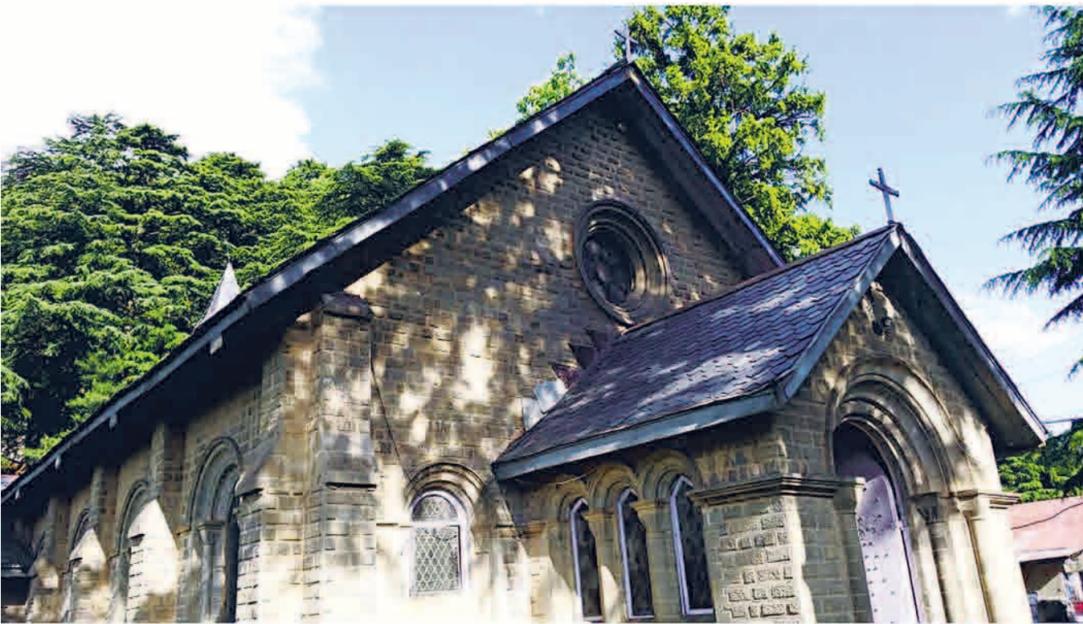


# Dalhousie Hills: The shining crown of Dhauladhar

By SOMEN SENGUPTA



PICS : SOMEN SENGUPTA



Colonisation and 'decolonisation' both appear in their candid best at the Post Office square of Dalhousie hills in Himachal Pradesh.

While colonisation saga walks back to a time when this unknown lap of Himalaya was converted into a hill retreat by British rulers who named it after a man who can be counted as the architect of British rule in India, the decolonisation removed the cavern from her face in independent India when two major roads of the same hill station were renamed after two great sons of the country who forced Brits to leave this shore after almost 200 years.

Dalhousie that was once in undivided Punjab and now in Himachal Pradesh was the hilltop that our colonial rulers wanted to immortalise by naming it after Lord Dalhousie who can claim enormous credit of giving East India Company a huge political power by his military skill and sharp diplomatic vibes. No wonder that as soon as Punjab was annexed to East India Company in 1849 Brits wasted no time to display their respect to this man by naming this small heaven after him.

It was some sort of a signal that announced India's enslavement to a power that unquestionably ruled the world till end of 1945. Today, years after the abolishment of British rule in India, the same hilltop contains the same old name, but its two main squares are now named after two icons of India who gave Brits many sleepless nights in last thirty years of their presence in the country. Once, which was Post office square of the town is now Gandhi chowk named after Mahatma Gandhi, while other end of the town where St. Francis church stands in old Charring Cross is now called Subhash chowk named after Netaji Subhash Bose.

After reaching Dalhousie I took a walk from Gandhi chowk to Subhash chowk taking a path enveloped under the shadow of tall pine trees. The cool feeling of walking in a hill station was perfectly getting supplemented with a feel of heritage walk as I passed relics of various colonial structures. Their presence is so strong that soon it was evident that Brits might have long gone but like every hill station of India till now their footprints are almost everywhere.

The small colonial houses with their European formation, century old churches, colonial British clubs, heritage hotels, cemetery and tea rooms all are still there, though many of those are now in dilapidated condition. Some structures are crumbling and will be grounded in the next few years.

This legacy of Raj is only a part to describe Dalhousie as there is one thing which has not changed over the course of history. That is the breathtaking view of Himalayas from here. The peerless panorama of Dhauladhar range of Himalayas under the shadow of peak Manimahesh, the real magnet that once attracted our foreign rulers to this place still rules the vast horizon with equal command in silence. The serenity and solitude of Dalhousie with the stroke of history soon conquered me from all sides. My long walk from Gandhi Chowk to Subhash Chowk was not disturbed like the political relation of these two great leaders. It was charming and distressing in every way. I found Gandhi chowk little messy and congested. Now crowded with unplanned expansion of shops and buildings, the old Post office square still holds the touch of Raj.

The Dalhousie Hotel and Café, a heritage hotel, some decayed colonial building and Dalhousie club once only meant for whites still rule the area. Many of its old buildings are unused for years were giving me a clear testimonial fact that Dalhousie badly suffered the pangs of partition of India in 1947 after which its rich patrons, mostly from Lahore, gradually got detached with it. Soon an exhausted me settled myself on a wooden bench near Dalhousie Hotel and tried to refresh myself with a cup of coffee from a road side shop. There are plethora of eating joint selling momos and chowmein here. However to keep a balance with real history of the place, I prefer coffee over everything.

As the aroma of coffee started wafting, I had a feel of getting pushed to a time way back in when Brits came and fell in love with this place. With their occupancy, soon development came fast along with wealthy landowners of Punjab and Rajasthan many of whom made it their second home.

When Shimla as a summer capital was booming, Dalhousie was softly awakening to become a wonderful sanatorium for British soldiers and civilians. It attracted people like Rabindranath Tagore, Rudyard Kipling and Netaji Subhash Chandra Bose, who had a long and strong association with this place.

Finishing my cup of coffee I quickly took a walk to find the building named Hotel Meher's which was the abode of Netaji Bose for many months in 1937. It was a delight to see that it is still running as a heritage hotel. However many new age historians think that Bose, during his stay in Dalhousie, mostly stayed in Kynance Cottage owned by Dr Dharamveer. His stay in this hotel was not that along as it is believed.

It will be worth mentioning that in early morning while scaling up to Dalhousie from Dharamashala I first took a turn 10 km before to visit Chamera lake, also known as Bhadrakali lake, is a place that no one can give a miss. Created as a culmination of Chamera hydropower dam project that impounds river Ravi this green lake is a feast to every eye. With blue sky above that borders snow capped mountains and green forests on its bank, the lake adds to the scenic splendour. I quickly got on to a boat that took me near a point from where a part of Manimahesh peak was visible.

By 4 pm I returned to Gandhi chowk and entered St. John's church, the oldest church of the town. Built in typical Romanesque lines in 1863 on the initiative taken by one Reverend John Henry Pratt, this church features almost all vintage picture of Dalhousie. Small yet beautiful, this church houses excellent stained glass illustrating Jesus with St John and St Peter.

From there I reached Subhash Chowk. The huge statue of the leader dons the area and behind that on a small hilltop stands St. Francis church. Built in 1894 the wooden roof church is bigger but not that well maintained. However the iron bell on the tower impressed me with its gigantic presence. The heritage look of the church is excellent.

A little disappointed at not finding enough photo opportunity, I returned to hotel and from there got to see the golden sun slowly sinking inside of rocky terrain of Himalaya – it is sunset time. The theatre above the cloud was perfectly decorated to host a magical riot of colours beaming from a setting sun.

My first day at Dalhousie ended on an unforgettable note.. Next morning I finished my breakfast as early as possible to take a walk towards mall. Suddenly on my left something grabbed my eyes for few seconds before I realized fully that the day was clear and I was lucky to see massive range of Dhauladhar. I was rooted to the spot. The scenic beauty captured my soul, and I was unable to tear my eyes away from the spectacular view. It was hard to believe for few moments that a vast and compact amalgamation of snow peaks were silently watching me from a close distance.

Since it was summer time, the snow had started melting exposing the brown rocky peaks that were dotted with blue and white. The prize catch of that peerless panorama was no doubt a full and clear view of Mt Manimahesh the highest peak of the range.

Now it was the time to enjoy another side of the range. My cab driver took me 10 km away to a place named Lakkhar Mandi and from there another 3 km inside of the reserve forest finally took me to the Kalatop a point inside of deep jungle. From here I could spot the mind blowing Himalayan range. The Kalatop is a flat surface on hill top where an iconic colonial forest bungalow still stands.

It is often seen in many Hindi movies. Known as the Switzerland of India Kalatop is just a piece of heaven cut apart from the maddening crowd of Gandhi chowk. Kalatop is surrounded by a 47 sq km wildlife sanctuary named Kalatop-Khajiar sanctuary where wildlife like deer, Himalayan black bear, leopard are frequently spotted. In afternoon my driver took me to upper Bakrota loop from where I got to see another splendid view.

Here stands a century old posh cottage named Snowdon, where in 1873, a twelve years old Rabindranath Tagore spent many days with his father. It is believed that here he wrote his first poem and every evening he used to sing songs to his father. In this dense solitude it is believed that Tagore got his inspiration for a world with profound peace under the shadow of mother-nature that in future gradually shaped into his iconic University Viswa Bharati in Bengal.

Next morning was parting time and I prepared myself to bid adieu to Dalhousie. While passing over its newly built roads which are nicely decorated with hanging flower pots I again failed to control my temptation to look over the horizon to witness the silent sentinel named Himalaya.

**Travel Logistics :**

Dalhousie is 485 km from Delhi & 188 km from Amritsar. Nearest railway station is Pathankot from where by road it is 80 km – a 3 hours drive upwards. Nearest airport is Amritsar. Plenty of hotels in all ranges – plethora of heritage hotels. HPTDC runs hotel like Mani Mahesh is one of the best located. You can book it through www.hptdc.nic.in Khajjar, 22 kms away is a beautiful place.

