REVISITING KALIMPONG IN MEMORY AND HISTORY: A LOOK INTO THE TOWN'S VIBRANT PAST

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INTRODUCTION

Kalimpong is a small town in the state of West Bengal in the Darjeeling hills. Unlike its counterpart, Darjeeling, which is known world wide for its sophisticated tea and one-of-a-kind toy train, Kalimpong remains much in obscurity outside of Bengal, and it is no surprise that many people even within the state have hardly any knowledge about the small hill town. Those few within Bengal who know about it are mostly tourists who may have visited the town when in search of a cheap holiday destination which fulfills all their requirements: fresh air, cool climate, cheap accommodation, transport and of course good 'Chinese' food. Others who claim to know the town, might have heard of it in their political circles as a region representing the Indian Nepali speaking population involved in the demand for a separate state outside West Bengal. This paper seeks to tell a story of a period in the

town's history that stands in stark contrast to how it is in the present day. It's about a period when Kalimpong was a bustling trade-town, a potpourri of the world's population (Datta-Ray 1984), a town that connected India to Tibet, China and perhaps to the world, where its inhabitants depended on trade to make a decent living.The research paper attempts to do this by revisiting this period through the medium of memory and history.

For this the paper relies heavily on engagements with women and men who have lived and worked in that period through unstructured interviews, which allows for a free flowing narrative to take place instead of a more formal approach with a pre-fixed set of questions. This allows the individuals to talk about their experiences as they choose which holds prime significance when understanding the 'past'.[1] The 'past', as we call it, depends on what we choose to remember and 'how' we choose to remember it, and in this process, it also in some ways leads to its recreation and construction. This is one of the main reasons why this research paper gives precedence to individual experiences—the truth that each individual, each group, each community has experienced is different from the other as opposed to universal truths and generalisations. The paper in this way explores the nexus between the past, memory and history through the 'lived realities' of different individuals who have been witness to a time period that stands in contrast to the present day scenario. Most importantly this research paper is an attempt to look at the history of the small Himalayan hill station through the eyes of its people and in a very significant way is about their personal place histories. The paper seeks to highlight different perspectives in order to build a narrative that is different from the political economy approach that usually dominates the understanding of the region.

It must be pointed out that in the construction and recreation of a historical narrative that relies heavily on individual experiences and memories, limitations are bound to be present. In this regard, one thing that needs to be pointed out is that reality can be distorted as

the process of going back into the past and extracting stories from one's memory does go through some amount of 'sifting' and 'straining' in one's mind and can be influenced by an array of factors. One can never be too sure about what one remembers or rather 'chooses' to remember and share it with 'the other', in this case the 'researcher' as someone on the outside. In other words, it is the storytellers (the men and women who were interviewed in this case) that hold the reigns of the story, of their past and of their memories. Thus, in putting together pieces of individual and shared memories for the construction of a narrative about a place, we have to succumb to the inaccuracy and imperfectness of one's mind.

The paper has been divided into parts, beginning with a short history of Kalimpong's emergence as a thriving trade centre in the region. In this regard, the paper emphasises the importance of understanding a 'context' and its specificities, which is of utmost significance in understanding any period in history. For this, the paper has relied on secondary sources such as newspaper articles, books, academic journals/writings, photographs and videos. This is important in order to understand the advantageous location of the town, which made it possible for it to become a trade centre and a business hub. The paper then goes on to describe the main commodity of trade business that Kalimpong was known for—'wool'—and how the entire economy of the town was dependent on this commodity under 'wool bundles and much more'. This section in the paper describes the business of wool trade and the workings of the wool godowns through interviews and personal communication. It is followed by a detailed description of the 'nature of work' inside the wool godowns in order to get an idea of the division of work between men and women. This section thus explains in detail the type of work men and women performed, their income, work ethic, and builds a picture of their public lives. The paper then looks at a sense of community present among the people who work in the wool godowns and in a way gives a glimpse of their private lives. Finally, the last section of the paper talks about how 'wool trade' in

Kalimpong comes to an end influenced by the political climate of the world, and how this affects the lives of individuals and the economy of a small town in unimaginable ways, thus bringing an entire era to an end.

'THEN' AND 'NOW'

Nima Wangdi Bhutia stares blankly into the blue September sky from the front porch of his house. The creases in his forehead do not represent any kind of thought on his mind but rather are indications of a man in his mid seventies. He puts his fingers near his mouth and ruffles his moustache before answering me and says, '*esto thiyena paila'* (it wasn't like this before) referring to the changes that his hometown has gone through. I call him Nima Bara[2] lovingly as he is my father's eldest brother. He was born in the year 1948: he reminds me that he is old and that his memory could be rusty because my questions were about a time in the distant past. Bara had been the storyteller of the family, and my sisters and I had grown up listening to stories about his life, his adventures and his experiences, which he shared with utmost precision and detail. I remember Bara keeping a thick book that was a collection of newspaper cuttings, old photographs and information on important events that had taken place in Kalimpong, and anything else that was remotely related to his hometown. He kept this book with an almost uncanny solicitousness, neatly wrapped in a plastic bag and safely tucked in his drawer right beside his bed. He would sometimes open the book that held his memories with an almost triumphant expression in his face and then tell me stories about the events that the book contained. Bara used to work as a driver in his twenties for the royal family of Bhutan, so his stories about this time in his life were nothing short of adventures. He sometimes told me about his hunting trips and how he got to shoot a gun (a rifle) for the first time in his life. He would remember dates and the tiniest details about each event he described. So my confidence in his memory was not without proof.[3]

Many of the tales about wool godowns, the genealogy of my family, his colourful childhood and the mysteries about my hometown had come from Bara. He tells me that he was a very naughty child who had no intention of studying or remaining in one room for more than a couple of minutes, so it was obvious that school had been horrible for him. Instead, he had somehow been able to skip school and go around doing odd jobs for some money. His first real job where he got paid a few coins was in the wool godown. 'I was a strong child, and those days were a lot of fun,' he laughs and tells me in a way that makes it seem like he was once again at that time in his childhood. I ask him what Kalimpong was like in those days and he says, 'Different, *ekdamai*' (very different). He points to rows of buildings and houses that have cropped up around the neighbourhood and tells me that there were only trees there, a few houses, cottages and no fancy buildings. He points to a curve bend on a road which can be seen from our house, and tells me that the road used to be frequented by horses and mules carrying loads of wool bundles for business in Kalimpong town. He tells me that it was called the 'Silk route'[4] which touched different places in and around Kalimpong, and where trade between India and Tibet took place.[5]

KALIMPONG'S EMERGENCE—FROM THE 'UNKNOWN' TO THE 'KNOWN'

> *'Nehru had called Kalimpong a nest of spies. Chinese communists saw it as the command centre of British imperialism. Clinging to the foothills at about 4000 ft, Kalimpong was once the world's potpourri.' [...] 'Kalimpong's glory lasted for about half a century until Indian and Chinese inflexibility closed the gates. From being a throbbing caravanserai on one of Asia's busiest highways, the town declined into a forlorn outpost at the end of a blind alley.' [...] 'But there was a*

> *spurt of wanton excitement just before the end. Trade had never been so prosperous.' [...]*
>
> *—Sunanda K. Datta-Ray (1984)*

The above lines are from one of the most controversial books on Sikkim's history called *Smash and Grab: Annexation of Sikkim* by Sunanda K. Datta-Ray published in 1984. One cannot understand the history of Kalimpong without looking at its relations with its neighbours—Sikkim, West Bengal, Nepal, Bhutan, China and Tibet—and this is because of the location of the Himalayan hill station. Perched between the modern nation-states of Nepal, Bhutan and China, as well as the formerly independent kingdom of Sikkim and Tibet, Kalimpong served as a logical venue for 'encounters of various kinds' as Markus Viehbeck (2017: 3) describes it. In his work he also talks about how the region and its historical setting was shaped intensely by 'encounters between peoples who came from many different socio-cultural environments' (ibid.: 4), which resulted in a place with a varied mixture of cultures, beliefs and preferences.

Chronologically, in 1706 Bhutan had annexed the Kalimpong area from Sikkim, and it was only much later, in 1865, after the Anglo-Bhutanese war that the area was absorbed into British India. Relations with Bhutan remained close especially after the British government gifted a piece of land in the area to Bhutan (Viehbeck 2017). This is the reason why Kalimpong still has very close connections with Bhutan as a number of Bhutanese people still occupy land and live in Kalimpong. The same land in the present day has a fortified palace called Bhutan House which belongs to the Royal family of Bhutan and is still visited by the King and Queen and various other members of the Royal family on special occasions and for other administrative matters.[6] Kalimpong also saw migration from nearby Nepal, especially from eastern Nepal, mostly due to the work of the British Christian missionaries and the growth of the area as a major agrarian society. People from Nepal made their journey to Kalimpong and Darjeeling in search of work opportunities and ended up settling in the area, which consequently led to a large Nepalese Hindu population

making Kalimpong their home. This would later lead to a growth of a society characterised by diverse cultures, ultimately leading to a unique cultural identity of Indian Nepalis in the Indian union. The missionary settlement in Kalimpong took place in the later decades of the nineteenth century and transformed the region to a huge extent. With the work of Christian missionaries increasing with time, the town saw a growth in terms of building of roads and communication networks with nearby areas and with the outside world, thus leading to an opening up of the area and gradually its transformation.[7]

In the years to come, Kalimpong increasingly grew as an important trade centre in India-Tibet trade and with it came a host of changes in almost every aspect. Despite other trade routes[8] via Gangtok in Sikkim, the trade route via Kalimpong was preferred for many reasons. Firstly, the Kalimpong trade route was through the Jelep La pass which was comparatively simpler and easier for the travellers; it offered a less treacherous path, good enough to cross on horseback with bearable weather conditions. The Jelep La route was a narrow neck of land running between Sikkim and Bhutan and was situated at a lower altitude covered with Alpine forests characterised by a rain-fed fertile land where agriculture and pasturage was possible. Secondly, this route offered a direct road to Tibet through the Chumbi Valley where the first Tibetan trade centre, Yatung, was situated. It took almost seven days to reach Yatung on horseback from Kalimpong after which the route led to Phari—the most important trade centre in Tibet. It took almost thirteen days from Phari to reach the capital-Lhasa (Majumdar 1994). Another reason for the preference of this route was that it touched many important trade centres along the way which made trade easier and profitable. In addition to that, the presence of British trade agents and the constant vigil of the Indian government helped in the maintenance of the trade, and this was not available on any other route (Majumdar 1994). Further, Kalimpong had a cool pleasant climate all year round and a very mild winter which helped in maintaining the quality of the wool and also made it easier to carry. Apart from that, Kalimpong was well connected with the global

market through the port of Kolkata in Bengal, and this facilitated a constant flow of goods in both directions (Viehbeck 2017). All these reasons made the Kalimpong trade route a much viable option, which led not not only to the development of the town as a trade centre but also promoted a flow of knowledge from different places in the world.

The wool godowns were huge warehouses employing a large number of skilled and mostly unskilled women and men who were engaged in all sorts of work. These godowns employed more than ten thousand men and women who were engaged in work like sorting out mounds of dirty white, grey or black wool from Tibet into neat bales for their onward journey to the city and then the outside world. Apart from this, others were engaged in providing maize and fodder for the animals, and many of them had opened up shops that provided temporary shelter, food and entertainment to the riders and merchants who rested or made a quick stop on their way (Datta-Ray, S.K. 1984). Kalimpong's economy thrived during this period because trade was encouraged by the British government and later by the Indian government, which led to a diverse cultural community in the town as it rapidly grew into a major trade centre.

'WOOL BUNDLES' AND MUCH MORE

The coming of the British in India changed the country in every aspect imaginable and Kalimpong too came under this blanket of change and experienced insurmountable changes, which would take the town out from its anonymity and expose it to the entire world. It was only in 1900s that the sleepy quaint town emerged in the national picture and gained an almost notorious reputation in India and outside. In 1904 when Col. Younghusband undertook an expedition to look into British India's trade prospects with the outside world, he forced his way into Lhasa, the capital of the Tibetan kingdom, and compelled the Tibetan Government to sign a treaty to open up Tibet for trade

My grandfather to the right and his coworker in front of the company truck, which took wool bundles to the nearest river through the ropeway.

and commerce with the outside world, mainly British India. This led to the commencement of India-Tibet trade, and Kalimpong offered the most direct and all-weather route to the Chumbi Valley[9] via the Jelep La pass.[10]

Kalimpong thus transformed into a major trade centre, a business port and a transit centre for travellers, businessmen and merchants from all around the globe. Even though road communication networks were being built, the Kalimpong-Lhasa route for the most part remained accessible only by horses and mules. Different varieties of goods and items ranging from animal skins, silver coins, jaggery, musk, yak tails, medicinal herbs to clothing items, pens, tooth brushes, household items were brought on horse back and mules to the town and distributed further to different parts of the world. Among these items 'wool' was the most ubiquitous commodity of trade, as Tina Harris (2017: 208) points out. Huge bundles of wool were strapped onto the back of mules and yaks, as a result of which their journey

from Lhasa to Kalimpong took roughly about a month, depending on weather and road conditions. Bara, remembering the long trail of mules with riders on their back and wool bundles securely strapped at the back and sides of the animal, pointed to a curved bend which could be seen from our balcony and told me that it was a beautiful sight. He told me that our grandfather had to direct the trail to the allocated godowns and make sure that the wool bundles were of good quality. Kalimpong housed a number of wool godowns or warehouses where the wool bundles were brought in and the working of dismounting and sorting of the wool took place. These godowns were the central place where different varieties of wool were sorted according to their quality and made ready for the market outside. Most of the wool godowns in Kalimpong were owned by the biggest trading families in the area in those days, a mixture of Marwaris and Newars (business men from Nepal) who called themselves Lhasa-Newars.[11] The most prominent trading families who held the reigns of the trade were: Pangda tsang, Sadhu tsang and Reting.

Nima Bara told me that some godowns like the Arjun Das godown[12] in the 11th mile area of Kalimpong employed around 200–300 women and men across different age groups. Even children as young as eight years old found all sorts of work in the wool godowns. One of the bojus[13] I interviewed told me that she started going to the wool godown along with her mother when she was a young child around nine years of age and did some menial work and helped her mother. She has fond memories of the wool godown as a child because there was always something to be done, and one never knew what one could find in those wool bundles.[14] Nima Bara also told me that he skipped school and sometimes went to work in the wool godown in the 11th mile area as a young boy. He said there was always some kind of work to be found in the godown, and he usually ended up separating the wool from dirt and other impurities for which he got 10 paisa a bundle. Later, as he grew up, he was engaged in cutting the animal skin in which the wool bundles were wrapped up.[15] Another boju I interviewed also talked about most of her childhood days being

Male workers of Raja Wool Godown in 1954.

Male workers in front of the entrance of Arjun Das Godown in 1955.

spent in the wool godown with her mother. All three of them spoke about incidents of some wool bundles having items hidden in them when they were cut open. One of the bojus recalled an incident vividly, when she had found silver coins in a wool bundle and had quietly gone to the manager of the godown and informed him of her find. She said she was careful not to make a fuss about it or tell others as that would have created chaos, and that she was the most honest when it came to her work.[16]

Each wool godown would have a manager to supervise the work in the godown, along with a Tibetan counterpart who assisted him in the wool dealings. The manager was called 'maharaj' by the locals and was usually a Marwari from the higher Brahmin caste. The manager was always a male, and the entire operation of the godown was under his command. He took attendance of one set of workers, distributed the payment to each person for their work, maintained the smooth functioning of the godown and made sure that the wool quality was maintained. The Tibetan counterpart assisted the maharaj in dealing with Tibetan traders and made sure that each godown got their fair share of wool bundles. He was therefore in charge of dealing with Tibetan traders who brought the wool bundles from Tibet, and also maintained a register of the quantity of wool that was made ready for the market in each godown. Nima Bara mentioned in one of the interviews that the Tibetan manager would have a Parker ink pen with which he recorded the details of the trade and a Rolex watch to see the time. Watches all the way from Switzerland from the world acclaimed Rolex company had a niche market in Kalimpong among the wealthy merchants and traders. Sometimes the wool bundles would contain watches, pens, animal skin, silver coins and precious stones which were smuggled from different parts of the world to be sold in the Indian market. [17]

Nature of work

Each wool godown had three types of work to be done after the arrival of the wool bundles from Lhasa. The first type of work, usually done by men, was dismounting the huge wool bundles from the animal's back and carrying them to the work station in the godown. This work often required a lot of strength as the wool bundles were arduously heavy and lifting them from the back of the animal was no easy feat. The bojus in the course of the interview, however, told me that sometimes even women performed this arduous task if they were strong enough. Work allotment in the godowns was not distributed in terms of gender but rather according to individual strength and ability. The women however were mostly confined to two types of work in the wool godowns—the first type, which came soon after the wool bundles were brought to their work stations, was opening the bundle, cutting off the animal skin (*chamri)* in which it was wrapped and finally separating the wool from the dirt and other impurities like animal dung (*gobri),* which was a very difficult task because often the wool stuck to the skin and had to be taken out very carefully without causing any damage to it. After this, the women had to separate the wool according to quality, ranging from the finest to the lowest. One of the bojus who is eighty six years old described the different qualities of wool they assembled with utter precision. The wool was first separated according to size—first lot (*thulo uun),* second lot (*syano uun);* then according to colour and texture—light grey, dark grey, black; and finally according to quality—*chyangra* (was a quality of wool which had a rough texture and was thinner than other varieties), *pashmina* (which was of fine silky quality and the most expensive), and finally *garbey* (which almost resembled human hair and was very fine and fetched a huge price). These women were called '*bhari kelauney*'[8] which loosely meant those who sifted the wool to get rid of impurities. The eighty six year old boju who had worked in the godown for most of her teenage and her twenties as a kelauney stated with much confidence and pride that the work of kelauneys required a lot of skill and knowledge and wasn't

something that everyone could do. She told me proudly that she was one of the best at her work and would always get the best bundle of wool. I asked her if there was any kind of wool allotment system, to which she laughed and told me that it all depended on one's luck. There were also times (a few) when she would end up with bad wool bundles which required working until odd hours of the night. 'Those were not very often though,' she gave a throaty laugh as she took a drag of her *bidi*.[19]

The second kind of work in the wool godowns that women were engaged in was what came after the wool was sorted out. After the *kelauneys* job of sorting and assembling the wool according to their colour and kind, the wool bundles, now much smaller in size, went for another round of checking before the weighing process, which was the final step before it was passed on to be sold in the market. This second crucial step was done by a group of women who were called the '*pasolnees'* in the local dialect. Pasolnees checked the wool quality once again before 'passing' it onto the weighing process, making sure that the wool bundles were all clean and good to be taken to the markets. The bojus told me that this work was easier than the separating and sorting work and didn't require as much skills and effort as the kelauney (sorting) work did. This led me to ask them if there was any kind of criteria or work distribution system which made the women eligible for work in different stages of the wool preparation. The wool godowns had no eligibility criteria for distribution of work, and it was more about how much work one could do. In the course of interviewing men and women who had worked in these godowns or had some sort of knowledge about the work environment in these godowns, one thing that came out very evidently was that the godown employed women and men from all caste and religious backgrounds, and was open to people who came to find work even from outside Kalimpong. There was some kind of work for everybody, and payment for their work was directly proportional to the amount of labour they had put into the work and its outcome. For instance, if a woman was able to sort and separate two wool bundles in a day, she would be paid

accordingly, depending on the quantity of clean pure wool she could produce.

One of the many interesting things that came out from interviews with the bojus was how work was open to all, and there was no stringent division of labour either in terms of caste or gender. However in one of the conversations with one of the grandmother's, she points out that women who seemed shy, delicate and 'pretty' (petite) in the eyes of the manager were often asked to work as pasolnees and not kelauneys as the former did not require much strength or effort. In other words, women who were seen as being physically delicate and petite were asked to join the work of passing off the wool bundle before the final stage, which was a much easier job than separating and sorting out. The pasolnees unlike the kelauneys had to give some sort of attendance and had regular shifts with fixed in and out timings. Their payment was also fixed unlike the kelauneys. My grandmother who had come to Kalimpong from Nepal along with her step sister had found work in the wool godown as a pasolnee. After this stage of work, the wool bundles which were now clean and sorted would be weighed in a huge weighing machine with the manager and his Tibetan counterpart taking note of the quantity. After this, the bundles would be taken in horse carts and small wooden trucks to a centre point where a ropeway would transport the bundles all the way down to the Teesta river from where they would find their way to the Kolkata port. [20]

A sense of community building

Most of the men and women who worked in the wool godowns lived in the vicinity of the godown area. There were scattered huts and small villages all around the area, and most of the families near the godown were dependent on the wool trade business for their livelihood. Work in the godowns started by 8am in the morning and continued till 5pm in the evening with lunch breaks in between. Women who worked as kelauneys had a flexible 'in' timing and could adjust the timing according to their convenience as they had no attendance records.

This was because the godown employed workers on a weekly shift basis where payment was made out after a weeks end. The maximum amount received by the kelauneys was Rs. 3—Rs. 4 for a week's shift. Any extra work would garner more payment depending on the nature of the work. The men were also paid the same amount, and the salary depended on the nature of the work; other factors did not take precedence.

My grandmother to the right and her co-worker and friend in front of unkempt wool stacks and a weighing tool in Arjun Das Godown in the 1950s.

Most of the workers would bring some kind of food as lunch to be eaten during breaks, which were roughly for half an hour or slightly more depending again on the progress of one's work. Women like the grandmothers I interviewed, said they preferred coming back to their homes in the break as they lived close by. They would sometimes go back with food for their friends and co-workers if the situation demanded. The women led busy lives, and there wasn't much time for recreation as the bojus point out. Most of the women were early risers, and since work started by 8am, all household chores had to be finished in the early hours of the morning. Some children went to the local village schools, and others were brought to work along with their mothers. After work, usually post 5pm, they went to their homes and made preparations for dinner and did other household chores. 'Women always have some kind of work to do in their homes,' one of the bojus mentioned. 'They are never fully free even then, even now,' she thoughtfully remarked. They got one day off from their work which was a Saturday, and it was usually spent going to the main town market to buy food items and groceries for the entire week. This was done by the women of different houses together. They walked to the market area with empty *'dokos'* on their back and came back filled with a week's grocery. One of the bojus said that grocery shopping was very difficult in those days because there were no vehicles to carry the big load of groceries. Everything had to be done on foot, and the groceries, usually rice, lentils, local wheat flour and sometimes vegetables, were quite heavy on their backs, and they would be exhausted by the time they reached home.

Grocery shopping, however, also had its perks at times as this was a time they would meet their friends or relatives in the market, especially the ones they hadn't seen for a long time. That was something that they looked forward to, and they were special occasions where the people, especially women, met each other and exchanged gossip over tea and smokes. 'Everybody smoked those days,' the grandmothers told me still holding onto their bidis and politely offering me a drag. I took it reluctantly when one of them told me that the quality of bidis

had gone down with time. 'The prices have increased, and the quality has become worse,' she said and pointed out how that is the case with almost everything in today's world. I agree wholeheartedly. It wasn't uncommon to find men and women smoking bidis together in public places in those days. It was considered essential especially during working hours, the women told me, when they wanted to take a break. I told them how there is a some sort of a cultural taboo when it comes to women smoking in public or women smoking at all, how it is not considered good for a woman to do. To this, the bojus laughed almost dismissing what I said and told me, 'How does smoking a bidi relate to one's character, whether she is good or not;' 'Does it mean that those women who don't smoke bidis have all good character?' they retort while taking drags of their bidis.[21]

Recreation activities for the people in those days especially women were very simple and limited. Like one of the bojus in one of the interviews told me, there wasn't much time left for leisure activities. There was always a lot of work to be done, but one thing they always made time for more than once a week was listening to stories. Being able to read or write in the community during those days was a privilege that very few people had. Books were a rare sight in the households in the village. I got to speak to a sixty five year old woman who we call '*phupu*' (which loosely means a sort of elderly aunt) who lives in our neighbourhood and whose mother worked almost half her life in the wool godown as a pasolnee. She told me that her mother (who we called '*syano mam*' which literally translates to little grandmother) was one of the very few women who knew how to read and write in Hindi and Nepali. She had a few books in her possession and she would relish them till odd hours of the night. A few times a week she would read these stories out loud to the women in the village who would assemble at her house after dinner. Since she was well versed with Hindi, she would read out stories like 'Hatim Tai' to the women who couldn't read them on their own and speak about places far and wide. This activity took place according to the availability of syano mam and women looked forward to hearing

her entertaining stories. Phupu told me that storytelling happened only after the women had completed all their chores, and sometimes they stayed listening to syano mam narrate stories until midnight. She remembered sitting with the women as a little child hearing her mother narrate stories with gestures and tones which kept everyone transfixed on her. 'My mother even wrote letters for people, you know, and she had very good handwriting,' she told me with a starry smile on her face. She said that this was the reason she was respected in the village and even the Maharaj in the wool godown held her opinion in high regard. I remember syano mam as a petite brisk woman who hardly looked her age, was very strict and always very precise with anything she did. She was always dressed in a crisp cotton saree with a matching blouse and a white scarf wrapped around her head when heading out. She was a brilliant story teller and always told us stories about our grandparents and the village. I could picture mam vividly in my mind narrating stories to women with gestures punctuated with her uncanny, contagious laughter.[22]

Other than this, all the the grandmothers vaguely remembered a picnic of some sort to which the entire village had gone, 'I don't

In the picture can be seen most of the workers of Arjun Das Wool Godown in the picnic of 1948 in the nearby forest of Sangsay Road in Kalimpong.

remember how we got there, what kind of food we ate or anything much at all, I just remember, your grandfather assembling all of us to take a photograph,' which they never saw they told me. I also met another boju, an eighty six year old woman who looks as bright as day light. We call her '*hajur aama*' (this term is given to grandmothers in the high caste Brahmin Nepali community); she settled in the village near the wool godown in 11th mile area after getting married to '*hajur baba*' who was a well-to-do Brahmin employed as a driver of a Marwari merchant. 'He used to drive the Land Rover, a huge strong beautiful car,' she told me proudly. So hajur aama on very rare occasions would gather her friends and go to the cinema which was a small wooden building just above the present day 'mela ground' in the centre of Kalimpong town. The cinema usually showed old Hollywood western films with cowboys on horsebacks which was a treat for them. 'We never understood the language, but it was always entertaining,' she told me happily . They would usually catch shows from 6 pm to 9 pm and from 9 pm until midnight and would walk back home. Hajur aama was quick to point out that cinema trips were a rare privilege, and this was why they made the most of it, 'We watched two shows back to back, you know,' she told me.[23]

During Dusherra or *Dashain*[24](in Nepali) people in the village got together to celebrate, eat and drink together. My grandparents especially my grandfather loved this festival and would often invite the entire village to celebrate it together. Nima Bara and my father tell me that my *bajey* (grandfather) loved celebrating all the Nepali Hindu festivals despite of him being a Tibetan, even before he married my grandmother who was a staunch Nepali Hindu. My grandparents lived in the area that is the present day 11th mile near Dr. Graham's Homes school in Kalimpong. My boju came to Kalimpong from a small place called Ilam in Nepal along with her step sister when she was around 18 years old in search of a new way of life. She found work in the Arjun Das Wool Godown in the 11th mile area where my bajey also worked as a supervisor since he was a Tibetan from Tibet. Bajey had come to Kalimpong from Lhasa in his twenties leaving his family there with the

intention of making a life in Kalimpong roughly in the 1920s. He had fallen in love with the small town in every aspect and because of his Tibetan lineage had quickly found work in the wool trading business. Bajey had taken to the Nepali Hindu culture of the local people to such an extent that he had adopted it as his own. He even wore the Nepali male traditional attire almost everyday to work and spoke mostly in the Nepali language. He had married my boju not much after she started working in the godown and had permanently built a house in the 11th mile area. Nima Bara and my father told me that bajey was the happiest when it came to celebrating Nepali festivals and while still retaining Tibetan culture and beliefs, he always made it a point to instil the local culture and traditions among his children especially when it came to language. My father remembers vividly how bajey insisted that his children learn the local Nepali language and gave more importance to it rather than Tibetan. Boju played an instrumental role when it came to language and all the children therefore grew up with Nepali as their mother tongue.[25]

The end of an era

Trade flourished and Kalimpong revelled in it for the next couple of decades. In the 1950s, the town witnessed a terrible landslide which had devastating repercussions in terms of road and rail infrastructure. Trade via Kalimpong slowed down. In addition to this, the world was seeing the rise of a newly communist China, and the effects were felt far and wide. The Indian government announced an export ban on wool in the aftermath of the landslide which was a consequence of the American government's decision of embargo against products from China. The export ban was applicable to all Tibetan wool products and yak tails that were not already in India by December 17 1950. A local newspaper reported around 50,000 maunds (roughly corresponding to around 40–80kgs) of wool lying dormant in the godowns of Kalimpong. However with further developments in the world stage, India and China signed a trade pact, and by October 1954 trade was

back on track but, it would be very short-lived. (Harris 2017). With the Chinese committing aggression on Tibet, the atmosphere changed drastically as political tensions between both the countries grew and with Indian government providing refuge to the Tibetan Holy leader, the 13th Dalai Lama, Kalimpong became a zone of distrust and chaos. Many local newspapers reported Chinese and Tibetan spies in Kalimpong, which only resulted in stricter vigilance and presence of police and army personnel in the trade routes and points on the border. As one of the boju lamented, the Chinese capture of Tibet led to a dry up of the trade business, and the godowns were completely shut by 1958.

The start of the 60s brought with it a great sense of dread and misfortune for the economy in Kalimpong. With the Chinese occupying Tibet, the Indian traders in Tibet were forced to shut down their business houses because the Chinese government announced a ban on purchase of any non-Chinese goods. Tensions escalated to such a level that even Chinese traders in Kalimpong were asked to leave as they were considered 'dangerous elements'. Finally with the India-China war of 1962 the India-Tibet trade via Kalimpong also came to a grinding halt. As one of the local Nepali fiction writer and poet put it, 'It was like Kalimpong's life-line had been cut', and this was something that the town could never really recover from.[26] The vast amount of people involved in the wool trade, from the travellers to the merchants to the wool godown workers, were left with nothing to do after the trade stopped. The bojus, remember the 60s to be a period of anxiety and misfortune since they were rendered jobless because their main source of income had been severed. Most of them took to menial labour work, carrying bricks, stones in construction sites; some of them did 'coolie work', and some of them who were lucky enough were taken by the wool godown merchants to work on some of their other business ventures.

Despite this blow, there were talks in the region of reviving Kalimpong's economy with other kinds of indigenous business ideas like noodles, dairy items and with concepts like 'tea-timber-tourism'

gaining hold in the society. Kalimpong, however, struggled to see itself emerging in the picture with its previous fervour, unlike its neighbour Darjeeling. (Harris 2017). The 60s and 70s saw a very sluggish growth of the town in every aspect. With the entire Indian nation championing the ideals of democracy and freedom, Kalimpong along with Darjeeling hills saw the gradual growth of a politically aware power-hungry group of men who brought to the forefront the issue of the region's cultural identity and its place within the Indian union. The 80s were thus a time period when the small mysterious town rose to the front of the picture—but this time it was for a very different cause—that of self determination and rights within the Indian union, which would catapult the town into a very different limelight that it would never be able to shed.[27]

CONCLUSION

A newspaper article by Archibald Steele that came out in the *Himalayan Times* on January 14, 1951 was titled 'Kalimpong, Border Cosmopolis—India Town, Jumping-off place for Tibet is spot where East meets West, North meets South between Plains and Towering Himalayas.'[28] The article goes on to describe the diverse mix of population of the place along with its picturesque location fit for the backdrop of a Hollywood movie. Many articles and newspaper reports that came out in that time period and even later often presented the place as having some sort of a mysterious image where princes and princesses lived, important thinkers and philosophers came, political and religious leaders, writers and filmmakers spent their time. In the course of this project, one thing that speaks out is that parallel to this almost romanticised presentation of the town, mostly by outsiders, as a 'pot pourri' or a 'land of spies'; for a certain section of local people who worked and lived in Kalimpong, the town did not present a glamorous or a mysterious image as books or newspaper articles made it out to be. In their eyes, it was just like any other place where people worked

and earned a living, a place that was their home, nothing beyond the ordinary. For them, the town in that period was a land of opportunities, where a fresh start could be made, a family could be started, where they could settle down if they chose to.

The wool godowns in that period represents a space where people from various backgrounds worked together in huge numbers. Even though caste and gender relations were part of the society, especially the Nepali Hindu society, the godown was open to all and everybody despite their age, gender or caste could find some sort of work there. Payment was directly proportional to the amount of work done, and there was no specific criteria for division of work in the godown. As all the grandmothers said, the kind of work done depended on one's strength, and there was a greater number of women performing all kinds of work in the godown, from lifting heavy wool bundles to cutting the thick skin off the wool, to sifting the wool to get rid of all impurities to handling the clean wool delicately and with utmost care in the end. It was a space where women were strong and gentle both, as per the situation. The wool godown thus represents a space of equality, where men and women were accepted and known for their work, much more than any other trait or characteristic.

The wool godown also becomes a space where long term relations are built, where connections are made and in this way is very much a part of their personal and private lives. What needs to be pointed out is how the lines between public and private were often seen to be blurred as most activities like working in the godowns, sharing meals, going grocery shopping on Saturdays, listening to stories were done together by the women, as a collective activity. There was no stark difference between the private and public sphere, and in a way, the entire village took care of each other. What also comes out prominently is that even though gender roles were present, women seemed more in control of their life, both private and public . A simple activity like women smoking a bidi in public was considered normal and for women this activity was as essential as it was for men. Along with that, women were in charge of their households, and that was something they

enjoyed and almost revelled in. Recreation activities were simple and meaningful, and even though most of the women remained illiterate on paper, they came off as strong, independent and courageous in the most modern sense of the term.

Kalimpong in the 40s and 50s gives an impression of a society that celebrated its plurality and differences while still holding a solidarity in its depth which provided its main thrust. This is something that has been waning with events and circumstances that have unfolded over the decades. The grandmothers I spoke to and got to know are mostly all in their eighties, still looking after their households, working in the fields, going off to the weekly markets for fresh produce and groceries, cooking for their family, roaming around the neighbourhood asking about everyone, sharing their homegrown vegetables or fruits and, most of all, just being the woman they were decades ago. It therefore needs to be pointed out that while understanding the cultural history of Kalimpong or any other place it is pertinent to take into account the myriad experiences and stories of people who are an integral part of a place's history and culture. A place's cultural identity therefore is not 'tied to a homogenous group of people' (Viehbeck 2017) but rather lives and survives in the many experiences and stories of different groups of people who make up the identity of the place. In a diverse and pluralistic atmosphere like the one that characterises Kalimpong, it becomes necessary to understand and see how individual agents relate to its diversity and cultural heterogeneity. In so doing, this paper has sought to unearth a few of these individual experiences and stories through the medium of memory and history in an attempt to produce newer ways of thinking and understanding the place and the region, which is largely missing, especially in the larger realm of knowledge and literature. This research paper thus has been an attempt to look at this hill town in a different light, not just as a cheap holiday destination or a town embroiled many times in the past for the political demand for a separate state in the Indian union, but as a place which has its own unique history and experiences, much bigger than its geographical size.

Kalimpong in the present day can almost be said to be having a mundane existence, where acceptance of the town's plight comes easy to the inhabitants, not because they like it but because they want peace and simplicity. This craving for peace and simplicity comes from the experience the whole region has had due to the political demand of a separate state outside of Bengal,[29] with political leaders promising a fight for the region's identity and ending up with nothing but another promise for development and progress in the form of shopping malls. The town's identity today hangs around a loose collective identity which the people almost seem to have forgotten. It is in this regard that the past like this one holds utmost significance for inspiration in the present and to build a future.

NOTES

1. Interviews with women have been done through a period extending roughly from six months to a year on different occasions as per the availability of the respondents in different settings even before the commencement of this project. Interviews specificially for this paper have been conduced with two grandmothers in the months of July, August and September 2019.
2. 'Bara' is a Nepali term used for senior elderly men. It can be used formerly through relation with family members or even informally for old elderly men as a sign of respect.
3. The opinions and perspectives presented in this paper have been borne out from the oral narratives of men and women who have been witness to a particular time period in the history of Kalimpong through personal communication and discussions with the researcher over a period of time before the commencement of this project. Some of the experiences and views presented in the paper have been a result of the personal relationships of the researcher with family members who have also lived through that particular period, and are in no way limited to the researchers' personal views.
4. 'Silk route' was a term used popularly to refer to the trade relations shared by India, China and Tibet where 'silk' was one of the commodities of trade that came from China. Silk, however, was never the main commodity of trade in relation to Kalimpong. For more explanation in the usage of this term,

please see Harris, T. 2008. 'Silk Routes and Wool Routes: Contemporary Geographies of Trade Between Lhasa and Kalimpong' , *India Review*, vol.(7) No.(3): 210–212.

5. Personal communication with Bara over the years.
6. The British had gifted a piece of land to a trade agent and middleman named Ugyen Dorji in the negotiations between Bhutan and British India. (Viehbeck 2017)
7. For a detailed study of the work of Christian missionaries in Kalimpong, please see Sharma, Jayeeta. 2017. 'Kalimpong as a Transcultural Missionary Contact Zone', in M. Viehbeck (ed.), *Transcultural Encounters in the Himalayan Borderlands*, pp. 25–54. Heidelberg : Heidelberg University Publishing.
8. The alternate trade route was through the Nathu La pass which required going through Gangtok in Sikkim, which was very treacherous and difficult. (Majumdar 1994)
9. The Chumbi Valley is on the south side of the Himalayan drainage divide near the Chinese border with Sikkim, India and Bhutan. The valley is connected to Sikkim to the southwest via the mountain passes of Nathu La and Jelep La and has experienced several skirmishes in the past because of its strategic location.
10. The Jelep La is a Tibetan name meaning 'the lovely level pass', named so because of its simple terrain. It is a high mountain pass between East Sikkim District, Sikkim, India and the Tibet Autonomous Region, China. It is on a route that connects Lhasa to India and was used for the India-Tibet trade that flourished in the 1900s.
11. The term was coined because a sizeable group of Newars, the business community from Nepal, had set up their business houses in Kalimpong. This group of men constantly travelled to Lhasa in search of trade prospects and had many business shops in Tibet. The Lhasa-Newars was a term that came after this business and the group became well versed in the Tibetan language and culture to the extent that some even adopted it in their daily lives. Among these Newars, Shyamu Kapu (Vajiratna Kansakar) was a very well know Lhasa Newar, who had a thriving business in Kalimpong and had brought property and built his home there, which still stands today as a centre for Buddhist monks and pilgrims.
12. Most of the wool godowns were named after the business owner in the area, like Arjun Das Godown, which was owned by a Marwari merchant named Arjun Das.

13. *Boju* means grandmother in the Nepali language.
14. Interview with a wool godown worker, Kalimpong, 1 August 2019.
15. Nima Wangdi Bhutia, in discussion with the author, Kalimpong, 20 July 2019.
16. Interview with a wool godown worker, Kalimpong, 2 August 2019.
17. Nima Wangdi Bhutia, in discussion with the author, Kalimpong, July 2019.
18. The literal translation of this would be: load separators. It referred to those who worked in the sorting and processing of the wool.
19. Local cigarette made of cheap tobacco wrapped in dried leaf and shorter and coarser than a cigarette as it doesn't contain any filter. They are locally made and are very cheap. Interview with a wool godown worker, Kalimpong, August 2019.
20. For a detailed description of the construction of the ropeway in the region please see, Majumdar, E. 1994. 'The Route: A Study of the Trade Route connecting the Frontier Trade Port of Kalimpong with the plains of Bengal and Lhasa (1865–1965)'. *Indian History Congress,* Vol. 55: 632 -633.
21. Interview with two wool godown workers, Kalimpong, 10 September, 2019.
22. Personal communication with '*phupu'* , Kalimpong, March 2020.
23. Interview with *'hajur aama'* , Kalimpong, March 2020.
24. *Dashain* in Nepali Hindu culture is equivalent of the Hindu Dusherra festival and is celebrated traditionally and strictly with rituals like 'Tika', wherein tika made of raw rice grains and curd is put on the forehead of the younger family members by the elder male members of the household along with blessings and money.
25. Personal communication with the researchers family members, Kalimpong.
26. Personal communication with a Nepali poet and writer, Kalimpong, June 2019.
27. In the 80s the entire Darjeeling hills region that is, Kalimpong, Darjeeling and Kurseong witnessed the bloodiest and most brutal agitation (andolan) for the demand to the Indian state for a separate state outside of Bengal to protect and preserve their cultural identity, led by the political leader, Subhash Ghising.
28. As seen in Viehbeck 2017. Figure 3, pp. 12
29. The region faced a 104 day 'bandh' in 2017 on account of the agitation for a separate state—Gorkhaland—in the Indian union, where several lives were lost and property damaged in the tussle with the state government, only to result in almost nothing.

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