

## **Exploring the Conection between Kurseong and Netaji Subhash Chanra Bose:An Assessment**

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**Abstract:** *This research paper seeks to explore the connection between Kurseong, a prominent hill town today in Darjeeling hill with the famous freedom fighter Netaji Subhashchandra Bose. It is seen that initially visiting the Darjeeling hills in childhood, he quickly became fond of the Darjeeling hills. Kurseong became his favorite retreat from hectic life of Kolkata and later as political leader, his influence among the hill people increased greatly which led to spread of nationalistic sentiments in the hills. Additionally, he was keenly aware of the issues and grievances faced by hill people and were sympathetic towards them. Now, the bungalow of the Bose family has been converted to museum and serves as important site in Kurseong city.*

**Keywords:** *Annexation, British, Freedom, Darjeeling, hill, Gorkha, Museum, Netaji etc.*

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### **Introduction**

The town of Kurseong in the Darjeeling district of West Bengal today is widely known as tourist spot. The town is located at altitude of 1458 meters or 4864 feet and is located some 30 kms away from Darjeeling town. The name Kurseong originates from Lepcha word “Kharsang” which means "Land of the White Orchids".<sup>1</sup>

Since the annexation of Darjeeling hills by the British colonial authorities, initially the Darjeeling town and later also Kurseong and Kalimpong were developed as hill stations. Simultaneously, a steady migration of people from nearby Himalayan kingdoms like Nepal, Sikkim, Bhutan and even Tibet started. The emergence of tea industry in the hills created a significant pull factor which heavily influenced the migration. The growth in population of the Darjeeling hills can be attributed to the growth of tea industry in the Darjeeling hills.

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British policy of hiring sardars who traveled to Nepal telling people to come to work in the Darjeeling hills further increased migration. In return the sardars received a fixed commission.<sup>2</sup> Additionally, the Darjeeling hills also emerged as a recruitment centre for the Gorkha troops which contributed to the migration. A recruitment centre was opened in 1890 to attract recruits from Darjeeling and nearby locations.<sup>3</sup>

As town of Darjeeling grew, Kurseong was increasingly seen as halting station by both military and civilian personnel. Therefore as early as in 1840, a dak bungalow and few rest houses were constructed. The construction of the Darjeeling Cart or Hill cart Road, as it is known today started from 1861 and was complete by 1869 when it reached Siliguri.<sup>4</sup> Consequently, it was felt that Kurseong should be made a municipality. Kurseong received the status of a municipality on 1<sup>st</sup> May of 1879 CE. Previously it was within the Darjeeling Municipality. Population of Kurseong then was 2836 and to administer this town a municipality board of six members was also formed.<sup>5</sup>

However, not only from the nearby hill kingdoms but also from plains of Bengal, a very modest migration started. This was done by Bengal's new English educated middle class or popularly known as Bhadrals. These Bhadrals, mostly engaged in clerical jobs or as lawyers settled in Darjeeling hills in small numbers. In case of Kurseong the total numbers of Bengalis were limited to few hundred at most. However, apart from this, Darjeeling hills also emerged as a popular tourist destination. Much like British living in India, the Darjeeling hills became quickly popular as a summer escape among Bengalis as well. How popular the Darjeeling hills became among Bengalis could be understood from the popular proverb that a Bengali doesn't die before visiting the Darjeeling hills.<sup>6</sup>

It was in these circumstances, the connection between the Netaji Subhashchandra Bose and the Bose family and the Darjeeling hills or more specifically Kurseong emerged.

## **Young Subhash in Kurseong**

Netaji's first visit to the Darjeeling Hills including Kurseong town happened in 1908 and again in 1915 for health check-up.<sup>7</sup> In his second visit, he wrote several letters, particularly to his friend Hemanta Kumar Sarkar in which a young Subhash summed up his thoughts about the mountains and the effects the mountains had on him. After seeing the pristine mountains, on a letter dated 19/10/15 to Hemanta Kumar Sarkar, young Subhash came to conclusion that the Himalayas had to be the original abode of the powerful Aryans. Therefore he made

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several remarks to his friend that the big slopes of the Himalayas were the most fitting abode of the heroic Aryans and living in the degenerate plains should be avoided. He thought, it was better to build a house in the hills rather than spending a hefty amount of Rs. Fifty thousand to construct a two-katha land in Kolkata. Additionally to revive the Aryan blood, one needed start scaling the mountains as in his opinion, pure Aryan blood no longer flowed in veins of people due to slavery for ages, He concluded the letter saying the Aryans were able to produce the Vedas only when they leaped across the Himalayas and the Himalayas were the sacred birth place as practically anything for which India could be proud of, could be linked to the Himalayas.<sup>8</sup>

In next letter which was also sent to Hemanta Kumar Sarkar on 21-10-1915, young Subhash remarked that living in the hills was beneficial for health and pure peace could be attained as in the peaceful solitude of the hills life could be just dreamed away and compared the mist of the hills to veil of fair poetry along with giving a quotation which he wondered if it was from English poet Pope. He concluded this letter stating that back in Kolkata, the frantic and ceaseless energy always kept him distracted. He could not fully understand the seriousness of life but after coming to the hills, one would ask question of why should life be all about labour?<sup>9</sup> Years later, Bose family purchased a bungalow in Giddapahar which has become today another important centre with historical value in the Kurseong town. This bungalow was purchased by Netaji's elder brother Sarat Chandra Bose in 1923 with a commanding view of the hills and the plains below.<sup>10</sup> This is also known as Netaji Museum today.

Apart from Netaji, his elder brother Sarat Chandra Bose also was fond of the hills and often frequented the Kurseong. Just like Netaji, he too appreciated the cool mountain air as well the panorama of the plains from Giddapahar. This was called by the Bengali writer Sudhin Dutta "the Cathartic Mountains".<sup>11</sup> The respite that the Kurseong provided was liked so well by both Netaji and his elder brother Sarat Chandra Bose that it is stated that they preferred to take respite in Kurseong rather than in Puri.<sup>12</sup>

### **Interactions with Hill People as Politician**

As Netaji's political life expanded the bungalow of Kurseong became more prominent. In the early 1930s, As Netaji chose to return from a Europe trip ignoring British colonial administration's warning, he was arrested as soon as he disembarked from ship in Bombay in April of 1936 and was transferred to Kurseong on 20<sup>th</sup> May of 1936 where he was kept under

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house-arrest in this house for several months until 17<sup>th</sup> March of 1937 AD. As his health however was showing no signs of improvements so he had to be transferred again to Calcutta Medical College and Hospital.<sup>13</sup>

In Kurseong he was though initially confined to house, later he was allowed to walk within one mile radius of the house.<sup>14</sup> During this confinement, he had developed a close connection with the local residents of the Kurseong town as well as the people of whole of the Darjeeling hill. Dalbahadur Giri was appointed as his political assistant. He also became acquainted with Helen Lepcha, the prominent social reformer and political activist from the local Lepcha community. During his stay, the responsibility of receiving letters from Savitri Devi from Kolkata hidden inside bread was upon a local youth named Bahadur Bista. Additionally, two local Congress politicians named Bhaktabir Lama and Jambir Sapkota were also in touch with him.<sup>15</sup>

In the lecture delivered Bangiya Pradesh Rashtriya Congress conference held in 1939, Netaji stated a fearless patriotic like Dalbahadur Giri was rarely seen in Bengal and his pre-mature death was caused by repeated imprisonments and brutal torture inflicted by the British authorities. The movement of 1921 had impact on the Gorkha community as well but the brutal crackdown of the British authorities had suppressed nationalistic sentiment in the Gorkha community. During the Simon Commission occasion of 1928, another effort was undertaken to spread message of Congress to the hills but it was not successful. But, again Nepali community was showing signs of nationalistic sentiment therefore large numbers of volunteers had attended the conference which was a matter of pride. He concluded his speech by warmly inviting the Gorkha community and he assured that the Gorkha community would have same place as the Bengalis.<sup>16</sup>

Yet another example of Netaji's interactions with hill politicians and activists was his exchange of letter with prominent hill politician Damber Singh Gurung, the leading hill politician sought Netaji Subhashchandra Bose's attention regarding the grievances and demands of hill people. He wrote a letter to Netaji detailing the wishes and demands of the hill people and on 8<sup>th</sup> August, 1938 he had received a sympathetic reply from Netaji. In that reply Netaji assured him that all grievances and demands of the hill people were similar to the problems elsewhere in Bengal and they would be met once Congress was in position to do that. He assured that not only the grievances raised by the hill-men needed be resolved but as

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the hill-men formed a small community in the province therefore specific attention needed to be given for which whether a special community needed to be appointed to investigate the issues or not needed to be also considered.<sup>17</sup>

Netaji's extreme popularity among the hill community of the Darjeeling hills led to support of his Indian National Army among the hill people later during the years of world war two. Krishna Bahadur Sunwar, a hill-man who had previously joined the British-Indian army joined Indian National Army and he became driver of Netaji.<sup>18</sup> Others were Dalbahadur Sherpa, Major Durga Malla, Lieutenant Tej Bahadur, among women Indrani Chhetri was notable.<sup>19</sup>

### **Museum**

Today the bungalow has been turned into a museum and it contains various personal belongings of Netaji and Bose family like chair, table, box, bed etc along with various rare photographs and personal letters to various people like Emily Schenke. This house was purchased by the Sharatchandra Bose in 1922 though it was originally constructed and owned by the British Ward family who lived there till 1913. As has been stated, the Bose family used to occasionally come to the home to escape from hectic life of Kolkata, since then it was lying empty. From 14<sup>th</sup> February, 1972, Pawan Bahadur Chettri who is now aged 83, is taking care of the residence and in 2000, it was taken over by the West Bengal Govt. Finally in year of 2001, the residence was converted into a small museum. The museum now receives an allowance of Rs. twenty thousand to Rs. twenty five thousand from the state govt. of West Bengal. Mr. Padam Bahadur Chettri, as of the date of taking interview, remains the gatekeeper of the museum and he lives with his family just beside the museum.<sup>20</sup>

The importance of the house can be further estimated from the fact that Netaji wrote his Haripura Congress speech while staying at this house. The camellia tree which was planted by Netaji's elder brother Sharat Chandra Bose in 1934 still stands today. Currently the house is under supervision of the Netaji Institute of Asian Studies.<sup>21</sup>

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, therefore it can be seen that Netaji who initially first visited the hills in his childhood for health purposes as English educated Bengali families used to do then, ultimately became fond of the Darjeeling hills as it offered escape from busy life in Kolkata

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and later as a political leader became exceptionally popular there. He utilized his period of house-arrest in the hills to bring the hill people in independence movement successfully and also understood grievances of hill people in sympathetic manner. All of these ultimately led to increased inclusion of Gorkhas of Darjeeling hills in national independence movement. Today as tribute to memory of Netaji in Darjeeling hills, the former bungalow of Bose family exists as museum.

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