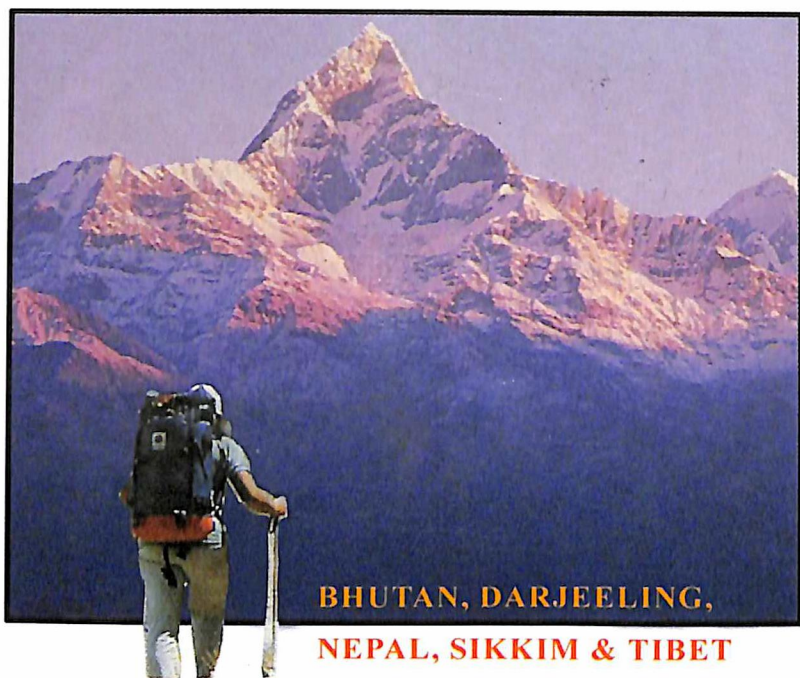


FOOTPRINTS IN THE HIMALAYA

PEOPLE, PLACES & PRACTICES



Sonam B. Wangyal

FOOTPRINTS IN THE HIMALAYA

PEOPLE, PLACES AND PRACTICES

Bhutan, Darjeeling, Nepal, Sikkim & Tibet

Sonam B. Wangyal



First published by Sonam B. Wangyal 2006

Copyright © Sonam B Wangyal 2006

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted, in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording or otherwise, without the prior permission of the publisher.

Printed and bound at
KMT Press
Phuentsholing (Bhutan)

Introduction & Acknowledgement

Many friends, including several folks whom I had never known before, suggested that it would be a good idea to compile the small essays I wrote for various magazines and newspapers. A good portion of this book therefore comprises of those essays but in order to sustain the interest of the readers who have already read them much revision has been done and either fresh materials have been added or irrelevant parts have been removed. The reader will also find a substantial amount of new materials including short 'fillers' which I hope will hold good interest.

The same friends who encouraged and at times pushed, nudged and even yanked me to complete this book were also responsible for many of the illustrations. I would like to acknowledge in this regard Mahendra Banthia (for access to his late father's collection of Bhutan photos), Nikhil Goyel of Phuentsholing and Nima Sherpa of Beechwood (Darjeeling), Dr. Shiva Kumar Rai of Gangtok (Sikkim), Denki Lhamu of Bhutan, Das Studio (Darjeeling), Bourne Shepard & Co. (Calcutta), Shankarnath Pradhan (Samaj Kalyan Samity, Jaigaon), Rajendra Lakhota (Sikkim & Siliguri), Raja Surajit Sen (Shillong & Guwahati) Paden Bhutia (Daughter-in-law of the Everest topper Nawang Topgay), Sonam Gomphu (alias Popo of Kalimpong), Basant Lama (Kathmandu) Dr. Sunder Babu Palla (Bhutan and Nepal), and my incorrigibly easygoing friend Binod Yonzone of Kalimpong for doing some of the sketches.

I am giving a separate paragraphs for five special people. I am deeply indebted to Advocate Anmole Prasad, who is a lawyer, artist, poet, musician and a reluctant fiction writer all rolled into one, for copy-editing this book. I had no claim on his proficiency as an editor and yet he ungrudgingly agreed to do the job. This book would not have been half as readable as it is now without this multi-faceted lawyer's contribution. I would like to record my sincere indebtedness to Dr. Indrabahadur Rai, Professor Samten Norbu and Mr. Krishna Singh Moktan for their invaluable suggestions. All three of them are giants in their respective fields of studies who have been honoured by the society, the government and the academia for their achievements and it is a special concession to me that they went through the manuscript and recommend changes wherever they were necessary. I am deeply honoured. And finally, to Dikila, to whom this book is dedicated, I would like to quote an often-sung line: "You are the wind beneath my wings."

The book is designed as a journey over the Himalayan region, but unlike a regular travelogue it is haphazardly spread over several centuries, without following any time sequence. The reader is the traveller and the journey commences in England with the story of a man who takes a most hazardous trip to the Himalaya and perishes in the cold and insensitive snows of Mount Everest, never to return to his English soil. The journey rounds off with another Englishman, who having lived most of his fruitful life in India heads home to England, never to return to the Himalayan vicinity. From Mount Everest the path leads to Darjeeling, Sikkim, Nepal, Bhutan, Tibet and back again to Darjeeling. It then hops to the tea plantations in the foothills (Dooars) and finally ends with the above mentioned Englishman, a tea planter, leaving for England, which is where our narrative or the journey commenced, making it a kind of a round about journey. Considering the fact that all the

proceedings in the tour are based on true-life events spanning many centuries, as well as several countries, it is difficult to be original and this book does not claim to have even the remotest proximity with that attribute. At best, I can claim that only the treatment is original: the body wholly belongs to others and only the dressings are mine.

For each country or place we pass through I have included commentaries, culled from books or stories told to me over a period of five decades, on the local people and the practices of the localities. It is my suspicion that it is not possible for everyone to get their hands on all those books or for each one of us to have elders passing down anecdotes of the yester years. I have been fortunate to have friends who have large collections of books and more fortunate to have a wife that allowed me to build a personal library despite the steady decline in our bank balance. Being inspired by friends and pushed by a pressing desire to share the accounts read and heard over the years the book took shape in the form you are now reading. Despite the rather extravagant title and an equally audacious the sub-title this volume is meant for the general reader and does not pretend to have any great scholastic merit. More specifically the book is targeted at the people of the Himalaya and to those interested in the region and if you have never been attracted by the Himalaya I hope it will kindle some amount of curiosity.

Sonam B. Wangyal

2006

Contents

List of Illustrations

Main Essays

1. Mission Impossible	7
2. To Everest Without Oxygen	14
3. The Bettens	22
4. An Indian Dwelling	33
5. A Hobo's Journey to Havard	38
6. Colonel Gawler's Rum	46
7. A King who lost His Principality but not His Principles	51
8. Thoughtwaves in Sikkim	57
9. An Imposter Gorkha	62
10. Unarmed Combat	69
11. A Stone Tossing Spirit	75
12. Vanishing Traditions	81
13. Gambling Gorkhas	94
14. Prithwinarayan Shah	98
15. Singha Durbar	104
16. Prithwinarayan's Bhutan Connection	109
17. No Entry – Bhutan	114
18. Entered the Dragon Kingdom	121
19. The Dragon Kingdom Steps Out	130
20. Horse Sense	138
21. In Good Faith	143
22. Bhutan's Best Kept Secret	150
23. Tibetan Buddhism, The Great 5th & the Enigmatic 6th Dalai Lamas	155
24. Kha-da: The Scarf of Salutation	166
25. A Successful Failure	173
26. Fireworks that Frightened an Army	180
27. In the Land of God	185
28. The Magical Quality of Bungalow Tea	191
29. At Home	195
30. The Final Healer	199

Short Fillers

1. Maurice Wilson in the Internet	12
2. Everest Defiled	13
3. Honourable Mountaineers	21
4. Nuns' Tale	32
5. Kindergarten Adults	37
6. A Tall Story	44
7. Jungay Hawildar	45
8. Royal Dues	50
9. Sikkim's Royal Coat of Arms	56
10. Sherpa Cricketers in Sikkim	61
11. Victoria Cross Awardees	67
12. Traffic in the Opposite Direction	68
13. A Short Story	74
14. A Glossary of Nepali Ghosts	79
15. Guarding One's Post	80
16. The Gorkha Khukuri	93
17. More Gambling Gorkhas	97
19. Hukumko Jawab Chhaina	103
20. Manufacturing Rains	108
21. Quarreling for Shit's Sake	112
22. Bhutan	113
23. The Royal Ruse	120
24. Old Habits Die Hard	128
25. Good Beginnings	129
26. Bhutan Chronology	134
27. An Act of the Gods	137
28. The Defenceless Posterior	142
29. Upholding a Tradition	148
30. Bhutan A Day Ahead of the Others	149
31. Counting Problems	154
32. Kalimpong's Forgotten Healer	165
33. The Memorandum	170
30. Stooping to Lose	171
31. Lhasa's Steel Bridge	178
32. Innocent Slip-ups	184

33. Airports in Tibet	189
34. Tibet's First Car	190
35. Football Kalimpong Style	194
36. What is there in a Name!	198

Illustrations

1. Everest	7
2. Maurice Wilson	9
3. News in Calcutta daily	17
4. Darjeeling Tea Logo	22
5. Darjeeling Tea Garden (1870s)	30
6. Wigwam	33
7. Dant Kothi	37
8. Prof. Dawa Norbu	39
9. Dr. Graham's Homes	42
10. Floating Bridge over the Rungeet	46
11. Cane Bridge over the Tista	48
12. The Old National Flag of Sikkim	52
13. The Chogyal and Gyalmo of Sikkim	53
14. Sikkim's Royal Coat of Arms	56
15. The Modest Sikkim Palace	57
16. The P.O.'s residence	58
17. The Chogyal's Marriage	59
18. Ganju Lama V.C.	63
19. The Victoria Cross	64
20. The 9th Gorkha Emblem	69
21. A Gorkha Soldier – a long time ago	70
22. A Gorkha Soldier – today	71
23. A Gorkha Policeman	72
24. A Nepali Shaman	76
24. A Gathering of Shamans	77
25. A Sunuwar Shaman	78
26. Beating the <i>Damphu</i>	81
27. The Tamangs Dancing	85
28. A Rai Shaman	91
29. Nepali Dancers	92

30. The Khukuri	93
31. A Casino in Nepal	96
32. Prithwinarayan Shah	98
33. Chandrasumshere Jangabhadur Rana	105
34. Singha Durbar	106
35. Bhutanese Prayer Wheel and Nepali Khukuri	109
36. Greater Nepal	111
37. Bhutan – The Nation	113
38. Bhutan – The Flag	113
39. Bhutan – The Royal Crest	113
40. Tashichho Dzong	114
41. Gateway to Bhutan	116
42. A Church Along Bhutan's Border	118
43. Punakha Dzong	119
44. A Welcome Hoarding	121
45. Gidakom Hospital (1990)	123
46. Kng Ugyen Wangchuk	130
47. Pandit Nehru to Bhutan	133
48. Raja Ugyen Dorji	138
49. Raja S.T. Dorji	139
50. A Bhutanese Villager and His Horses	140
51. The Chief Justice of Bhutan	141
52. Buddha in Kushinagar	145
53. Unknotting the Khada	148
54. Shabdrung Nawang Namgyal	150
55. Bhutanese Dancers	153
56. Coin Counting Machine	154
57. The 5th Dalai Lama	159
58. The 6th Dalai Lama	160
59. The Home of the 6th Dalai Lama	161
60. The Author with a Tawang Native	164
61. Receiving a Khada	167
62. Khadas to the Maitreya Buddha	168
63. Bhutan Queen offering a Khada	170
64. Kintoop	173
65. Darjeeling Town	174

66. Theos Bernard	179
67. The Dalai Lama	181
68. The Tibetan Army	182
69. The Chinese Army	183
70. The Potala Palace	188
71. A Tea Garden in the Himalayan Foothills	193
72. Kalimpong, 100 Years Ago	194
73. Darjeeling Tea & Tourism Festival Logo	196
74. Kitar Sherpa's Certificate	198
75. Tea Garden Bungalow	200
76. Picking Tea Leaves	202

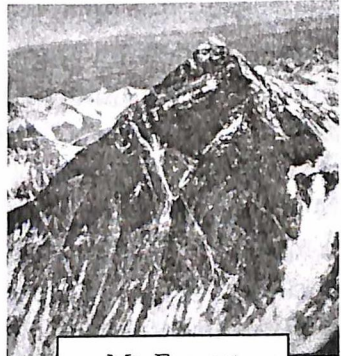
Bibliography 203

1. Bhutan	203
2. Darjeeling	205
3. Nepal	207
4. Sikkim	208
5. Tibet	210
6. Others	212

End Notes 214

MISSION IMPOSSIBLE

We begin our Himalayan journey not from the foothills of the mountains or from the plains of India or for that matter not from anywhere close to the Himalayan range. In fact the journey commences in England where our protagonist in his rather extraordinary mission, commences his expedition to take on Mount Everest. By virtue of being the tallest mountain in the world, Everest attracts all kinds of people and over the years there have been some who have dared to scale its peak without the aid of oxygen and others who even tried to make it to the top entirely on their own, in what has been euphemistically described as 'solo attempts'. Adventurers, members of the gentler sex, the legally blind and lately even a teenager have managed to look down upon the world from the top of this enormous massif. Till the time Tenzing Norgay and Sir Edmund Hillary made a successful ascent of the Everest the entire mountaineering fraternity had one ambition: to be the first on the peak. The duo having grabbed that honour many climbers began looking to set different kinds of records some of which verged on the impossible and at times even appeared preposterous. A 64-year-old, who should have been telling his grandchildren stories of his youthful exploits, became the oldest man to reach the summit, another attempted a ski descent and one Sherpa even spent 21 hours at the



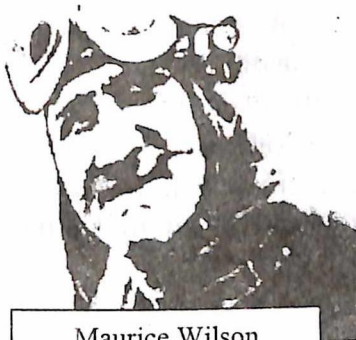
Mt. Everest

top. Then there were those who wanted to be the fastest up the mountain and others the swiftest on the descent. One man even famously trekked hiked from the sea level and then went all the way to the summit! Despite the numerous successful climbs the lure of Everest seems to grow with each passing year and more and more mountaineers are seen every year so much so that during a good climbing day a traffic jam, with those on the way up having the right of way, is not uncommon. Recently commercialism has touched Everest with the arrival of organizers who sell Everest Expeditions to ordinary people for colossal charges of up to US \$65,000 a head and there have been numerous glory-hunters who have actually taken these offers. Oftentimes the results have been catastrophic but the fraternity of fresh tourist-climbers, it appears, never ceases to replenish itself and the amazing fact is that some of them have actually made it to the top.¹

Today climbers take on Everest with an ever greater knowledge of the mountain's various routes, enormously improved climbing gear, and state of the art technological support and even climbing without oxygen is being considered an event not out of the extraordinary. With around 90 people having been on the summit without oxygen Everest has now become an arena for setting newer records of the unusual kind. An amputee managed it to the top, a ski descent from the summit has been done and another even did it on a snowboard. In 1988 Jean Marc Boivin (France) paraglided from the summit and three years later this feat was surpassed by Roche and Claire who did it together as the first husband-wife team. Nevertheless, of all those who plodded on the slopes of Mount Everest there is none comparable, not even remotely, to the supreme eccentric called Maurice Wilson, our hero from England. Unfortunately, he is not often recalled and this could possibly be because he was unable to slake his prodigious patriotism by putting up the Union Jack atop the peak ahead of other national flags. However, the more probable reason for

Wilson being sidelined in the annals of mountaineering history is the fact that he never had any training in mountaineering, and, by definition he was not a true mountaineer but just a crazy climber.

that he was not it must be also became the man to dare yield, and in task, he did not do too



Maurice Wilson

Having said a mountaineer, said that he only untrained Everest to this impossible surprisingly badly.

We will commence with the headline news of April 23, 1933, in the now defunct journal, Reynold News, which announced: "THE MOST AMAZING AIR ADVENTURE EVER ATTEMPTED..." The headline news was no exaggeration for Wilson had planned to crash-land his second-hand Gypsy Moth about halfway up Mount Everest and then climb the rest of the mountain with the aim to have the British flag as the first flag on the world's tallest peak. He confidently told the reporters that 'one fit man can succeed where a larger group will fail.' Even though the concept verged on madness, it was great reporting, for there was a man announcing that he was willing to risk his life under the severest of conditions for his country's honour. Call it insanity or dare-devilry Wilson had done his first solo flight only two months ago and his relative inexperience in flying hardly bothered him or the fact that a flat area long enough for his plane to crash-land was most unlikely to be found. Even if he crash-landed safely and commenced his ascent he would need to identify the actual peak and there were enough chances of him mistaking some of the minor heights for the real one. Furthermore, even if he had managed to scale Everest he still would have to survive the long descent including the eventual walk to the nearest Sherpa village for rest and recovery; and all along he would have

required supplies. However, for Wilson, who was immune to any suggestion of failure, these were mere trifling details. We get a glimpse of his unusual mind when he theorizes on physical fitness. Thoroughly headstrong and generally unreasonable, Wilson believed that a programme of a gradually increased fasting would condition the body in such a way as to increase its intake of oxygen. Wilson being Wilson, the simple logic that only an increased capacity of the lungs can facilitate an increased intake of oxygen escaped him completely. A strong believer in fasting he was also of the opinion that if he went without food for several weeks he would enter into a state of semi-consciousness: a state of being comparable to that of floating between life and death. Coming back from such a condition, he was convinced, would be equivalent to a rebirth, where all ills, both physical and spiritual, would be washed out and that he would emerge a new man still retaining the experience and knowledge of his 'previous' life. So a "re-born" Wilson left England heading for the final refueling port at the Indian city of Purnea, in the Bihar state of India. There were attempts to dissuade him from going ahead at Cairo, Bahrain and Karachi but Wilson had an assignment and he could not be stopped. His plane was eventually seized in India, and surprisingly not because his mission was suicidal, but because he would be violating air traffic regulations by flying over Nepal and entering Tibet before the eventual crash-landing. Wilson somehow managed to sell the plane and headed towards Darjeeling, this time without letting anyone know why. Darjeeling was to be his launching ground.

At Darjeeling he secretly hired three Sherpas who agreed to smuggle him through Sikkim to Tibet and eventually to Rongbuk Monastery. Everything was done in utter secrecy and it seems amazing that he brought provisions for his four-hundred-mile journey including mules to transport them and quietly slipped away well before the authorities discovered

that he had left his hotel several days ago. At Rongbuk he left his Sherpa porters and headed alone towards Everest expecting to be on top in three to four days time. He took with him a shaving mirror, which he proposed to use as a heliograph to signal the Sherpas of his success from the summit. He reached as far as Camp II where snowstorms forced him back to Rongbuk a totally exhausted man. After two weeks he was once again on Everest, this time with his three Sherpas, and managed to make it to Camp III, 21,000 feet above sea level. The Sherpas directed him to a food dump, about half a mile further up, which had been left by one of the previous expeditions. It was Wilson's good fortune that at the dump he found a small treasure trove of goodies: it contained sardines, chocolates, baked beans and biscuits. He pitched a tent there and asked the Sherpas to go back to Camp III. It was going to be solo from thereon. Maurice Wilson, unfortunately, never came back.

Eric Shipton led a small reconnaissance expedition of seven men on the western side of Everest a year later. They reached North Col and decided to go further up, and weather permitting, make a dash for the summit. Unfortunately, the conditions did not improve and instead of risking lives they decided to continue the exploration on lesser heights. It was during this exploration that Wilson's body and his diary was discovered along with the remnants of a badly tattered tent. Sticking to the tradition of not bringing back the dead from Everest, Shipton's team buried him in a crevasse nearby. Then in 1960, 26 years after his death, he resurfaced once again when the Chinese Expedition found his body. He was buried once more under the snows of Everest.

From the entries in his diary it appears that he had made attempts day after day till exhaustion and Everest's severe conditions drained the life out of him. Shipton had found him dressed in thin gray flannel trousers, a shirt and a light

pullover. He was wearing a pair of thin socks and he had taken off his boots. Nobody, not even the fittest and most experienced mountaineer, could have survived with such clothes in the windswept and storm lashed icy heights of the Himalaya. There were enough signs to show that he had not died of starvation but of exposure and the way he was clothed seemed to suggest that instead of beating a retreat he had opted for the more drastic but honourable option of simply surrendering to the mountain. His attempt to take on the challenge of Everest had failed and if he could not have Everest then he found it more meaningful that the mountain should have him. Today there are about 125 who have died on Everest, 42 of them while descending after reaching the summit, and each carries its own story but none as fascinating or as reckless as that of Maurice Wilson.

Maurice Wilson in the Internet:

BBC's website: Barry Collins, who wrote a play on Wilson says, "I have this feeling that he couldn't come home again. He'd made such an enormous public fuss in the newspapers that he was going to prove the existence of God and what faith can do...If he'd gone back a failure it would have been the end for him psychologically so he ended up dying on the mountain."

Expert's Opinion: An American supporter of Wilson believes that he did get to the top and died on his way down rather than on the way up. "The Chinese expedition of 1960 found a tent that was 700 feet higher than any other high camp established on Everest. Where did that tent come from? It could have only come from Maurice Wilson"

Sir Charles Bonington, a legend of British mountaineering:
In www.mounteverest.net he says, "...I think it's pretty unlikely that Mallory and Irvine reached the summit of Everest, but with Wilson I think you can say with absolute certainty that he would have no chance whatsoever."

EVEREST DEFILED

A lot have been written about the Everest becoming a dumping ground for waste materials and there have been some attempts to clean up the mess. The following facts may illustrate the pressing emergency to take matters in earnest and keep the mountain free of trash.

In May of 1996 David F Breashears and his team which included Tenzing Sherpa's son, Jamling Norbu, were on the Everest making an IMAX film. Breashears, noticing the crowd on the mountain, lamented: "Until recently, I had known most of the climbers on Everest, at least by reputation. They were part of the tightly knit community I had grown up in. But now the routes were crowded with amateurs and guided clients, some of whom had plunked down \$65,000 to be led up and down the mountain." He recalled 1983 when he was a part of a team that was the only one on the South Col route. Then reflecting back on the previous year he wrote, "Last year 14 expeditions – French, Nepalese, Norwegian, Spanish, Swedish and Taiwanese among others – shared fixed ropes, camps, and a common obsession to reach the top." The base camp at 17,000 feet used to be a makeshift staging area but in 1996 it was a "bustling village of more than 300 people, packed with kitchen tents, dining tents, satellite dishes, boom boxes, VCRs, offerings of burning juniper, sputtering generators, and hundreds of prayer flags streaming in the wind." The effects of such crowds on the higher parts of Everest is best said in Breashears' own words which have been highlighted for effect, "Up above at 26,000 feet, the South Col has been turned into the world's highest garbage dump, with more than a thousand empty oxygen bottles littering the snow alongside torn tents, abandoned stoves, and other refuse."

TO EVEREST 'WITHOUT OXYGEN'

It is hardly surprising that Maurice Wilson failed to conquer Mount Everest but it is a small wonder that he managed to get as far as he did. Everest presents one of the most daunting challenges to human endurance, nerve and spirit of adventure. The conditions there are Arctic, but one has to do without the sleighs and huskies, there are no chances of rescue by choppers and there always is the possibility of being swept away and drowned in lethal avalanches. Besides, one must keep in mind the hazards of falling into unsuspected crevasses, the ice-cold snow-carrying high-velocity winds could easily sweep one off the mountain, while the steep slopes and the lack of oxygen could extract the best, or the life, out of you. It is therefore a bigger wonder that great hopes and ambitions held in our frail human bodies have overcome these odds and that men have managed, time and again, to put climbers on the top. Some have scaled the peak from the southern slopes and others have done it from the northern face. There have been those who have gone up with heavy-budgeted 'techno' props while others have gone up the conventional European style, Alpine climbing. But whatever the budget, props, methods, or routes Mount Everest always demands the best of a mountaineer. An established mountaineer once remarked that the conquest of Everest represents, "a universal symbol of human courage and endurance; an ultimate test of man's body and spirit." It could not be anything less for at altitudes above 8,000 meters the line dividing life and death is extremely thin and even for the most accomplished climber the smallest of errors could easily be the last one. However, even this awesome challenge has a litmus test, a definitive triumph to

evaluate man's ultimate mental and physical capability, that of gaining the highest point on earth without the support of supplementary oxygen. This remains the most daunting and definitely the most dangerous way to approach the pinnacle of all peaks.

In 1907 Longstaff, Alexis, Brocherel and Subedar Karbir Burathoki (a non-Sherpa of Nepal) camped at 4,500 meters (approx. 14,760 ft) for almost thirty days trying to acclimatize to the oxygen-deficient atmosphere of the Himalaya. It was a time when packaged oxygen was yet to be introduced and the foursome spent another two days at 6,000 meters (approx 20,000 ft) to acclimatize for a higher ascent. From there they took a on a daring continuous climb to scale the Trisul Peak (7,128m, 23,000 ft). This became the benchmark and a demonstration of the fact that man could survive for an extended period without oxygen² at that height and could possibly go even higher. Within two years Duke of Abruzzo and his three guides eclipsed this path-breaking achievement while trying to scale K2 (7,654m.), the second highest peak in the world, by extending the record to 7,500 meters.

By 1922 rudimentary oxygen equipments had been designed and the Everest expedition of that year carried the cumbersome apparatus at the insistence of George Finch, an oxygen-assisted climbing advocate. Skeptics and medical experts had expressed serious doubts about whether man could survive without supplementary oxygen beyond Duke's high of 7,500 meters and Finch accordingly made the expedition lug the heavy apparatus up the slopes of Everest. Most of the expedition members were not happy with the extra burden, not because they were ignorant about the value of extra oxygen but because they had little faith in the equipment. No one was sure of its efficiency at below freezing temperatures and super-high altitudes and there were no guidelines as to how little to inhale for optimum effectiveness or how much more

before it became unsafe. Consequently, George Mallory, Col. H.T. Morshead, Major E.F. Norton and Dr. T.H. Somervell made a combined effort at the peak on 20 May 1922 without carrying oxygen. They managed to break the Duke's record by reaching 7,650 meters and the next day, the three of them, stretching themselves to the limit, made it up to 8,200 meters, just 648 meters short of the peak. The daring attempt had failed, but not entirely, for it had proved the skeptics wrong: they had survived above 8,000 meters without oxygen, and many opinionated medical experts had to wear red faced for a long time. In the same expedition George Finch, Geoffrey Bruce and Gorkha Tejbir made the second attempt but at 7,650 meters they got stuck in a storm for the whole day. Here Finch experimented with the oxygen they had carried and discovered that a few whiffs of the gas dramatically improved their miserable condition. With this newfound advantage Finch and Bruce scaled 8,320 meters. This attempt too did not succeed in putting a man on the summit but it succeeded in creating two new records, one for the highest climb without additional oxygen and another for an oxygen-assisted climb. However, both the records were to tumble the very next season at the hands of two members of the same expedition. Norton and Somervell, in one of the most extraordinary oxygen-unassisted attempts, took on the challenge of hypoxia and the indifference of Everest with a renewed vigour. Somervell crossed the record set by Finch and Bruce but gave up at 8540 meters. Norton then broke the convention of minimizing risks by climbing in twos and went solo from that point. He struggled up the hostile slopes and when he was just 273 meters from the summit fatigue got the better of him and he returned a totally exhausted man. His record of 8,575 meters climb without extra oxygen stood unfazed as the mountain for almost half a century.

Improved and lighter oxygen equipments were available in the market by 1933 but most mountaineers were still not happy

with the equipments and they were more prepared to carry misgivings than the oxygen cylinders. Oxygen assisted climb meant an extra load, the men had to wear masks and these usually misted the goggles, often the supply pipe would get clogged making the climb even more hazardous than without the equipment and there was the additional problem of occasional oxygen leakages. Hugh Ruttledge, who led an expedition that year and reached 27,000ft, was responsible for some major equipment improvements but faith in the apparatus was so low that even his men went to Everest without taking extra oxygen.

Mountaineers soon began to rewrite previous records. There was the record for scaling the highest peak, for reaching the highest point despite not having reached the summit and another for the highest oxygen-less climb. So far the highest peak conquered was Trisul in 1907 and this longstanding record fell when H.W. Tilman and Noel Odell scaled Nanda Devi (7,817m.) in 1936. In 1939 Fritz Weissner recorded the highest oxygen-less climb on the K2 with an effort of 8,365 meters but Norton still held the record for the highest point reached (8575m.) during his unsuccessful crack at the Everest. While Norton's record stood defiantly unaltered the French



News in a Calcutta Daily
June 2, 1953

were to set the record for the first success on an 8,000-meter-plus peak without supplementary oxygen. Frenchmen Maurice Herzog and Louis Lachenal, in what was one of the most meticulously planned expeditions, put the French flag atop Mount Annapurna (8,091m.) but they paid a heavy price for this distinction by losing nearly all their fingers and toes to frostbite. Three years later this record

gave way to Herman Buhl's superb effort of scaling Nanga Parbat (8125m.). But by the time this great ascent was made Tenzing Norgay and Edmund Hillary had already set their feet atop Everest using supplementary oxygen. The challenge, therefore, to take on Everest without additional oxygen, became even greater.

Confirmation of the human ability to survive at altitudes above 8,500 meters without oxygen came about rather accidentally. In 1954 an Italian expedition was on K2 with very much improved oxygen support. Two of the climbers had reached 8,611 meters when to their horror they found that their oxygen supply had run out. Their successful return without oxygen from that height gave hope and inspiration to those who had their eyes set on Everest. In an almost identical incident in 1975 Dougal Huston and Doug Scott spent a night at 8,760 meters, their oxygen having run out at 8.30 p.m. This was a new high bivouac record. Of greater significance was the fact that these two climbers had spent the whole night without supplementary oxygen and managed to return safely. The fact that they were just 80 meters short of the peak sent strong signals to the mountaineering fraternity that a successful assault could come any day. Mountaineers all over the world watched and waited.

Three years later, in 1978, Everest eventually surrendered to Peter Habeler and Reinhold Messner. They completed the final part of their assault unaided, un-rope and at an almost impossible speed of 100 meters an hour. They confirmed that Everest was attainable 'without oxygen' and with that the floodgates opened. In the same year three Americans made it to the top of K2 oxygen-unassisted and much before their jubilation and excitement had died down Hans Engl, Mingma Sherpa and Ang Dorji viewed the world from the top of Everest without the aid of canned oxygen. A year later Kanchenjunga fell to Peter Broadman, Doug Scott and Joe

Tasker. Messner had a successful rerun of Everest in 1980 while in 1983 Larry Neelson became the first American to register his name in the gradually growing list of Evereststeers without oxygen. In the same year Japan also added the names of five men on to this distinguished list but this time the mountain extracted a costly tribute of two Japanese and one Sherpa lives. The Australians had a shot in 1984 and Greg Mortimer and Tim McCartney expanded the list but their comrade Andy Henderson's moment of glory faded just 50 meters short of the summit, his hands totally frozen to deny him even that short distance.

The regularity of oxygen-less successes paved way for newer challenges. In 1986 Erhard Loretan and Jean Troillet notched a fresh record in what is termed as a 'flash' ascent. This was another one of the finely executed expeditions where the two men acclimatized to the Himalaya for two whole months, at times living at altitude as high as 6,500 meters (over 20,000 ft). When they made the assault they took off at the end of the monsoons effectively avoiding the full blast of South-West Monsoons as well as the low pressures and chills of the winter. They took no tents, no sleeping bags and no oxygen cylinders for their intent was to go up as rapidly as possible, reach the peak and dash back to the base. They made it to the peak in just forty and half hours and it was thought that the record would hold for sometime. In September of 1988 Marc Batard (France) cut short the record by half when he reached the summit in twenty-two and half hours – a record many thought would last for a long time and yet were unprepared to stake money on it. In between these fantastic climbs Stephen Venables became the first British to register his name in the hallowed list of oxygen-less successes.

Barely a month into Batard's express climb the fairer sex too contested for the coveted recognition. Lydia Bradley (N.Z.) claimed credit for the first woman to be added to the list of

oxygen-less Evereststeers. However, the claim was disputed for lack of evidence leaving the field open for the first officially recognized oxygen-unassisted woman Everest topper.³ As far as the men were concerned the records were getting increasingly more difficult and Sherpa Ang Rita set a new high to cross when he climbed Everest for the fourth time without oxygen in 1987. What made the success extraordinary was not just the number of triumphs but the fact that the last one was achieved in winter. The universal opinion till then was that oxygen-less ascent of the massif in winter was not possible because the lower pressures prevailing on Everest would trigger off numerous physiological changes in the body to bring about a guaranteed death. That Ang Rita had achieved this 'impossible' became something all mountaineers could not deal with gracefully and there were some who sincerely believed that an exceptionally fine weather in the December of 1987 produced the conditions conducive to the success. That may be true but equally true is the saying, "Who dares wins" and how many are there who would dare Everest in winter! It might be added that had Ang Rita been a European or an American the press, radio and the television would have feted him like the celebrity he deserved to be. There probably would have been documentaries and even a Hollywood version of his life but that was not to be his lot, instead there were suggestions that Ang Rita's climbs had always been achieved on the back of heavyweight expeditions. The last time I heard about Ang Rita was in the spring of 1996 when the storms that whipped Everest became international headlines. The reporting was an exceptional event with the storms figuring as cover issues in Time, Newsweek and Life magazines. Eleven climbers died that spring and that was enough to gobble up the headlines everywhere and in the enthusiasm to report the devastation, the murderous condition on the slopes and the story of those who just about managed to make it back alive, the world simply forgot that Ang Rita gracefully graying into his forty-ninth year, in the thick of the same storm, had

established an unbelievable record, oxygen-assisted and unassisted, of ten successful ascent of Everest. Ang Rita's amazing triumph went almost unnoticed. Unfair? May be. News traffic in the modern global village generally flows in a one-way direction and the historic success of a humble Sherpa from a poor third world country simply got swamped in the tragedy that involved mountaineers from the first world nations. Many of us therefore read and reread about the tragedy of the spring of '96 but virtually got no news about the history created by the Sherpa. It is said that Ang Rita silently slipped into Thame, a quiet little Sherpa village. He was really not bothered that he did not get the media coverage he so richly deserved, the villagers in Thame would not bother him either and the press was so busy blathering about the tragedy that it could not be bothered at all with the triumphant 10th successful ascent by Ang Rita Sherpa.

Honourable Mountaineers

Because the ethnic people of Sikkim hold Mount Kanchenjunga (Khang-chen-zong-nga) as a sacred mountain they are of a strong opinion that men should not defile it by setting foot on the summit. Before Sikkim merged with India an expedition taking off from the Sikkim side could only do so if it gave a solemn assurance that the expedition would terminate a few metres short of the summit. So, till 1979 the peak had been 'reached' only twice (British, 1955 & Indian, 1977) and because the expeditions were bound by promises to Sikkim both the expeditions returned without actually setting their feet on the summit. In 1979 Dough Scot, Pete Boardman, Joe Brown and Joe Tasker climbed the mountain from the Nepal face and therefore were not bound by any promises to stay off the summit. On 16 May the team was just three metres short of the summit when the honourable mountaineers turned back in deference to the Sikkimese sentiment. Significantly, this was the first oxygen-unassisted endeavour. Tasker was to later write, "**The obligation to respect what was sacred to another people was beyond promises.**"

THE BETTENS



Everest is barely visible from Darjeeling and to even see a small bit of the tip, jutting out from the lesser mountains in the front, it is necessary to travel to hilltops like the Tiger Hill or to Sandakphu and Phalut. In fact, Everest is neither in Darjeeling district nor anywhere close to it and yet the

district can lay claim a reasonably good association with the mountain. Even if we were to reject that Maurice Wilson's tragic venture had, for all practical purposes, commenced from Darjeeling there were numerous other expeditions that were officially flagged off from the district. In fact Darjeeling and Kalimpong were the undeclared official towns for launching any Everest expedition and the district being the principal area from where the Sherpas were recruited it was only natural that Darjeeling should walk off with the honours. Rather unfortunately, the expedition that became the first to conquer Everest was not launched from Darjeeling, but from Kathmandu. Nevertheless, justice, honour or the simple continuation of the district's association with the mountain was preserved by Tenzing Sherpa of Darjeeling by being the first co-conqueror of the mountain with Edmund Hillary. Other Sherpas from Darjeeling followed Tenzing's footsteps

and many became household names in the world of mountaineering: Nawang Gombu (first to climb Everest twice), Ang Kami (youngest Everest climber in 1965), Kusang Sherpa (four times Everest topper), and legends like Ang Tshering, Nawang Topgay, Nima Tashi, Da Namgyal to name just a few. However, the world was changing and so were the practices associated with mountaineering and when the first successful Everest expedition took off from Kathmandu, on 10 March 1953, perhaps it was a signal that Darjeeling no longer had a monopoly on being the centre for expeditions to Everest and other mountains in the Himalaya. Later expeditions began to recruit Sherpas from Kathmandu and even went shopping as far a field as the Sherpa heartland of Namchi Bazar and Solu-Khumbu to ferret out the finest climbers. Darjeeling, despite having the impressive Himalayan Mountaineering Institute (HMI) and a history of successful Everest climbers, gradually became more of a trekkers' haunt than a mountaineer's destination. In a bid to commemorate the golden jubilee of the historic success of May 29, 1953, by its first director, Tenzing Norgay, and possibly also to erase the growing impression that Darjeeling and the Institute were have-beens in mountaineering annals a strong team to Everest was flagged off in the last week of March 2003. On 21 May, Kusang Dorji, an instructor with the HMI, and Nadre Sherpa of the Sonam Gyatso Mountaineering Institute (Sikkim), made it to the top. The success ought to boost the image and morale of the HMI and also bring in focus the much-required attention the Institute deserves. But in all fairness it must be said that the district's fame has many more attributes than just mountaineering. The number of scholars, travelers, adventurers, leaders of national and international repute and other celebrities who have had proud, protracted or very personal connection with the district is just enormous. The district provides a unique opportunity to study various Tibeto-Burman languages, trans-Himalayan cultures, mountain geology, Himalayan flora and fauna, anthropological diversity

and a spectrum of religious practices ranging from Hinduism as practiced by the Nepalis, including the numerous forms of shamanism followed by these people, on the one hand to the four major schools of Mahayana Buddhism occasionally heavily watered down by the ancient Bon religion and at times in their purest forms on the other. These advantages draw scholars of various disciplines to Darjeeling district in fair numbers but what draws the majority of the people to the district's hills, year after year, is its scenic beauty and the crisp climate. So every summer and autumn, droves of people from the hot, humid and dusty plains of India travel to the hill stations and while other hill stations may provide altitude, climate and exotica as same as Darjeeling none can boast of affording such a magnificent view of the Himalaya especially with Kanchenjunga, arguably the most beautiful mountain in the world, with her lateral sisters thrown in for a visual feast at the eye level. The botanist-writer Sir Joseph Dalton Hooker who stayed a short while (1848-49) with the retired diplomat, Brian Hodgson, tucked away on the Jalapahar hill of Darjeeling, probably came closest to describing the visual delight that Darjeeling is: "The view from his windows is quite unparalleled for the scenery it embraces, commanding confessedly the grandest known landscape of snowy mountains in the Himalaya, and hence in the world. ...The most eloquent descriptions I have read fail to convey to my mind's eye the forms and colours of the snowy mountains, or to my imagination the sensations and impressions that rivet my impression to these sublime phenomena when they are present in reality: I shall not therefore obtrude any attempt of the kind upon the reader. ...views elude all attempts at description, they are far too aërial to be chained to memory and fade from it so fast as to be gazed upon day after day, with undiminished admiration and pleasure, long after the mountains themselves have lost their sublimity and apparent height." He goes on to describe that the extent of the range seen was comprised within an arc of eighty degrees (from

north 30° west to north 50° east), or nearly a quarter of the horizon, along which the perpetual snow formed an unbroken girdle or crest of frosted silver; and in the winter, with snow falls extending the range, the white ridge stretched for more than a hundred and sixty degrees. Sir Joseph was so impressed that he deemed: "No known view is comparable with this extent..." One could, of course, get a more extended view from Tiger Hill and even a greater range from Sandakphu, both of which are in Darjeeling while what extended grandeur awaits the traveler at Phalut is better left unsaid and best experienced.

Darjeeling's Toy Train, now declared a World Heritage by the UNESCO, is another attraction that brings people to Darjeeling. Train buffs have even formed organizations in the United Kingdom, Australia, Canada and India solely to preserve this marvel of a railway in Darjeeling. The steam engine, some of them over a hundred years old, chug through cryptomeria forests and tea plantations, often tooting right through villages giving the visitors a unique ride commencing at almost sea level, with tropical climate and Aryan people, to terminate at over 7,000 feet height, with temperate vegetation predominantly Mongolian people. No mention of Darjeeling could be complete without a note on Darjeeling tea and this produce of the district has been heaped with superlatives for its aroma, taste, tone, clarity of colour and the stimulating effect on the mind. Today, no matter where tea may be produced and regardless of how good the produce might be, the gold standard remains the tea from Darjeeling. Tea has become such an identifying feature of the district that the Concise Oxford English Dictionary does not define 'Darjeeling' as a town or a district but puts it down as: **"Darjeeling/ da:'dzi:li / n. a high-quality tea from Darjeeling in NE India."**

The tea industry has also produced many icons like the pioneer Wernicke, planter-ornithologist Louis Mandelli, master planter Ramsingh Rai, non-white pioneer proprietor Bipradas Pal and many others. These people and the others that followed all struggled against odds they had no clue about and eventually pooled their experience and the knowledge gained to make Darjeeling tea what it is today. Through trial and error the plantations evolved into profit making ventures and holding the reigns of each success there always stood the all-powerful Manager with loads of experience and a wealth of knowledge gained through personal and related experiences. He was metaphorically the judge, jury and the executioner within the confines of his plantation. He was supported by a crew of faithful subordinates, the Assistant Managers, who walked the plantations' last mile every day, liaised with the labours, struggled with the accounts, unfailingly fired the factory engines, and also worshipped or flattered the all-powerful Managers with never a grudging word. These men never knew when the following day's work would end and when the next holidays would commence. Being a puppet at the hands of a Manager, they bore all indignities heaped upon them by him, and even by his wife. They plodded on day in and day out desperately clinging on the status of *chota* (junior) Manager driven by the one distant silver lining that one day they too would qualify to become a tea estate Manager.

There are many stories, some amusing and some tragic, of these Assistant Managers in the Darjeeling plantations and the story of the Malcolm Betten illustrates to some extent how the Assistants managed their miserable lives. When Malcolm Betten joined the Nagri Farm Tea Estate in 1925 as an Assistant Manager he was a young engineer enthusiastic and excited at the prospect of facing the challenges of the wild and exotic Asia. He was mentally prepared to take on the rough and tumble of a life in a remote tea plantation far removed from refined colonial society. Little did he know that life in

Darjeeling tea plantations, at least if one was the Manager, at times compared well and could even occasionally demand a little more cultural refinement than back home in England. In fact it was a time when Victorian etiquette dictated the way one dressed and behaved at the Darjeeling plantations and Malcolm was to get a taste of it at the Nagri Farm Tea Estate. Having sailed for several weeks to arrive at Calcutta he got on the overnight train to Siliguri from where he boarded the miniature 'toy train' run by the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway Company. At Sonada, he got on to a pony and rode toward the tea estate leaving his luggage to the care of coolies who were to porter them to his bungalow. By the time he reported his arrival at the Manager's bungalow it was already late into the evening and as he approached the grand house he must have felt a warm sense of relief. A good number of Europeans had gathered there for it was the New Year's Eve and an air of festivity hung in the atmosphere. It was a perfect time to arrive, especially so because his boss, the Manager, was in a mood to entertain and celebrate. Little did Malcolm know that it was considered improper to present oneself at the Manager's bungalow, in the evening, informally dressed and to do that on the New Year's Eve with several guests in attendance was absolutely unimaginable to the prudish tea estate Managers. Malcolm's luggage was still to arrive which meant that he could not be attired according to the protocol of the tea gardens and the management was in no mood to deviate from a tradition that they had nurtured for many years. Malcolm spent his first New Year's Eve in Darjeeling, dining alone.

His life was a lonely learning process of trying to understand the intricacies of the tea industry while simultaneously learning to pick up the rudiments of the Nepali language. However, he was fortunate in the sense that while other tea companies barred their Assistant Managers from marrying early, his company had no such restrictions. And so it was that after a couple of years his fiancée arrived at Kolkata (Calcutta

then) but the leave granted to Malcolm was so brief that it is said that they got married “more or less straight from the boat”. The tea companies of those days put a value on each working day and concessions were rare and so that all our young Assistant Manager got was one night’s leave for a honeymoon following which it was off on the overnight train to Siliguri and back to the grind of the tea estate.

His bride, Eva, found life at Nagri Farm a whole lot different from what she was accustomed to. She described her abode as a “pimple” on a small knoll consisting of a central sitting room with two rooms leading from it. The attached bathrooms contained a washstand, a tin bath and a unique contraption very aptly called the “thunderbox” into which the bungalow’s occupants daily emptied their bodily waste. It was left to the sweeper to empty the contents of the thunderbox and get it prepared for the next day’s droppings, thunders, showers and all. The kitchen too was a sort of an eyebrow raiser for its main content was a decrepit iron stove of ancient lineage, there was no laid on piping for running water and the supply came through a tap outside which was shared by all the servants as well as those living in the factory opposite the bungalow. The factory itself was so close that it was possible to look straight into Eva’s little cottage and the Factory Assistant Manager never failed to take advantage of the opportunity.

Life was, to say the least, as tough as it could possibly get. There were no telephones, the Assistant Managers were not permitted to go Darjeeling town, this privilege being reserved for the Annual General Meeting when there would be much drinking and dancing, and the only social contact was with other planters who could be anywhere between and occasionally beyond ten to fifteen miles of precipitous pony

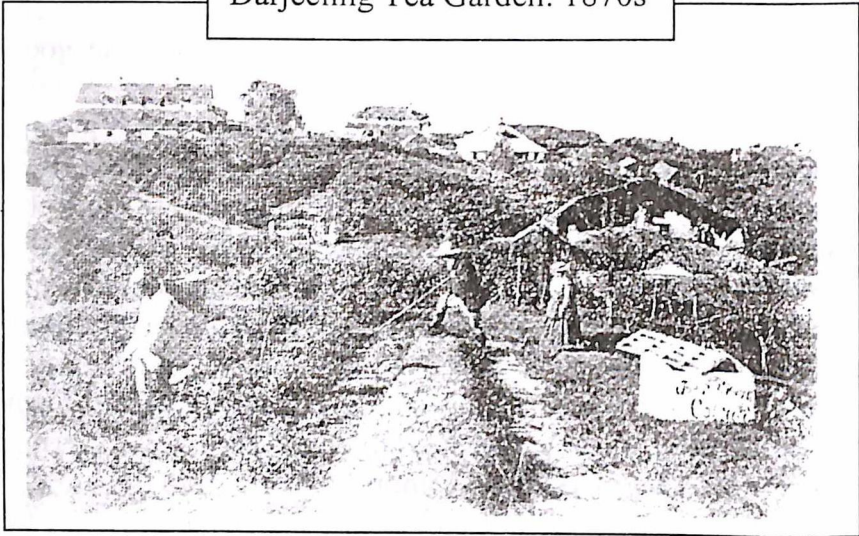
rides. Under the circumstances the *dak-wallah*[†] literally became their sole contact with the outside world and to Eva these men were the Public Relations Officers for they not only brought mail but also delivered parcels, gifts and messages from one garden to another. Magazines, often several months old, would do the rounds of the tea estates and they were eagerly waited upon, for they would not only provide good reading material but also keep them informed of the 'news' and trends back home. 'Home Mail' or letters from England arrived on Mondays and Tuesdays were the housewives' days to write home and by the afternoon all letters had to be completed, else the mail would not make it that week to the boat sailing back to England. The only thing that arrived daily and 'on time' was the Calcutta daily, *The Statesman*, which would reach the tea estate a day old. Running the kitchen, this was Eva's primary activity, posed a bit of problem too. Each household had a '*roti wallah*'* who would once a week bring bread, vegetables and other minor luxuries from the town. Should the *roti wallah* fall sick or go on leave she had to depend on the Marwari trader. It was this ubiquitous trader in every tea garden, who would willingly part with his goods on credit and claim exorbitant interest at a later date. The Manager's compound supported a small farm which meant that the availability of vegetables never posed a problem but what generated difficulty was the fact that Eva and Malcolm had no say at all in the choice of vegetables, which depended entirely on the *mali* (the gardener) who would set off to the Manager's bungalow each morning and come back with whatever he thought were necessary. The tea estate was originally meant to have a good sized farm, and so the name Nagri Farm Tea Estate, but this got whittled down to the small plot in the Manager's compound and since this was sufficient to supply the needs of the small European

[†] Non-official mailman employed by the tea garden.

* The local term for a 'bread man' who in reality brought, besides bread, the grocery for the planters.

community on the estate the intended farm never took off. The *malis* were not always honest and often some vegetable would be 'lost' on their way but for the Bettens this was a small price to pay as long as there were vegetables on the table everyday.

Darjeeling Tea Garden: 1870s



Eva and Malcolm were later transferred to Tukvar Tea Estate and this was much closer to Darjeeling and the *roti wallah* could go to town every day unlike Nagri Farm where it was only once a week. The couple endured the difficult years in both the gardens, spent the hard war years keeping the gardens in good shape, survived the earthquake that leveled large parts of Darjeeling and even managed to avoid the leopards that were a threat and menace in Nagri Farm. An incident in connection with leopards must be mentioned for it illustrates the respect, or should we call it dread, the Manager commanded. Occasionally the Assistant Managers were invited to the Manager's bungalow for tea or dinner and this at was considered somewhat of a great privilege. On presenting one self at the Manager's bungalow, regardless of how dusty or slushy the path was or how many bushes and brambles came in between, it was expected of the Assistant to be

'dressed' for the occasion. After one such formal evening, Eva and Malcolm, having just completed their dinner, were about to return home which was good two miles away when suddenly there were shouts of "Chituwa! Chituwa!" or translated from Nepali, "Leopard! Leopard!" In fact, everybody could hear the call of a leopard and a concerned Manager gave Malcolm his gun and few cartridges. This was very comforting. Malcolm put the cartridges in his pocket and with the gun in one hand and a 'haat butti' (hand lantern) in the other, the couple fully reassured with good firepower, took the journey home. Fortunately nothing happened on the way and they reached home without an incident. And then, in the safety of their home, having nothing much to, Malcolm examined the firearm out of sheer curiosity. It was only then that he discovered the narrow escape he had had. To his ultimate horror he found that none of the cartridges fitted the bore of the gun. The next day the gun and the cartridges were thankfully returned, and in the manner of all good Assistant Managers not a word was said about the grave mismatch.

Malcolm, of course, eventually did become a Manager and he too had his own bunch of Assistant Managers. But by then living condition in the plantations had improved considerably and the bungalows were bigger and neater, the sanitation was modern, water flowed in the kitchen and the toilets, trips to Darjeeling bazaar to let off steam were not too rare and in general the lives of the Assistants were not in any way so miserable as in the past. Nevertheless, some customs remained unchanged: the Manager's bungalow was his castle, his actions were never questioned and his pronouncement was the law.

Nuns' Tale

It is generally believed that Loreto Convent of Darjeeling was founded on 10 October 1846 with Mother M Teresa Mons and two Irish nuns pioneering the effort. Jennifer Fox, a daughter of a tea planter and a Darjeeling-born lady of 1936, who has done quite a bit of research writes that there were actually five nuns involved. The concept of opening the convent goes to Archbishop Carew who, realizing that Darjeeling provided an excellent climate for health, decided that a group of Calcutta Loreto nuns should establish two schools there, one for girls and another for boys. The story goes on that the Archbishop, not really familiar with the route, suggested that two nuns should travel to Darjeeling on "dawk-palanquin." Well, it was easier said than done.

In those days a journey on "dawk" meant getting into rather uncomfortable palanquins and traveling at nights to avoid the heat of the day. The palanquin or palkee-bearers averaged 3 miles an hour with a new set of bearers taking over at every 12 miles interval. Judge Longnan was consulted and the horrified judge informed the Archbishop of the four hundred miles of dust-tracks, three hundred bridges to be crossed and of the pains of sleeping in the palanquins. He scoffed at the idea commenting that Darjeeling residents could be counted on the fingers of one hand and a school there would be absolutely useless. The Archbishop, looking way beyond the immediate problems and prospects, sent five young nuns along with a chaplain to Darjeeling on 10 May 1884. Sending the team on a seven-week up-river journey solved the problems of dusty roads, unstable bridges and cramped up palanquins. The boat journey though was by no means a luxury and the nuns had to confront "days of muggy heat", rains and storms including the toiling pace of the boat struggling against the current. Reaching Kishengunj was a relief and the District Commissioner's house a haven. From there onwards they were to travel in a most peculiar form of transport that consisted of a box like structure with wooden wheels pulled by four men in the front and pushed by two from behind. The ride was backbreaking since the wheels did not possess springs and pneumatic wheels were many years away. Nevertheless, the sisters were happy that they were heading closer to their destination when suddenly the silence was broken and along with it also the prospect of a school at Darjeeling, well almost. There were alarmed cries of "bagh! bagh!" (tiger! tiger!) and the terrified men folks disappeared in all corners leaving the nuns to the mercy of the beast or a quick answer to their prayers. After some anxious moments of worried waiting, and spontaneous supplications to the Lord, the men returned satisfied that the tiger had taken its own course. The party then resumed their journey and shortly Darjeeling had its own Loreto Convent.

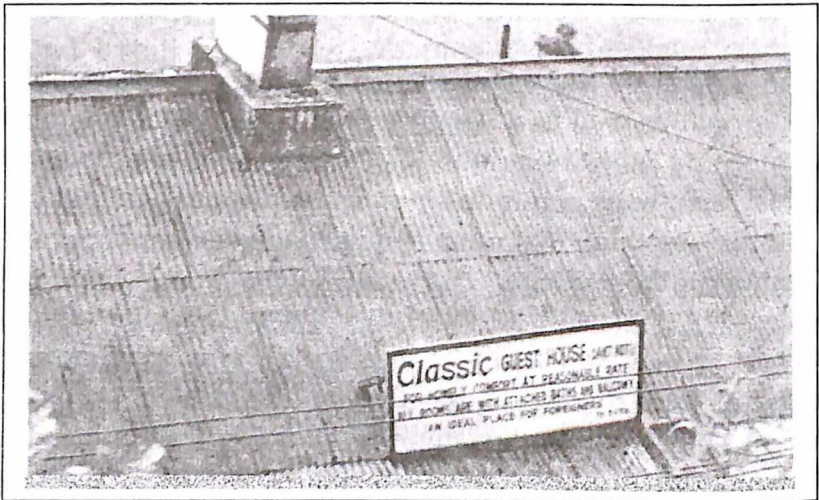
they had left behind and in this evocative effort they even gave their homes English names like Ivanhoe, Dale, Colinton, The Eagle's Nest, The Shrubbery; and their surroundings had names like Birch Hill, Commercial Row, Southfield, North Point, The Mall; and the roads were called Auckland Road, Ashley Road, Hooker Road etc. A large part of Darjeeling was made truly European in every sense and the Brits loved every bit of it. Darjeeling, like the other hill stations, became popular not only because it provided them an English or British settings and a congenial climate but also because the place gave an exclusivity of disconnection with the rest of India and the Indians. However, with the passage of time the wealthy Indians began to make inroads into this European bastion. The first to break into this European sanctuary was the Maharajah of Cooch Behar who bought The Shrubbery but had to let go of the property in 1877 to the government. The Maharajah subsequently made Colinton his summer resort, and following him were Barrister P.L. Roy (Rainbow), Rajah of Digapatia (Girivilash), Lawyer N.C. Bose (Baghmarie), Sir R.N. Mukherjee (Southfield) and Maharajah of Burdwan (Rose Bank). The Indians gradually began to take over from the British and of all the Indian communities who have made Darjeeling their second home the Bengali community, possibly because of their proximity to the station, easily outdid the others. The hills of the district are even today home to many Bengalis, some of them having longer acquaintance with the place than many who flaunt themselves as native sons. Towards the end of the nineteenth century amongst the regular visitors to Darjeeling were members of a certain Bengali family, the Bonnerjees of Kidderpore, and when one of the Bonnerjee girls, Pramila, married a certain Amiya Nath Chaudhury (Omi) and the couple continued the tradition of visiting Darjeeling every summer. Darjeeling became the couple's annual ritual and "Edelweiss", a large cottage close to Chowrasta, their summer address for several years. In 1919 the house owner sold Edelweiss and the Chaudhurys not being

able to rent it again decided to buy a property of their own. At that time, close to Chowrasta were a couple of modern buildings, *Wigwam* and *Dant Kothi*, made by two American dentists, Smith Brothers, who used to practice at Darjeeling in the summers and at Calcutta for the rest of the year. The properties were for sale and the couple decided that the houses suited them fine. Omi being a very successful barrister at Calcutta had no problem in meeting the cost. Of the dentist partners one was retiring and the other was given *Dant Kothi* on rent while the couple decided to keep *Wigwam* for themselves. *Wigwam* was one of the most modern houses in the district with large bedrooms, large bathrooms and a large lavatory and it even had "modern sanitation, then almost unique in Darjeeling." Everything about the house was large and appealing. Huge windows provided beautiful views of the hills, the dining room was grand in size and so was the kitchen and the spacious drawing room with wooden parquet floor made it one of the best houses in the station. The cottage had something else that has been described as "unknown and undreamed of in Darjeeling" and to a large extent that is true even today: it was centrally heated.

Omi added an annexe containing two more bedrooms and a bathroom as well as a lavatory making the place appropriately larger and more luxurious for a barrister of his repute. There must have been numerous minor internal and external changes too but one thing that remained unchanged throughout was the name of the cottage, *Wigwam*. There was no question of changing the name of the other cottage, as the name *Dant Kothi* (Hindi/Nepali for 'Tooth Villa') was most appropriate having been rented to the one of the dentist brothers who wanted to continue his summer clinic in Darjeeling. But the Chaudhuris did receive suggestions from friends and relatives that an Indian name to the house would have been more appropriate and the name *Wigwam* was foreign for an Indian couple's dwelling. Amiya Nath Chaudhury, taking the cue in

like a typically barrister-like fashion decided to check the proper meaning of the name before any alteration was resorted to. Omi must have been thoroughly surprised and probably equally pleased to find that the dictionary defined *Wigwam* as “an Indian dwelling” in reference to the Red Indian’s tent. Amiya concluded that although the Indians living in Darjeeling’s *Wigwam* were of a different breed they were Indians all the same. Justifiably, Amiya closed the case and *Wigwam* remained *Wigwam*.

I visited *Wigwam* in 2003 and 2004 and was surprised and delighted that the house was still called *Wigwam*. A servant at the cottage informed me that the walls were made of mud and I thought he was joking for they appeared very much to be of concrete. Few knocks with my knuckles and the low thuddy response of mud changed my opinion. Though the central heating has been removed and a few minor changes have been made the mud walls have been left in their pristine finish and despite being over a hundred years old not a single crack is visible.



Although Wigwam retains its old name and décor, Dant Kothi is Classic Guest House today. I have not seen the interior but the roof sure needs a fresh coat of paint.

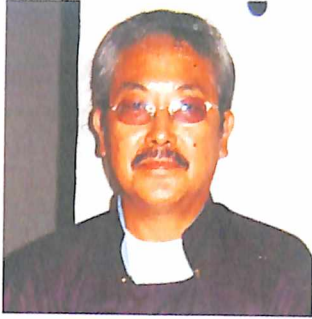
110% Kindergarten Adults

Darjeeling Government High School initially opened up in 1856 as the Bhutia Boarding School. The school was never designed to produce educated gentlemen but spies who could sneak into Tibet and spy for the British. Accordingly a lot of emphasis was put into the science of land surveying and the study of the Tibetan language. The school admitted only the children of the Bhutia and Lepcha communities because they could easily be mistaken for Tibetans unlike the Indians and most of the Nepalis. Among the assortment of the students it was not uncommon to find fully-grown up adults learning the ABCs of modern elementary education. These adults were naturally slow learners and the problem was compounded by their excessive absenteeism. The teachers could scold the younger children and even threaten them with corporeal punishment but the 'primary section men' were hardy chaps of the hills, some as old as their masters, and there was little the teachers could do.

Oftentimes the tutors, mostly from the plains of Bengal, just gave up in sheer frustration because some of the pupils when pulled up for truancy nonchalantly stated that they had left the hostel to meet their wives.

Over the years the number of adult students dropped and the school was merged with the Darjeeling Government High School but the old tradition of making the Bhutia boys to compulsorily study the Tibetan language was maintained. The boys did not mind the obligation but they repeatedly complained to their Tibetan teacher that his strict and stingy marking affected their rankings against those who studied Nepali or Hindi. After due enquiry the Tibetan master was convinced that his stringency actually relegated his boys to inferior positions in the overall rankings. The master decided to make adequate compensation. He surprised his pupils and perhaps everyone else by giving his better students

110 out of 100 marks.



“Dr. Sonam B. Wangyal is eastern Himalayan region’s one of the most prolific writers in the English language. He has been a regular contributor to major journals like ‘Himal, The Himalayan Magazine’ (Kathmandu), ‘The Statesman’ (Nbplus, Siliguri edition), ‘Himalayan Times’ (Kalimpong) and numerous other journals, souvenirs, directories and related materials. Besides his recent successful book on Sikkim and

Darjeeling this collection of some of his essays is a wonderful reading that generates humour, sadness, surprise and occasionally even manages to startle the reader. I thoroughly enjoyed it from the first page to the last.”

Buddhiman Yonzon

* Central Committee Member

- All India Nepali Bhasa Samity
- Bharatiya Nepali Rastriya Parishad

“A very interesting work...a happy blend of historical facts with the mysterious and the unknown. Behind the portrayal of some characters one discovers the author’s keen sense of scintillating wit.”

Professor Samten Norbu

* Scholar in Tibetan Buddhism and Retired Professor of Tibetan Language, North Bengal University.

“I enjoyed reading the book.”

Dr. Indra Bahadur Rai, Ph.D

- * The leading Nepali littérateur of the present times.
- * Recipient of all relevant awards for Nepali literature.

“This book contains a number of very interesting historical, cultural and thought provoking essays...the versatility of the author on multifarious subjects has found expression in his facile and lucid writings.”

Krishna Singh Moktan

* Former Inspector General of Prisons, West Bengal, and the recipient of Bhanu Puraskar, Govt. of W. Bengal.

N9638
₹ 450.00