewed: October 17, 2024).

Mr. Sharma (58), prior resident of Red Cross Quarter, S. N. Das Road: Parallel to this initiative was another notable institution— Arya Night School at Kagjhora, Darjeeling, established in the late 1970s with the support of the Arya Samaj Missionary. Late Prof. Kabindra Tamang, then Head of the Botany Department at Darjeeling Government College, played a pivotal role in nurturing this school. Classes were held in the evenings up to Class X, enabling students to pass the Madhyamik examination. Like Turnbull's

Night School, this institution too fell victim to the political unrest of the late 1980s. Yet, its spirit endured. The institution later reinvented itself by offering morning classes from 6:00 am to 9:30 am for working individuals and school dropouts. Many of its alumni today serve as senior civil servants and higher secondary school teachers, standing testimony to the enduring power of education. The struggle for educational access extended beyond secondary schooling. In the early 1980s, gaining admission to Classes XI and XII was extremely difficult for students who did not feature on college merit lists, as higher secondary education was then administered exclusively by colleges. Deprived students, along with their unions such as Sanyukta Vidyarthi Sangh, launched agitations—rallies, chain hunger strikes and protests— demanding their right to education. Facing limited seats at Darjeeling Government College, the administration initially struggled to respond. Eventually, the State Higher Education Ministry intervened, arranging evening college classes in humanities at Municipal Boys' High School, Darjeeling, as an extension of Darjeeling Government College's quota— recognising education as a fundamental right. This arrangement continued briefly but was discontinued in 1983–84 following the expansion of seats at Darjeeling Government College, St. Joseph's College, and Loreto College, facilitated by the District Administration and the Director of Public Instruction (DPI), GoWB (Interviewed: October 16, 2024).

There is significant light to be shed on the contribution of Father J. M. Abraham, S.J., of St. Alphonsus Social and Agricultural Centre. His initiative to start a night school stands out as one among his many contributions or educational services for the hill people through both formal and informal modes of learning. His efforts reflect not merely institutional expansion but a deeply humane engagement with the educational deprivation of labouring communities. Insight into this pioneering initiative emerges vividly from a personal letter dated November 1966, addressed to a friend in Canada, where he has written about the humble beginning of evening classes: "…It seemed silly to arrange special classes for one pupil, so I asked our 'buy-dar' to find out if any coolies would like to go to school in the evening. I didn't expect any would… After walking miles to get to work, after carrying heavy loads all day, after eating a handful of rice at noon… Who could stay on to face monotony of the Nepali A-B-C's? No one, I thought. I was gloriously wrong… The girls had left their tattered lunch-bags and their bamboo umbrellas on the top landing…to them going into one of our clean 'beautiful' classrooms was like going into a chapel, into a special, almost a sacred place. Some hadn't believed… that they were really going to be allowed in… It was a privilege they had no right to dream of… even if now they were Cinderellas entering the place of delight, still they had better not take with them their dirty bags and their wet umbrellas… The end of the story? Now we have three evening classes: one for the youngsters 10 to 13 like Lama; one for the coolie girls 14 to 20; and one for a dozen mother from villages around who come to school each evening—so shyly—to share unexpectedly in the privilege they are giving their own children at such cost and sacrifice… This is one small by-product of the school you are building… this is the loveliest fruit for your faithful generosity. I had often thought of adult education, but this is a nebulous 'someday' way. How happy I am that one of you bugged me into making that 'someday' today" (Abraham, 2004, p. 11). This narrative not only documents the origin of the evening classes but also reveals the emotional, social, and symbolic value that such educational spaces held for marginalized hill communities— particularly women labourers

and adult learners who had long remained outside the ambit of formal schooling. The initiative thus stands as a compelling testimony to missionary commitment toward inclusive and need-based educational outreach in the Darjeeling hills.

Conclusion:

The historical trajectory of night schools in the Darjeeling hills reflects a significant dimension of missionary engagement with non-formal education. Long before the colonial administration, and later the independent Indian government, formally recognised adult and continuing education as developmental priorities, Christian missionaries had already responded to the educational deprivation of the hill population through practical initiatives such as evening and night schools. These institutions emerged as accessible learning spaces for those structurally excluded from formal schooling— particularly tea-garden labourers, women, adult learners and school dropouts whose economic responsibilities made daytime education impossible.

In a country like India, where formal education has never been able to meet the needs of all parts of society, the importance of other systems is clear. Non-formal educational initiatives such as night schools thus played a crucial gap-filling role. They extended the reach of learning to those left outside the conventional classroom and ensured that education did not remain the privilege of the few but became accessible to the many.

From a sociological standpoint, these night schools functioned not merely as literacy centres but as agencies of socialisation, awareness building, and social mobility. They enabled the marginalised to acquire basic skills, develop self-confidence, and gradually reposition themselves within a changing social order. Even after Independence, when governmental adult education programmes and non-formal education schemes were introduced, missionary-run night schools continued to function actively at the grassroots. Operating through voluntary commitment rather than bureaucratic obligation, they complemented state initiatives and, in many ways, anticipated the framework later adopted by government agencies.

While the formal educational contributions of Christian missionaries— through schools, boarding institutions, and teacher-training centres— remain unparalleled in shaping the socio-cultural development of the hills, the significance of night schools is equally noteworthy. They represented education in its most inclusive and democratic form: flexible in structure, community-oriented in approach, and deeply sensitive to local realities. By reaching the downtrodden— women confined within domestic roles, plantation labourers tied to rigid work schedules and adults denied earlier opportunities— these institutions became powerful instruments of social upliftment and collective empowerment in the Darjeeling hills.

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