

# 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 III<sup>rd</sup> 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.

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## **On to Lucknow**

The reason I headed north rather than south with the others is complex. I longed to go to Darjeeling to see Mount Everest and the tea plantations. But the more compelling reason was to visit Jim and Charlotte Stringham. God has a marvelous sense

of humor. I was in India to immerse myself in Eastern religions, convinced that I would discover the truth through this path. The Stringhams were Christians, and not of the casual variety. Both graduates of Yale, they moved to China in 1933 as Presbyterian missionaries, where they served until 1944. When forced to evacuate China, the Stringhams and their four children returned to Canandaigua, NY, my home town.

Dr. Stringham worked as a psychiatrist at the large VA hospital in town and with his family attended the church where my parents and I worshipped. Later, when Dr. Stringham opened his own practice in town, he was our family physician. Health issues prevented them from returning to the mission field. After their health issues were resolved, in 1961 they were approved to return to mission work, this time to Lucknow in north central India. I would have had contact with them again in 1966 when they were in the US on furlough.



By this time in my travels, I was hungry to see a home town face. I took the overnight train from New Delhi to Lucknow. Almost all the long haul trains in India at that time were still powered by steam engines. I traveled in a III<sup>rd</sup> class reserved sleeper. Reserved meant that only passengers with reservations were permitted in the carriage—theoretically. Wooden boards folded down for sleeping at night—eight per compartment. My air mattress and sleeping bag gave me a fairly comfortable night's sleep. It amuses me that a modern-day description of the rigors of travel on the lowest class of Indian Railway sleeper car (SL) sounds exactly like what I experienced 50 years ago! During waking hours, I enjoyed

conversations with the other occupants of my carriage.

Once my train arrived in Lucknow, I managed to find the Nur Manzil Psychiatric Centre, of which Dr. Stringham was the director. The hospital was founded in 1950 by E. Stanley Jones, an American missionary who gave himself heart and soul to the people of India. He also started a Christian Ashram movement, spiritual retreat centers in which he tried to incorporate as many elements of the rich Indian culture as did not conflict with the Christian faith. I met the Stringhams coming out of chapel, and both were quite surprised to see me. I stayed nearly a week with them, luxuriating in their hospitality. I had a small room with bed and table all to myself (except for a friendly lizard). I toured the clinic, which had a pleasant atmosphere and genial staff.



A few memories come back to me from my time with Jim and Charlotte. They were a deeply devout couple. No matter how early I rose in the mornings, I could hear them praying in their bedroom. I often walked with them through the streets of Lucknow in the morning. They carried a loaf of bread with them on our walks to give to beggars. Apparently, unscrupulous men deliberately maimed children, sent them out to beg and then demanded all that they collected at the end of the day. By giving food, they were able to help without supporting the cruel begging racket.



Jim and Charlotte had an older Muslim man who cooked both Western and Indian dishes. Jim was a marvel of efficiency in the mornings. He had it timed so that toast popped out of the toaster at the moment the egg was ready to place on top. I ate everything set before me. The Stringhams carved out time from their busy schedules to spend with me. We had many helpful discussions about the Christian faith. They loaned me a book to read while on the road—*The God Who is There* by Dr. Francis Schaeffer, an American who founded a Christian community in the Swiss Alps. This book was going to prove pivotal in my life.

I reluctantly left the Stringhams. The Magical Mystery Tour was heading on to Darjeeling in the foothills of the Himalayas.