

Development Dynamics in India: Two Examples, One Film: A reading of Satyajit Ray's *Kanchenjunga*

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Introduction

*This essay will attempt a reading of certain ideologies of development prevalent in post independence India, in the light of *Kanchenjunga*, a film by well known director Satyajit Ray in 1962.*

Set in Darjeeling, a popular tourist resort in the Himalayas, the film is about an upper class family of 'tourists' from Calcutta in their final afternoon on holiday. The interplay of characters mirrors the fractures in their otherwise impeccable veneer of aristocracy when they confront changes at both family and social levels.

The film is a critique of development agendas and this is its most important sub-text. Darjeeling emerges in the course of the film as much more than a hill station. It becomes an example of how dominant ideologies leave their mark at every level: architectural, demographic and economic. It becomes symptomatic of larger developmental agendas pursued in India in the 1960s and beyond, well into the 21st century. It also serves as a warning of the possible outcomes of this dominance.]



“(We) saw that novel congress of the wild peoples, and plowed here and there through it, and concluded that it would be worth coming from Calcutta to see, even if there were no Kinchinjunga and Everest. - Mark Twain on the people of Darjeeling (Twain, 1897 Chapter LV)

Citizens of the Western world today are familiar with the name Darjeeling because it is printed on every other packet of tea consumed, as a guarantee of its quality. Indeed, there are many who think it to be the name of a particular variety of the beverage, rather than a place. To many Indians (Bengalis in particular) Darjeeling is a ‘hill station’, a valley in the Himalayas where the Bengali middle classes throng every year in trainloads in their attempt to escape the soaring mercury levels of the simmering Calcutta summer.

To those nursing their colonial hangovers, however, Darjeeling is the town that the British built to cool off while the rest of India sweated it out in the plains during the heat of May and June. To them it stood as a reminder of the “good old days” of the Raj, with its views of the peak Kanchenjunga, with its mall and its bandstand, with hotels called Windermere and cafes called Keventer’s and Glenary’s. The proportion of those who held this view was much more in the 1950s and the 1960s than it is now, that generation being almost extinct. A former civil servant in British India, he has now retired but remains powerful as the chairman of many companies, and cherishes the title his former masters gave him. The film is set in 1962, just 15 years after India became independent.

The story of the film not being the subject of this article, we shall refrain from going into it in great detail. It is the family’s final afternoon out and the Raibahadur strolls off when he meets

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Ashoke, an unemployed, upright youngster who needs a job but is too timid to ask a favour. The Raibahadur seizes on him, lectures him endlessly about the ‘benevolence’ of the British and their ‘civilising’ influence on India. For him, Darjeeling used to be ‘just another little village of the Lepchas’ — one of the many tribes of dwellers at the Himalayan foothills — until “one man, one Britisher” called Campbell came and changed everything and built a town, a hill station.

This simplified pronouncement is more than ‘fact’. It is a cultural statement. It privileges a particular model of ‘development’ prevalent in British India which is born out of the thesis that nature must be subjected to satisfy the needs of mankind and that the dominant ideology can ride roughshod on local opinion, especially when that opinion has no economic strength. Throughout the film, Darjeeling emerges as a place built by the British, with almost no traces of local architecture. The following is a sample of the places which bear out the topography of Darjeeling in the film. Most of them are locations where the events take place while a few others like the race course are mentioned in conversation.

1. Observatory Hill
2. Windermere Hotel, with its Victorian facade
3. St Andrew’s Church.
4. Victoria Park
5. Terraced rows of gabled houses with typically British frontages.
6. Sanatorium
7. Mall
8. Bandstand.
9. Keventer’s Café
10. Race course
11. Oakdene

Apart from these there is the sound of the famous ‘toy train’ in the background, the sight of military officers marching past on the mall and many more, all of which, without exception, are essentially British contributions. The only single example of local architecture in the film comes in the shape of a ‘chorten’, a memorial built by many mountain tribes of the Himalayas containing the remains and relics of important or holy people. The distinctive spire of the chorten can be seen in a shot which captures the beauty of the mist setting in.

This constitutes a powerful visual statement, whereby all ‘local’ traces have been erased completely. All vestiges of local culture have been uprooted and replaced by a built environment which is completely British, created for a comfort and congeniality of the tourist. The locals reside, we are forced to assume, either in the log cabins we sometimes see perched on the terraces or in worse accommodation. They have been uprooted too, and we see them as one of four entities: beggars, pony attendants, nomads with a pack of mules, or servants. The one glimpse of local women we have on the mall shows three of them knitting wool, their state of penury obvious. The architecture and built environment of Darjeeling is a constant visual reminder throughout the film of this social inequity which prevails in this tourist paradise. The only contact these ‘unequal’ locals have with the tourists is when money changes hands, as business or as alms.

A Historical Insulation

The inability to understand local tradition and wipe away all its traces in the name of development is a peculiar contradiction in British India. While some Britons excavated (and lobbied for) the preservation of many ancient Indian historical ruins, carrying out much pioneering work under the aegis of the Archaeological Survey of India with the aid of their Indian employees, there were others who believed and enforced the view that all traces of native tradition, which smacked of ‘heathenism’, were best done away with. Darjeeling was evidently created by the exertions of this second group.

Darjeeling became a Gorkha settlement towards the end of the 18th century when the Nepalese Gorkhas waged war with the king of Sikkim and annexed much of his land, including Darjeeling and the Terai. The East India Company, to protect its strategic interests in Bengal, fought back, reinstated the king of Sikkim, and made Sikkim along with Darjeeling a buffer state against the Nepalese. This prevented the Nepalese Gorkhas from coming in direct contact with (and thereby attacking) British interests in southern Bengal. This peace was short lived and the dispute broke out afresh in the second decade of the 19th century, and the British decided to rectify the mistake they had made 20 years before. This time, they would keep Darjeeling for themselves.

Darjeeling was a vantage point of entrance to both Nepal and Bhutan. This made it, potentially, a centre for attracting trade. Thus it was that in Feb. 1829, Mr. J.W. Grant, Commercial Resident at Malta, led a group which stayed for six days, — the first Europeans to have set foot in Darjeeling. Of course there was a more ‘benevolent’ reason for the British takeover. William Bentinck, then Governor General, is said to have been especially heartened by the prospect of saving all those poor souls suppressed by the age-old tyranny, with the spread of Christianity.

A ‘treaty’ with the king of Sikkim was finally signed on 1st February, 1835 and read as follows:

The Governor General, having expressed his desire for the possession of the hill of Darjeeling on account of its cool climate, for the purposes of enabling the servants of his government, suffering from sickness, to avail themselves of its advantages I, the Sikkimputtee Rajah, out of friendship for the said Governor-General, hereby present Darjeeling to The East India Company, that is, all the land South of the Great Rangit River, East of the Balasun, Kahail and Little Rangit Rivers and West of Rungno and Mahanadi Rivers. (Dash, 1947, pg 37-38)

Thus it came to be that the Gorkha settlement came to be recognised around the 1830s (a lot of the Gorkhas having been driven away by that time), as a “largely uninhabited tract of land”. There were, then, only 20 mud huts around the Mahakal Observatory, the population was 100. ‘Intrepid’ Englishmen spent the freezing nights without wraps, we are informed, in ‘a lonely mud hut’. Four years later, there were 30 buildings and in 1863, 70 homes were built in the ‘best British tradition’. (*History of Darjeeling*, website)

In 1839, Dr Campbell of the Indian Medical Service, British resident of Nepal, was transferred from his position in Nepal and appointed superintendent of Darjeeling, which

placed him in-charge of political relations with Sikkim besides running the civil, criminal and fiscal administration. When he found time, he also acted as Postmaster, Marriage Registrar and Administrator of the station funds. The results were instant. From a mere 100 people in 1839, the population shot up to 10,000 by 1849. A road from Pankhabari was laid-out through tracts of dense forest. The road came to be lined with bungalows.

As for the king of Sikkim, he was 'compensated' by the British with an allowance of 3000 rupees, which raised to Rs. 6,000/- in 1845. And later on, when his Prime Minister demanded more and asserted their rights of trade, the British marched their forces into Sikkim, got rid of the 'Pagla Dewan' ('mad prime minister') and under a new 'treaty' in 1861 ensured that the doors of Sikkim were 'opened up' to travellers and merchants.

'By 1881, when a narrow-gauge Toy train began to zigzag up the mountains, the hill station was completely anglicized. The British lived on the town's top ridge, and their workers lived on the hills below - a social and geographic stratification that exists today, with the Indian upper class taking the place of the British.' (*Darjeeling Town*, website)

Developmentality

Even after India's Independence, this 'civilisational' model of the British continued to set the agenda for the new utilitarian developmental models which were adopted during the first two decades of independent India, and which functioned on the Mill-Bentham axiom of the greatest good of the greatest number. Both the 'goodness', and the 'numbers', were applicable to the upper classes which administered the system. Therefore, just as the 'civilised' British rulers found it right to 'civilise' their Indian subjects, the 'civilised' ruling upper classes of free India continued to frame policies to 'develop' and 'uplift' those occupying the lower rungs of the social and economic ladder. The Indian bureaucracy continued to be in charge of framing and implementing policy. Even though its employers changed from London to Delhi, the bureaucracy itself did not change and neither did its agenda.

This agenda is best described in the words of the first Indian Prime Minister, Nehru who called dams and steel plants the 'temples of modern India'. This is part of a wider developmental rhetoric now referred to as 'Nehruvian socialism', where the 'welfare state' takes care of its citizens, runs factories and steel plants to maximise not profit but opportunity and ensures development through industrialisation. These lofty ambitions came crashing down within two decades of Independence because the same insularity ensured that ground level problems relating to regional identity were ignored in pursuing the development agenda. The result was widespread social and political unrests, including secessionist movements and language riots in southern India. To add to this, there were famines and costly wars with neighbours China and Pakistan. The country was hit by a recession in mid 1960s which grew out of two reasons.

One, "foreign aid was suspended during the Indo Pak war of 1964". Two, "there was a two year succession of droughts which severely affected Indian agriculture and led the central government to reduce its investment outlay in an attempt to hold back the drought induced inflation. The area hardest hit by the reduction of government investment was West Bengal, which contains India's main concentration of engineering industries." (Lubell, 1974, pg 7) The result of this was that by the end of the 1960s a whole generation of educated middle and lower middle classes, especially in Bengal found themselves without jobs as industries were

forced to shut down and the ranks of the unemployed swelled. The common man had once again, been sacrificed at the altar of the great insulated developmental agenda.

Kanchenjunga sounds the warning bells for this situation, which developed within a decade of its making. And the ‘visual scenery’ of Darjeeling serves to remind us constantly throughout the film of how disastrous such restrictive agendas of development can be.

And The Twain Shall Never Meet

Darjeeling, says Ashoke’s uncle, the archetypal ‘private tutor’, is a “melting pot”, where class divisions vanish and a new sense of identity emerges. The irony could hardly be more severe. Because, in the Darjeeling we see here, people from different classes move together, all on holiday away from the city, but each in their respective and carefully cocooned worlds. And when these worlds cross paths, there is chaos.

Not only is the Raibahadur unable to relate to or understand fellow Indians, he is clearly not interested in them. “I have neither the inclination, nor the time,” he says, to find out “whether the fruits of Independence are ripe or raw”. Whether Independence has brought any benefits “is for the younger generation to work out”. He is 60, “too old to care”.

During this trip, the Raibahadur has found a ‘suitable’ match for his younger daughter Manisha. The prospective groom, Banerjee, is a British degree-holding engineer who, as one of the ‘architects of the future’ ardently believes in the Nehruvian agenda of development. However, this new face of the Indian establishment has ideas which are surprisingly similar to that of the old guard. With remarkable self-assurance he tells Manisha that he has a “bright future”. He confesses that he, like many others of his kind, has become “very worldly”. He pits himself as the polar opposite of Manisha’s uncle the birdwatcher, who is also on holiday with them. Even his speech is mechanical. “Whatever we do must be of immediate use, and yield a tangible result,” he says. “An industry implies budgets, calculations, profits; it has meaning and is down to earth, practical.” He expresses his inability to relate to the world of the birdwatcher, with a hint of pride about the ‘usefulness’ of his profession. He is patronising towards the birdwatcher and condescending towards the unemployed Ashoke. Like the Raibahadur, he too cannot relate to those around him.

The film makes it clear that the insulation of the Raj’s ruling classes had already percolated into the first generation of independent India, scuttling any possibility of radical social change.

This is not merely a social feature. It is manifested in Banerjee’s development agenda too. “A flood devastates crops, so let’s build a dam, check the flow of the river, which will require money, materials, machinery, manpower”. All this is regardless of environment or local requirements, and functions with a mathematical exactitude that has nothing to do with real people. This is the irony of the developmental agenda. Through it, one ‘enlightened’ world seeks to ensure the ‘welfare’ of the other, which constitutes people they have never met.

Results

The ‘locals’ of Darjeeling comprise more than the Lepchas. There are the Gorkhas, Gurungs, Sherpas, Newars, Khampas, and many other peoples of the hills. Some like the Lepchas have

always lived here while others have settled from elsewhere and have lived here for several generations, like the Gorkhas of Nepal and the Khampas of Tibet.

In *Kanchenjunga* we see two locals, who are also the only two 'rooted' characters. But we have no clue about their cultural background in this film. Both are beggars. One is a child of about eight who scampers after a tourist in relentless pursuit. The other, a man of about forty, has his own survival trick: he begs in English, "Help me please, I'm poor and blind..". The British may have left, but his survival strategy has not changed because there are enough tourists with colonial hangovers who will give alms to an English speaking (and hence, 'civilised') beggar.

This reaffirms the contention that processes of social change (a change in mindsets, for example) take a great deal longer to happen than a political change of guard. And like mindsets, models of development too do not change quickly.

This state of affairs received its first wake up call in the 1950s and 1960s when organised movements began to surface in the hills, demanding a greater say in their own affairs. They protested the marginalisation of locals not only in Darjeeling, but their exploitation throughout the valley where tea estates employed thousands of locals at poor wages. They also protested at the manner in which their language was ignored in government correspondence in the region. These movements became more and more violent, gathered under the umbrella of the Gorkha National Liberation Front, and demanded a separate state of Gorkhaland in the 1980s. Many years of violence completely stopped the tourist inflow into Darjeeling, thus damaging the local economy even further. The violence ceased only after a settlement was reached in 1988 and a semi autonomous council was created to administer the area. Memories of many years of neglect to different peoples in the area remain and every new incident of violence throughout the 1990s threatened to reopen old wounds. (*Gorkhaland*, website)

From the Past to the Present

In many ways the bureaucratic machinery created by the Raj functions with largely similar degrees of insulation even today, more than five decades after Independence, and the results are evident in our second example, the current dispute over the construction of a dam in the valley of the river Narmada in Gujarat. Like the dams Banerjee talks of building in *Kanchenjunga*, this dam too is conceived with an eye on increasing the yield of food crops, without making adequate arrangements for the people who would be displaced by flooding caused due to the building of the dam.

The parallels with Darjeeling are striking. Here too, is a built environment that threatens to displace thousands of people from their dwellings and animals and birds from their habitats, without making any provision for their rehabilitation. And it doesn't end there. This too, was initially a British plan, first drawn up in 1901 but then dumped later on because the black alluvial soil of the region would make the investment worthless. And true to the spirit of development as practised in British India, it surfaced again after India's independence under the developmental agenda of Nehruvian Socialism. Nehru's Home Minister Sardar Patel gave the plan a green signal to benefit his 'own' people from the Gujarat state. The neighbouring state of Madhya Pradesh protested that the dams would submerge vast areas of land. After decades of wrangling, many deadlocks and promises, a blueprint for the project finally emerged in the 1980s comprising 30 big dams, 135 medium dams and 3000 small dams on

the Narmada & its tributaries. Two of these 30 big dams are ‘megadams’, and are called the Sardar Sarovar Project (SSP) and the Narmada Sagar Project. The 1312 km long river will thus be ‘harnessed’.

It was in the mid 1980s that people displaced by the SSP workers began their protest. Only since then has the human cost of this project has become clearer. While SSP alone would produce 1,450 megawatts of power, furnish 30 million people with water, and provide employment for 600,000, it would also displace over a million people, more than half of whom are tribals. Its reservoir will flood 91,000 acres of forest and agricultural land and the canal network will mangle another 200,000 acres. Activists of under the banner of the Narmada Bachao Andolan have been protesting, to much visibility but little effect. Successive governments at both national and state levels have been complicit in steadily increasing the height of the dam. The project goes on (as do the protests) and when completed threatens to be a large ecological and demographic disaster. But it is just one of more than 3300 large dams (and many more smaller ones) which have been built in various parts of India after Independence. The total number of people estimated to have been displaced by the large dams alone crosses 50 million. (Chatterjee, 2003 and Roy, 1999)

Seen in this context, the portrayal of the people of amid the built environment of Darjeeling in *Kanchenjunga* becomes symbolic of all such instances where ‘development’ is carried out at the cost of displacing thousands from their habitat and from their means of livelihood. It is important to see and read the film because more than five decades after India’s independence, the lessons of Darjeeling have still not been learnt.

Environment and the future

While *Kanchenjunga* uses the built environment of Darjeeling as a visual code, it also treats it as symbolic of the larger rhetoric of ‘development’ and asks critical questions about the way in which this development is to be achieved. In doing so, the built environment of Darjeeling is constantly contrasted against (and dwarfed by) the magnificent mountains around it and the forests of pines and birches, thus visually linking larger issues of environment and development.

The film takes a clear stand on the issue. The Raibahadur and his family have been to this hill station for ‘seventeen days’. Yet, they have not, for once, been able to catch a glimpse of the Kanchenjunga, the Himalayan snow peak that is viewed best from Darjeeling. This ‘denial’ plays a major part in the film, and can be read as nature’s way of snubbing human beings who think nothing of exploiting the environment. Thus, it becomes a silent yet evocative critique of the development agenda. However, this is not all. The snows do clear at the every end of the film, but by then, events have overtaken the Raibahadur. He has been snubbed by the unemployed Ashoke, his plans for his daughter’s wedding have gone awry and none of his family have turned up to meet him at the appointed place. In a final irony, he becomes too engrossed in his own situation to take notice of the ‘snows’ behind him.

The Raibahadur is accompanied on this trip by the birdwatcher brother in law, Jagadish, who rambles into the woods on his own to catch a glimpse of a rare hill bird. Later, in the course of a conversation with Ashoke, Jagadish tells the youngster about ‘migratory birds’. Many of these birds, like the golden plover, fly a distance of more than two thousand miles from the arctic to the tropics during the winter months every year. And every year they come back to nest at the same place, never losing their instinctive sense of direction. But then, Jagadish

points out that “all these nuclear tests are filling the atmosphere with radioactive gases.. one day I might find that the birds haven’t appeared.. that they have lost their minds and forgotten their way.. that they have lost their very special sense.. or .. what is even worse.. perhaps they have all died on the way...and like rain drops, fallen one by one.”

This too, was a timely warning. It came at least 12 years before the Indian government carried out the first of its many nuclear tests. As in all other nuclear powers of the world, these tests are carried out in India for a variety of reasons ranging from ‘protection against enemies’ to ‘creating alternative sources of energy for the future’.

Like the other caveats in the film, this too has not been heeded.

The results have started to come in.

[Note: Translations of dialogues from the film mine, largely based on original subtitles]

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