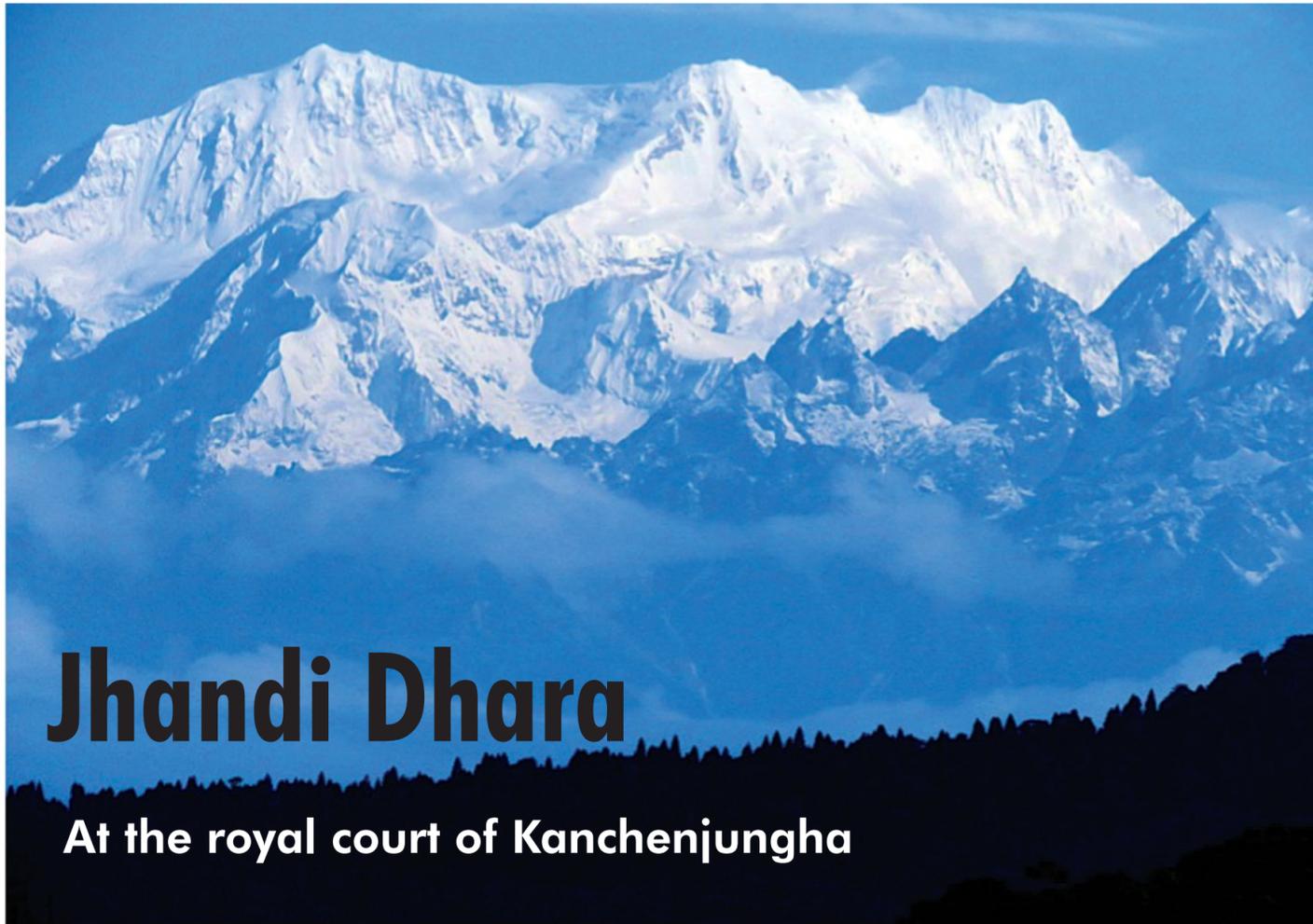


PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA



Jhandi Dhara

At the royal court of Kanchenjunga

By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

The rain had no plan to stop on that misty afternoon. Early in the day clouds were playing with tall saal and pine. As there was no Sun in sky, a patch of foggy veil with bone rattling wind blowing from mountain was engulfing us all.

The road that cuts the rocky bed of Himalayan foothill of Darjeeling finally stopped at a village near Lava. This is a village named Jhandi which at first look seems too ordinary.

Soon rain came again and this time it was a heavy downpour.

A small yet beautiful wooden house on the edge of hill was booked for me – I booked it from Calcutta even without reading any review. The man from travel agency only told me that if I am lucky to meet the ‘Queen’ I will never think twice to revisit.

Queen !!!
Yes - she is here, though not visible now by any chance. She is here behind the curtain of cloud overlooking us from time immemorial. My wife was unimpressed as usual. Every time you select a wrong – she teased me.

Wrong place ?
We are here in Jhandi which is 6205 ft from sea level and there are hardly 25 families living in this small village. It is still an isolated chamber where ‘Queen’ gives a special audience to her subject. Will ‘Queen’ awake tomorrow ? Will she unfold her curtains ? Will this subject win a luck ?

My own mind was running askance and trying to hide tension by braving a cosmetic smile.

Hot lunch was served soon at the wooden house very intelligently designed and tastefully decorated. As the rain was showing no sign of ceasing, I parked myself under a cozy cover of blanket. Sleep grabbed me in few seconds there.

When I woke up at 5 pm, it was still raining and clouds were knocking at the panes of my window glass. It was so foggy outside that even trees below the hills were no more visible.

“Have you ordered evening snacks and tea?” I asked like a lazy man almost sure of returning home with a broken heart. My wife caught my frustration in a moment. She knows returning home without meeting the ‘Queen’ is a defeat of mine and I would take time to recover from that shock. Soon hot vegetarian snacks and tea arrived.

We all started our evening chats covering politics to cricket. As night walks in, electric lights of the house started fluctuating. Our caretaker who last shown his face around 8 pm went back to his hut. In that dark and isolated hill top, four of us were ready for a long sleep not before locking all doors tightly.

It is night here at Jhandi – I peeped through the balcony to check the sky. There were no stars, the sky was overcast with clouds. Outside rain drops were washing down the hill and the

drumming caused by clatter of the raindrops on the wooden roof was loud. The rhythm caused me to go back to sleep again.

The dawn broke next day like a dark evening.

There was no Sun and no sunlight – the white and gray clouds were now colliding with our wooden house and every glass panes was wet. My wife was not ready to mourn for this gloomy day. She has her own homework ready in her smart phone.

“We will visit Lava monastery and that British tea estate with heritage bungalow – Do not sleep and please talk to the boy to arrange a car” – She put her point over me.

When you settle your score to visit a monastery and a tea estate in lieu of seeing the ‘Queen’, it is painful. However as a lover of heritage and colonial history I found reasons in this consolation prize.

My teen-aged son was overjoyed.
“What if ‘Queen’ does not give us an audience? We have seen clouds floating inside our rooms last night – Have you ever slept with a cloud in your life? is it not an experience to remember.” He lectured me and I found no reason to counter him.

Soon we rode a jeep that took us 9 km from Jhandi to a picture post card green valley of tea gardens. The stiff ride upwards finally culminated at an extraordinary well maintained lush green field where wooden benches were placed facing towards the tea estate.

Back to that there is a British bungalow of 1882 when tea plantation was started here by a British company. Known as Samabeong tea estate the bungalow now looks like a movie set where everything looks antique yet authentic. The refurbished and well decorated bungalow was equipped with several guest rooms and a fantastic lounge with rich collection of books and gramophone records. In its wooden floor, fire place, high back chairs an aura of British era prevailed strongly with lot of vintage black and white photos and other old furniture.

“Can not we stay here next time ?” My wife placed her hope to me. “Yes we can if they ensure a meeting with the ‘Queen’ from here,” I replied insipidly.

An answer like this cannot please any wife of the world – So mine was not an exception.

We reached Lava by noon and went straight to Buddhist monastery that houses Buddhist deity Avalokiteshwara with 1000 hands. Breaking a wall of fog, we scaled a road that led us to the back courtyard of the monastery.

“Why are we going to the backyard ? Is there any special purpose for this ?”

I was getting perplexed and then a ray of hope flashed in my mind. Is it the time for great Tibetan monastery debate a unique way of learning the Buddhist doctrine by Tibetan school ? Am I going to be a fortunate to witness it without any plan ? Will Buddha smile today at me ?

Buddha really smiled that day – As soon as we arrived, a board placed there read that the monks are debating !!!!!!!

This tradition of monastery debate actually came from Tibet where it was first introduced in the year 793 by king Trisong Detsen. There in his presence monks used to debate on philosophical and spiritual teachings of Buddha. I was thrilled to feel that without any expectation a rich side of Buddhism would be exposed to me.

In that vast courtyard there were atleast 200 monks and nuns in their religious dress. They were in various groups and each of the group was led by a senior monk who was conducting the debate. In every group some questioners were challenging, rest of the lot and defenders were giving equally energetic answers.

Watching Buddhist monks debating on academic subject is a lifetime achievement for any one.

I placed myself as close as possible to that grand assembly and kept my camera shutter on in every single gesture of those radiant monks.

Tibetan Buddhism always focuses on Buddha’s teaching in the light of logic and this culture they adopted from India many years ago. This debate is a serious business with a dramatized expression where loud talking questioner and defender clap and overreact to create a super normal ambiance. For every question, the defender needs to answer within a given time and his wrong answer is criticized by rest of the group. There are mock punishments for poor answering and even a pretending of physical abuse. I witnessed it almost by rubbing shoulders with them and they entertained my enthusiasm.

The debate that was started with invocation of Buddhist God Manjushri continued for nearly 40 minutes and after that a discussion was carried on for another 20 minutes.

Even in late afternoon there was no change in weather. It was that same wet and foggy.

Ordering lunch over phone we rushed back to Jhandi’s wooden nest. As soon as we alighted from the vehicle the clouds burst open again.

Do not mourn for ‘Queen’ anymore – you have witnessed a unique thing there in monastery and be happy – My wife again tried to be as sympathetic with me.

Even that night as well we all went to bed listening to the rhythm of falling rain. It is again dark here in Jhandi. It is again almost soundless like a lonely planet.

My 73 years old father in law was one who first looked outside next morning over the window. It is calm now and rain is gone. Removing the curtains and opening the window he exclaimed and told to her daughter – ‘call him , his ‘Queen’ is here.’

I was ruthlessly pushed by my wife from sleep as she was more excited than me.

“She is there – rush!” she exclaimed. I did not rush but looked over the hori-

zon from balcony.

With a blue background, a long range of snow peaks of Himalaya were slowly emerging from the caverns of clouds. One by one, the royal court of ‘Queen’ was appearing before me. First I found Kabru -1 and Kabru- 2 two of most important peaks of Kanchenjunga range.

By that time I was armed with my camera, my father in law suggested me to go a place near our cottage from where the range looked more majestic . I rushed there without putting my jacket on. It is because when the ‘Queen’ calls, you have to run.

‘Queen’, that Kanchenjunga, third highest peak of the world is now slowly removing her cavern. She is distinctive in every sense. An amazing amalgamation of 5 snow massive peaks in one group is rare and imagine, except one, all are more than 8450 mt tall !!!

Up on the sky, over the blue horizon an army of snow capped peaks along with ‘Queen’ were emerging. Peaks such as Mt Rathung, Kokthang, Kabroo, Pandim, Talung, Kumbhakarna, Siniolchu all came forward to bid us good morning.

The picture is more than perfect now. The glory of Himalaya is now before us, with Kanchenjunga dominating the horizon like a ‘Queen’.

My wife had to nearly drag me from there as we were getting late. We had a train to catch home back.

As soon as our last bag was placed in the boot of the car, I looked over the horizon once more. Kanchenjunga was still smiling and silently inviting me for a quick revisit.

I smiled too to render my consent of coming back as soon as it can be.

Travel Logistics :

Jhandi is a small village in Darjeeling region of Bengal. It is 57 km from Siliguri, a city very well connected via train, bus and air. Bagdogra is the nearest airport. Nearest place of interest are Lava, Neora valley national park and Kolakham.