



THE FILM *BARFI!* WAS SHOT EXTENSIVELY IN DARJEELING. THE SHOOTING LOCATIONS INCLUDED SUKNA, TINDHARIA, CHOWRASTA, DARJEELING HIMALAYAN RAILWAY STATION AT GHOOM, PLANTERS CLUB, WINDAMERE HOTEL, ETC



Darjeeling is akin to vintage wine which gets better as time passes by. Graced by the Himalayas and developed by the colonial rulers, it continues to offer pleasure to many people from varied fields, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

# The taste of vintage wine

If the sky is clear it shines with a pristine touch of glory, but if it is foggy and dark then it replicates a little Europe. This is the charm of a colonial hill station named Darjeeling, which is like an old wine that tastes better with every passing year.

Standing with distinction in the crowd of many hill stations on the Himalayan foothills across north India and developed by our colonial rulers, Darjeeling dons the crown of the “queen of all hills”. She is old yet grand. She renders an irresistible temptation with the aroma of the colonial era. Nature also has decorated her with the best panorama and weather. From Mark Twain to RD Burman, this place played an abode of peace, pleasure and inspiration to many. Darjeeling is the place where Vivian Leigh, the legendary actress of the film *Gone With the Wind* (1939), was born.

The word Darjeeling has derived from a Lepcha word meaning ‘the land of thunders’. Old available records say that it was actually owned by the Chogyals and was later conquered by the Gorkhas from Nepal. In 1814, it was captured by the British East India Company and was given back to the Chogyals. It returned to the British in 1835 through another treaty and ever since, the small village started taking the

shape of a sanatorium for European soldiers. The place situated more than 6,000 ft above sea level captivated the Europeans. A road connectivity in 1842 and the introduction of tea plantation by the British transformed it entirely.

Nestled in the Himalayan foothills on the lap of dark green pines, blooming orchids, and over the horizon, the long snow-white range of the Kangchenjunga (then considered world’s highest peak), our European rulers had no reason to ignore this place. The hide and seek game played by the clouds, mist and the sun with a touch of chill in the air gave them a feel of the shore they had left behind.

Soon, Darjeeling became an educational hub. Its colonial school buildings with their breathtaking panorama still give a feel of a little Europe. St Joseph North Point School, once known as the Harrow of the East, was built in 1892 on the land gifted by the Maharaja of Burdwan by removing 200,000 cubic ft of soil. Its majestic Grecian columns and cuneiform windows give a real touch of a colonial aroma. No wonder, many legendary directors — from Satyajit Ray to Raj Kapoor — used this building in their movies. In the same line, St Paul’s school, built in 1864 at Jalapahar, is another masterpiece of colonial architecture. Its vast ground and the red-pink colour combi-

nation are captivating. There is also a small chapel inside the school.

Darjeeling as a prime hill-station got its crowning glory when a two-ft narrow gauge railway track was laid to connect it from Siliguri. The job started in 1879 and by 1881, it was completed and came up as an engineering wonder. Designed by Gillanders Arbuthnot & Company, the track still runs on British steam locomotive engines in the name of the Darjeeling Himalayan Railways. The 88 km long track tames some of the toughest technical challenges in one of the most difficult landscapes. Passing through the plains, tea-gardens and finally into the deep dark pine forest enveloped by clouds, the line takes innumerable curves and some of them are of more than 120 degrees. When a train takes a double round in the Batasia loop to cross a steep of 1,000 ft leaving the Kangchenjunga on its right and the war memorial on the bed of flowers on the left, no one can bypass the excitement. You need to stop at Batasia loop to get a 360 degree view of the Himalayas. It is an UNESCO world heritage object. The tea plantations all around made the place a perfect abode for the colonial rulers and Indian royals in the summers.

A tour of Darjeeling is incomplete without seeing the Kangchenjunga peak. If you are blessed with a clear morning free



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of fog and clouds, count yourself a winner because the Kangchenjunga will be there over the horizon to rule the place.

The main attraction of Darjeeling as it was 170 years ago remains the same even today. It is the majestic view of Mount Kangchenjunga. One needs luck to see such an amazing amalgamation of five snow peaks in one group where one is over 8,450m tall. Kangchenjunga is the world’s third highest peak where five massive peaks stand side by side. Up to 1852, it was considered world’s highest peak.

Nowhere can one expect such a magical combination on the earth. The meaning of the word Kangchenjunga is “five treasures of snow”. Its five peaks represent gold, silver, games, grains and holy books. If you are there in the winter, the hill beds are full of colourful flowers that attract even more colourful butterflies. Up on the sky over the blue horizon, an army of snowcapped peaks offer a visual treat. On the side, there are also equally important peaks like Mt Kharg, Rathung, Kokthang, Kabru, Pandim, Talung, Kumbhakarna, Simvo, Siniolchu, and many more nameless ones.

Before the dawn breaks, be ready with your camera and morning tea. In early morning, the clouds kiss the mighty

peaks. In a moment the queen of all peaks bares it all for you.

The panorama of the Himalayas is also seen from the Darjeeling mall, a beautiful walkway made by the British years ago. The road which goes to the mall starts from the town hall — a heritage building — and it passes beside a century old planter’s club and heritage restaurants like Kaventer’s & Glenary’s. Heritage hotels are dotted on both sides of the Nehru Road that ends at Chowrasta where once a bandstand used to exist. On its left there is a wide plain road known as the mall road and there is a mound at the centre of it called the observatory hill on which a century old St Andrew’s church stands like an old sentinel. A road down the mall takes you to the CR Das museum where the national leader breathed his last in 1925.

Two more attractions of this place that you can’t give a miss are the Padmaja Naidu Zoological Park that houses rich collections of very rarely seen Himalayan red pandas and many other Himalayan animals and birds. Just next to this is the Himalayan Mountaineering Institute, India’s first organised school of trekking and research. Inaugurated by Jawaharlal Nehru and headed by Tenzing Norgay, it houses an excellent museum giving an overview of all historical Himalayan expeditions. The memorial of Tenzing Norgay is also at the courtyard of the institute.

Both mornings and afternoons in Darjeeling are full of nostalgic touches. Get a window-seat in Glenary or a rooftop of Keventer’s two heritage restaurants and sink in the temptation of steaming hot chocolate or fish and chips cooked in English style. The divine aroma of freshly baked cakes and buns will just add more to your appetite. If you are eligible, have an evening tea in a century-old Planter’s Club or walk beside St Andrew’s church making a path in a deep fog curtain.

Whether you walk by holding hands of your dearest or walk alone, the magic of a bygone era is bound to engulf you in every corner of Darjeeling.