

Darjeeling!

I very reluctantly left the Stringhams to venture farther north and east to Darjeeling. The train journey from Lucknow to Siliguri took nearly 24 hours to cover a distance of almost 600 miles. I traveled IIIrd class reserved sleeper again. Because the reservation cost a few rupees more meant that most of my traveling companions were well-educated professionals. That meant that most were fluent in English, so we had some enjoyable conversation. At one point the first day of travel, we got our first glimpse of the Himalayan Mountains. Even from over 100 miles away they towered into the air.

Getting to Darjeeling from Siliguri (just about at sea level) was definitely part of the thrill of the visit. The only proper way to do the journey was (and still is) by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway, affectionately known as the Toy Train. It's a narrow gauge railway (2 foot track spacing) that takes 7 hours and 55 miles to climb 7,000 feet in altitude using a system of loops and switchbacks to accomplish the job. The views from the train of the terraced fields and tea plantations, with the Himalayan Range as a backdrop was breathtaking.

Darjeeling is located at one end of the serpentine spine of a "hill". The land drops off very sharply on every side. Everywhere roads can be seen snaking their way laboriously up the hillsides through tea gardens. The entire northwest horizon is dominated by Kanchenjunga and it's sister peaks. Everest can't be seen from the city but can be seen from Tiger Hill, which is about seven miles from the city and another 1,500 feet in altitude.



My visit to Darjeeling was marked by two significant events. One was the morning I hiked up to Tiger Hill to watch the sunrise over Mt. Everest. Two Indian friends and I left well before sunrise one night. The moon was full and imparted a strange aura to the landscape—mountain laurels, clouds in the valleys, Buddhist shrines. From Ghoom, with its large Buddhist stupa, the road climbs steadily to Tiger Hill. The scene by moonlight near dawn was a carpet of clouds at the base of the high peaks with thermals projecting large masses of clouds above the base. The light slowly increased, flooding everything with amazing colors.

It could finally be seen where the sun would rise somewhere behind a huge arch of cloud. There was a gasp and the rest of us turned to Kanchenjunga sticking above the clouds with an unearthly red glow. There was now a huge circular castle in the middle of the arch. The sun rose behind this castle and the arch was filled with phosphorescent colors. Finally the

sun emerged, accompanied by a warm ovation by those assembled on the hill. The pictures I took are disappointing.



The other significant event proved to have much more lasting value for me. The Stringhams gave me an introduction to a minister in Darjeeling. Jonathan was (and still is) married to a remarkable woman, Indira, a medical doctor who pioneered work among alcoholics and drug addicts. They had two children—a boy of five and a daughter just a year old. He was (and still is!) an evangelist, leaving home for months at a

time to travel on exhausting tours, speaking to college students and tea garden workers.

As I wrote to a friend, "The answers to some of my questions about Bible passages have been more than answered. Understanding comes in waves." The radical nature of Jonathan and Indira's faith in Christ was stunning to me. They staked everything on the truth of the Good News about Jesus. I wish that I had a picture of them from that time. The picture above is more recent. I stayed in Darjeeling for a couple weeks and spent part of most days with this family.

I finally had to flee Darjeeling because of the cold—days only in the low 50s, nights near freezing and almost no building with any source of heat. I'm guessing that the fancy hotels had heat, but that's not where I was staying. I was paying less than a dollar a day for room and breakfast. When I left Darjeeling because of the cold, it was the last time I was to see that city. Fortunately, it was not the last time for me to meet up with Jonathan and Indira. More on that as my story unfolds in real time plus 50 years.