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Floristic Studies in Darjeeling Hills

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Hills of Darjeeling are forming a cap on the northern boundary for the State of West Bengal (India) and are situated within 26°31'05" and 27°13'10" N latitude and between 87°59'30" and 88°53' E longitude. These hills are part of the Singalila Range of Eastern Himalaya, covering an altitudinal range of c. 132 m to 3660 m. The richness of the flora of this region is well known and many famous taxonomists have visited this area. *The Flora of British India* included plants of this area.

The present political demarcation of Darjeeling is quite recent. This landmass has changed hands many times within Sikkim, Nepal and India. Besides, the Kalimpong area of the present day Darjeeling Hills was a part of Bhutan. The boundary of Nepal, Bhutan, Sikkim, Darjeeling, etc. were not so clearly demarked earlier and the entire area was covered with very dense forests. So, there was every possibility that a specimen marked as collected from Nepal might have been actually collected from Sikkim or Darjeeling's territory. Naturally, the history of floristic studies in Darjeeling is intimately related to at least that of Nepal and Sikkim.

Earliest report of floristic exploration of this area, so far known to us, was by D. Don in 1821, which was based on Lambert's herbarium. In 1825, he published the *Prodromus Florae Nepalensis*. A review of the history of the floristic study of the Darjeeling Hills revealed that it was actually initiated only after the establishment of road-link with Darjeeling in 1840, construction of a Sanatorium, introduction of the cultivation, and the establishment of the Lloyd Botanic Garden in 1878.

One of the earliest botanical publication dealing with the plants of Darjeeling was a note on the flora of Tonglu by Hooker in 1849. Later it was followed by several scattered publications or floristics of Orchids of Sikkim Himalaya area by different workers (Gamble, 1875, 1896; King & Pantling, 1898; Cowan & Cowan, 1929; Biswas & Chopra, 1956; Biswas, 1966; Hara, 1966, 1971; Hara *et al.*, 1978, 1979, 1982; Ohashi, 1975; Matthew, 1981; Grierson & Long, 1983-1987, 1991, 1991, 2001; Noltie, 1994, 2000). But a comprehensive floristic study of Darjeeling is yet to be done.

The present article analyses the prevailing floristic composition of the area with special notes on endemics and exotics.

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