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Intrigue in the Hills: Espionage, Geopolitics and Social Tensions in Kalimpong's Past

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Intrigue in the Hills: Espionage, Geopolitics and Social Tensions in Kalimpong's Past

Diki Sherpa

ABSTRACT: This paper looks at the historical and contemporary significance of Kalimpong as a centre for covert operations and espionage, highlighting its role in the geopolitical tensions between India, Tibet, and China. It explores the town's transformation from a strategic trading hub to a hub of intelligence activities. The paper discusses key individuals and events, including the 1962 India-China war, that shaped Kalimpong's security landscape. The article suggests economic revitalization as a way forward for the town to escape its legacy as a spy hub and of social tensions.

KEYWORDS: Kalimpong, British colonial rule, trading hub, intelligence activities, security concerns, post-colonial India, 1962 India-China War.

Introduction

In April 2022, the Special Task Force Police — a unit of West Bengal's armed police force — highlighting national security concerns, arrested Pir Mohammad, a 39-year-old man from Kalimpong, North Bengal, for allegedly sharing 'sensitive information' about army installations in the region with intelligence agencies in Pakistan (Chettri and Ghosh 2022). The region has been consistently under close watch by state and central agencies due to its strategic location. Of particular concern is the Siliguri Corridor, which is the narrowest part of India, spanning a mere 25 kilometres between Nepal and Bangladesh, with China situated in close proximity and also connecting the northeastern states of India to the rest of the country. In addition, the Nathu La pass in Sikkim, located just 50 kilometres away from Kalimpong, connects India and China, and had been the site of border disputes and military tensions between the two countries before it was reopened for trade in 2007 (Menon and Chatterjee 2018).

Although the apprehending of Mr. Mohammad draws attention to the security issues in Kalimpong, it is worth noting that the town had a significant history of clandestine activities prior to 1962. Due to its strategic location, Kalimpong played a crucial role as a trading hub and transit point, which also made it a centre for international espionage and subversive activities bringing into focus the security concerns faced by the region. These developments not only underscore complex relationships and power dynamics between India, Tibet and China in different times, but also highlight the significance of the town within the larger context of geopolitical tensions and conflicts in the region. Drawing on local newspaper *Himalayan Times (1949–1963)*¹, archival reports and secondary literature, this article aims to explore the transformation of Kalimpong from a trading town to a hub for espionage activities before 1962.

Historical Background

Following the British opening of Tibet in 1904, Kalimpong became a vital commercial hub due to its proximity to the region, facilitating trans-frontier trade (Camman 1951; Gros 2016; Harris 2016). The town gained prominence as a site for regulating movement of goods and people along the trade routes that directly linked Lhasa with Calcutta (now Kolkata), serving as a crucial transit point. Although the primary motive for establishing contact with Tibet was commercial, the shifting of the geopolitical tensions in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, particularly involving Russia, also played a significant role in the decision. The British government in India relied on Kalimpong to watch over Tibet and understand Russian activities in the region (Mayeer and Shareen 1999: 16–25). To ascertain better the purported Russian involvement in Lhasa, travellers from the north were extensively interrogated. This was because Sir Andrew Fraser, the Lieutenant Governor of Bengal, who spent his summers in Darjeeling, would feel uneasy about the presence of Russians in Lhasa, which was only 300 miles away (NAI 1903: 40–80). In August 1903, for instance, a Tibetan trader named Dhow Tshering Bhutia was reported to have undergone a thorough interrogation after arriving in Kalimpong (NAI 1903: 25–30).

British India's establishment of trade ties with Tibet resulted in the large-scale movement of people, with numerous individuals and groups arriving in Kalimpong for favourable economic prospects. Along with Tibetan and Indian traders, people from Bhutan, Nepal, and Ladakh also flocked to the town to pursue business opportunities that emerged alongside economic growth. In addition, many foreign scholars, artists, adventurers, and religious missionaries could be seen traversing Kalimpong's streets, eager to explore Tibet. These diverse individuals, each with their own set of goals, contributed to making Kalimpong a vibrant hub with transcultural and cosmopolitan potential (Viehbeck 2015: 10–13).

Emergence of Kalimpong as a 'spy centre'

As the political developments of the 20th century unfolded worldwide, marked by significant events such as world wars, Indian independence, and Chinese expansion in Tibet, Kalimpong emerged as a prominent hub of information. It did not take long for the place to transform from being a mountain town with commercial potential to a place where clandestine activities were prevalent, causing concern not only for the colonial and post-colonial authorities, but also for the Chinese authorities at various times.

Following the collapse of the Qing Empire in 1911 and changing political dynamics in the region, Tibet sought its independence, leading to several rounds of negotiations and political activities involving the Dalai Lama's representatives, British officials, and officials of the then Republic of China. In this context, Kalimpong emerged as a favourable location for engaging in covert operations, political campaigns, and advocacy, marking the inception of some of the earliest clandestine activities (Sen 2021: 414– 416). As a result, the British authorities became increasingly concerned about the covert operations of both Chinese agents and Tibetan revolutionaries in Kalimpong, over and above their usual worries about smuggling and illegal immigration (Poddar and Zhang 2017: 150–153; Sen 2021: 414– 415).

To counter these threats, British authorities in India intensified security measures, resulting in the setting up of intelligence networks. Dorjé Tharchin, a Tibetan Christian is one of the notable figures known for his service to colonial and post-colonial authorities. He established one of the earliest Tibetan-language newspapers called *Mirror of News from All Sides of the World* (Yul phyogs so so'i gsar 'gyur me long), also known as the *Mélong* or The Tibet Mirror, in 1925. Alongside the newspaper, he founded a publishing house called the Kalimpong Tibet Mirror Press (Kha phug bod yig me long par khang) (Hackett 2008; Sawartheil 2011; Willock 2016; Warbeck 2017).

Before Dorjé Tharchin began his career in journalism in Kalimpong, he participated in a teacher training program at the Scottish Universities' Mission Institution around 1917 with government support (Sawertheil 2011: 64). As a trainee, Tharchin's proficiency in the Tibetan language provided him with opportunities to work as a translator for high-level government officials. As early as 1921, he accompanied David McDonald and his wife to Gyantse for the same service followed by several visits to Lhasa, accompanying high officials as a translator and local guide (Sawertheil 2011: 63– 64). These experiences allowed him to expand his contacts and establish networks of informants.

The newspaper featured content related to religion, encompassing both Christian and Buddhist themes, in addition to covering local and international events informing Tibet about world affairs (Engelhardt 2011: 215–217; Sawerthal 2011: 89–90, Willock 2016). Additionally, Tharchin often included reformist ideas advocated by progressive Tibetans, such as Gendun Chopel, who was a member of the Tibet Improvement Party led by Rapga Pangdatsang (Sawerthal 2011: 70– 72; Arpi: 49– 53). Rapga Pangdatsang, one of the members of the influential Pangdatsang family, held significant influence in Kalimpong due to his family's monopolisation of the wool trade in Tibet (Spengen 2000:140). The Pangdatsang family's extensive global business network further enhanced their prominence in Kalimpong. These individuals aimed to contribute to the discourse on social and political change in Tibet. However, their anti-imperialist sentiments influenced by the Kuomintang (KMT) ideology could hardly fit in British ruled Kalimpong during the period (Sawerthal 2011:71–72).

Although Tharchin sympathised with and shared ideas for reforming Tibet, his allegiance lay with the British government. He worked for the British government in intelligence gathering, even before officially becoming a registered spy in 1943 or 1944 (Sawerthal 2011: 73). During World War II, while China under the leadership of the KMT government headed by Chiang Kai-shek was one of the Allied powers, its anti-imperialist agenda ran counter to British colonial interests. The British government's policy towards China, specifically the increasing regulations imposed on the Chinese population in India at large, was driven by a 'colonial anxiety' stemming from potential security concerns for the British empire in the face of a growing anti-colonial sentiment (Yin 2022: 3–7). Against this backdrop, the British government undoubtedly viewed anti-imperialist ideas among Tibetan reformers in Kalimpong as an added concern. Rapga Pangdatsang was bound to attract the attention of the authorities and we eventually deported him in 1946 (Sawerthal 2011: 75).

During the war period, the town accommodated foreign agents such as the Japanese, Hisao Kimura as well. His presence in Kalimpong sheds further light on the geopolitical dynamics and espionage operations that unfolded in the region during World War II. Disguised as a Mongolian monk, Kimura ventured into Tibet with the mission of gathering intelligence on a supposed Chinese supply route. Little did he know, the war had already ended upon his arrival in Tibet. Enduring a gruelling journey through Mongolia and Eastern Tibet, Kimura ultimately found himself in Kalimpong. Stranded in Kalimpong without a country to report to, he maintained his cover as a Mongolian monk and secured employment at the Tibetan Mirror Press under Dorje Tharchin (Kimura 1990: 135–136). In their initial meeting, Hisao had drawn a map detailing his journey from Mongolia to Lhasa and onward to Kalimpong and a cartoon of Kuomintang and Communist civil strife in Tibet (Kimura 1990: 138–139). Recognizing his experience, British Intelligence through Tharchin approached Kimura and dispatched him back to Tibet to gather additional information on the Chinese presence in Eastern Tibet (Kimura 1990: 168–181).

While intelligence gathering was prevalent before the 1940s, there was a significant surge in its frequency and intensity after that period. In the midst of escalating political tensions between Tibet and China, journalists and intelligence-gatherers stationed in Kalimpong were eager to receive first-hand news of developments across the Himalayas (NAI 1944: 43–44). The establishment of the People's Republic of China in 1949 and the resulting tension on the Sino-Tibetan border particularly piqued their interest. The *Himalayan Times* speaking about intelligence gatherers noted that “they are of various nationalities but mainly Americans and Western Europeans” (*Himalayan Times* 18 November 1951).

The presence of a diverse range of individuals during that time created an atmosphere permeated with suspicion and mistrust. In this, scholars from diverse regions who were enthusiastic about studying Buddhism and Tibet could rarely evade arousing the scrutiny of authorities. Prince Peter of Greece and his wife, Princess Irene, were among the scholars who resided in Kalimpong for several years with the intention of accessing Tibet to study the distinctive practice of Tibetan polyandry. However, they were subsequently expelled from the town due to suspicions of espionage (*Himalayan Times* 14 January 1951).

Trade relations between post-colonial India and the People's Republic of China (PRC) facilitated Chinese operations in Kalimpong, exacerbating India's anxiety and concerns. The new Trade Agreement or Panchsheel, signed in 1954 between the PRC and India marked a shift in the trade relations between Tibet and India, adapting to the altered circumstances of India's decolonization and China's control over Tibet. The key advantage of the agreement was that it permitted the Chinese Trading Agency to operate in Kalimpong, Delhi and Kolkata, which enabled an overt Chinese presence in the region (MEA, India 1954). Lobsang Yamphel Pangdatsang — brother of Rapga Pangdatsang — was appointed as the representative for the Chinese Trading Agency and he arrived in Kalimpong in January 1955 (Goldstein 2013: 156; *Himalayan Times* 5 April 1959). However, his stay in Kalimpong was brief as he was suspected of carrying out covert activities on behalf of China and Yamphel Pangdatsang was

asked to leave India in the early 1960s (McGranahan 2016; *Himalayan Times* 4 February 1962).

Kalimpong gained a notorious reputation for harbouring spies, not just in Indian, but also in the Chinese perceptions. Despite efforts to curtail covert operations, they persisted to such an extent that it overshadowed the town's importance as an economic centre. Moreover, as the relationship between China and India began to worsen after the 1959 Tibetan Uprising and the ensuing escape and exile of the Dalai Lama to India, news articles detailing intelligence gathering frequently appeared in newspapers and became a part of the political discourse, not only in India but also in China. Chinese authorities were suspicious of India's activities in Tibet and perceived Kalimpong as a hub for anti-Chinese activities and 'the commanding centre of the rebellion' (*Himalayan Times* 5 April 1959). Subsequently, in 1959, the *People's Daily*, the official newspaper of the Communist Party, labelled Kalimpong as a 'spy centre' contributing to its negative portrayal during that time (Poddar and Lisa 2017: 158). While Nehru declined to acknowledge Kalimpong as a 'command centre' operating against the PRC, he acknowledged the presence of numerous international agencies and individuals he referred to as 'spies' in the town, including those posing as geologists and birdwatchers (*Himalayan Times* 5 April 1959).

However, the veracity of these reports and the actual presence of spies were often called into question. Circulation about espionage and intelligence gathering resulted in a sense of unease and insecurity in Kalimpong, as people began to feel that they were constantly being watched. Amid the widespread rumours and reports that prevailed during this period, which fuelled a sense of unease and suspicion among the populace, a 1951 article published in *Himalayan Times* attempted to define what constituted a 'spy'. Although the article dismissed some of the reports as exaggeration or unfounded, it acknowledged that they had nevertheless fostered a climate of paranoia, in which people were constantly worried. It sarcastically remarked that, 'indeed in Kalimpong it will be uncomfortable these cold winter nights if every now and again we have to spring out of bed to see that no spies are lurking beneath the bed, at least this will be the condition prevailing if some of the more fantastic reports of the prevalence of spies operating in Kalimpong are to be believed' (*Himalayan Times* 16 December 1951).

With the evolving dynamics between China and Tibet, the Chinese Trading Agency came under close surveillance. Heightened concerns among Indian intelligence officers led them to concentrate their efforts on individuals associated with communist propaganda and their connections to the PRC.

Both the Chinese and Indian governments were highly concerned about the possibility of subversive activities being plotted or carried out in Kalimpong. While individuals such as Pangdatsang brothers were expelled from India for sympathising with Chinese authorities, ordinary Chinese such as Chang Xiu Feng were suspected of being Chinese agents, without solid evidence to substantiate it (Sen 2021: 436-437). The worsening relations between India

and the PRC further escalated the concerns, resulting in heightened security measures and mass surveillance on the suspicion of clandestine activities. The need to crack down on spies corresponded with increased surveillance, more checkpoints, and greater restrictions on movement affecting numerous lives of individuals during the period (Sen 2021: 436-437).

Conclusion

Situated at the intersection of political, social and economic histories, Kalimpong's past highlights the significance of its strategic location in shaping the geopolitical landscape of the Himalayan region and the attendant perils surrounding it.

The opening up of Tibet by the British in 1904 and subsequent trade ties across the Himalayas transformed Kalimpong from a mountain town with commercial potential to a location with various clandestine activities. These developments had far-reaching consequences for the Himalayan region, exposing isolated areas to external influences and increasing its strategic importance. Beyond facilitating trade, the town became a vantage point to observe developments in Tibet and China, while also becoming a focal point itself. With the presence of foreign intelligence agencies, Tibetan revolutionaries, and Chinese agents, the town garnered attention from various international interests.

Given its history, Kalimpong continues to encounter at least three significant challenges related to security concerns, social tensions and economic stagnation.

The emergence of Kalimpong as a hub for covert operations and its frequent representation as such had significant implications for the town and its residents. Prior to 1962, Indian intelligence officers were increasingly anxious about subversive activities against the PRC being carried out in the town. Subsequently, they became more vigilant about individuals suspected of having links to Chinese communist authorities. It is this history of Kalimpong which influences its present circumstances and the way it is perceived in terms of security and intelligence matters.

The Tibetan and Chinese communities in Kalimpong experienced growing mistrust of each other with the former suspecting the latter of working for the PRC. It resulted in instances of aggressive action carried out against Chinese residents, who were often caught in the middle of the political tensions (*Himalayan Times* 21 January 1961). Although the Chinese population in Kalimpong has dwindled to a meagre number, the unease between them and between communities in general continues to persist and hinders cohesion.²

Finally, the increasing representation of Kalimpong as a 'spy' hub led to a shift in the town's focus from being a trans-frontier commercial hub to an espionage hub with significant implications for the economic prospects of the town and its residents. It has stagnated as an economy. The economic practices that Kalimpong thrived on were significantly impacted by the mid-twentieth century political shifts on both sides of the Himalayas. The trade suffered

severe consequences due to the expansion of PRC in Tibet, particularly with the withdrawal of American buyers who were the primary purchasers of Tibetan wool – a primary trading commodity in the Kalimpong market (*Himalayan Times* 20 April 1952). The final blow came with the 1962 India-China tension, which significantly transformed the economic landscape of the region. The border closure and complete cessation of trade along the Lhasa-Kalimpong routes resulted in the town losing its significance and relevance in the trading landscape. While affluent merchants swiftly shifted their businesses to Kathmandu and redirected their trade connections with Tibet through Nepal, individuals without sufficient resources to relocate found themselves unemployed in Kalimpong (Harris 2013: 94–95).

In terms of a way forward, it is about time the narrative on Kalimpong shifted from security considerations and social tensions. The situation could be remedied by revitalising the economy through investing in infrastructure and attracting new industries, as well as focusing on the development of alternative sectors such as tourism to diversify the economic landscape of Kalimpong.

Moreover, the strategic re-opening of additional historical trade routes, including Jelep La (in addition to the existing Nathu La), which historically connected India and Tibet, offer an opportunity to enhance bilateral border trade. These routes hold not only historical significance but also practical advantages, providing alternative access points and diversifying trade options (Sherpa 2017). The potential surge in trade activity through Kalimpong will be beneficial for the economic growth in the region. As goods and services flow through the town, local businesses could experience an upswing in demand, leading to the creation of new jobs and overall economic prosperity.

ENDNOTES

1. From 1949 to 1963, “Himalayan Times,” an English-language newspaper, was published in Kalimpong. Its prominent articles and news reports shed light on the living conditions and opinions of the inhabitants of the northern Indian regions adjacent to Tibet, Nepal, and Bhutan, as well as their perceptions of Europe and the West. As a result, it serves as a crucial historical resource for investigating the political and social changes that took place in the Himalayan region after World War II.

2. During the author's conversation with one of the senior Tibetan residents in Kalimpong, they expressed unfavourable opinions about China and its government, likely stemming from the historical and cultural disputes between Tibet and China (29 February 2023).

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