

The airport at Bagdogra seemed to be slightly bigger than what I remembered from my trip in 2006. Bigger and more spruced up. It might be bigger but, like most small airports, we still walk to the arrival terminal from the aircraft. As after any flight, the first call of business for almost everyone on the plane is to use the facilities. And here I noticed that the toilets were clean and well maintained. This was an illusion as I realized soon after coming out of the airport. Like every other airport in the country, there was complete chaos as soon as one stepped out of the building. Taxi drivers accosting you for custom, cops and security personnel yelling at cars to move it and not block the road and of course a long line of vehicles waiting on the road leading to the airport building.

Our taxi driver Sunil said he is waiting outside the airport since the parking charges inside are exorbitant. After some confusion, we managed to find him and walk some distance to where his Wagon-R was parked. He was going to be our driver cum guide cum native informant for the next 5 days.

Soon we are on our way to Kalimpong. The drive through Siliguri and its suburbs is as chaotic as I recall from my previous trip. As in any other non-metro in the country, the traffic is heavy and multi-modal on roads which are not equipped to carry such a high volume of vehicles. Add to this the chaos of vendors taking up a fair part of the road makes it like any other small town. Except here there are malls and huge billboards for upscale gated communities being developed with “semi-private pools and a view of the hills”. And yes, Mamta Banerjee and her nephew waving at us from hoardings at every intersection.

Crossing through various habitations, an army camp and a dense jungle with wonderful *sal* trees, we reach Sevoke, the place where the road joins the Teesta river. This small town is like any other roadside town along a major highway. It is also the site of the famous Coronation Bridge- the gateway to the Northeast. The bridge is quite charming with a single arch. Sunil proudly informs us that the bridge is over a hundred years old though a quick look at Wikipedia tells us that it was completed in 1941.

After Sevoke, the route is very scenic with the road being flanked by the Teesta gorge on one side and hills on the other. The gorge is narrow and imposing but the river here does not look all that impressive. The reason, as Sunil points out helpfully is because of the dams upstream, some of which we pass on our way to Kalimpong.

The traffic on the road is heavy, especially in the opposite direction. This two-lane road, apart from being the only route to the hill districts of Darjeeling and Kalimpong, also connects the plains to Gangtok and other places in Sikkim. The usual taxis ferrying tourists to scenic locales, trucks carrying supplies from Siliguri and of course Army convoys. The problem is that if one of these vehicles breaks down, the road is essentially blocked on one side leading to back-ups several miles long as we saw on our way up to Kalimpong.

After about 2 hours driving along the right bank of the Teesta, we finally reach Teesta Bazaar, where the road forks. Crossing the Teesta takes one to Kalimpong and Gangtok and going straight to Darjeeling and Kurseong. A few miles after crossing the bridge there is another fork where we turn towards Kalimpong.

The drive from the Teesta to Kalimpong is very scenic. Passing through deodar forests the road has little traffic which was a relief. Clearly Kalimpong is not a very popular destination with the tourists. The road itself is quite treacherous though with many hairpin bends. Some of these are not the usual hairpin bends one normally sees on hill roads. These are what Sunil called *jalebis*- the road takes a complete circle with a very small radius, all the time with a gradient. In fact on one such turn, there is an underpass and then one takes a complete circle and goes over it!

We pass a desolate Covid Check Camp on the way. Sunil tells me that during Covid, all drivers were supposed to get their temperatures checked before they could go towards Kalimpong. To circumvent this, the taxi drivers who would have driven for several hours, would stop some distance away from the camp and drench their faces with cold water before getting their temperature checked. Indian ingenuity has no limits!

The names of the small habitations on the way are very logical- one mile, two mile and so on till Kalimpong. At some point, the road forks with one going to Kalimpong town and the other towards our destination- Chibbo village. It is clear that Chibbo and other places on this road are not terribly important since as soon as we turn, the road becomes terrible.

Chibbo is a tribal village which is located on the other side of the hill from Kalimpong town. The village is quite spread out though sparsely populated like most hill villages. The population is mostly Tamang though the overall tribal population of Kalimpong district is dominated by the Lepchas.

We reach our host's place which is a small house surrounded by a forest on one side and habitation above. It overlooks the valley and across the valley, one could see the ridge where Darjeeling is located and another ridge with Namchi in Sikkim. Namchi is the place where the administration has constructed a tourist attraction with replicas of the Char Dham temples complete with a massive statue of Shiva whose outline is visible from the place where we are staying. One can also, on a clear day, make out the Kanchenchunga in the distance, beyond the Namchi ridge.

After some lunch our host takes us to meet her friend in the village who runs what I believe is the largest nursery for cacti and succulents in Asia. It was truly huge and the sheer variety of cacti in there, from all over the globe was breathtaking. The nursery not only supplies these to other nurseries around the country but also exports them.

The weather forecast had been rain through the week that we were going to be there. We were prepared to be stuck indoors since the rains are heavy in that region. The average annual rainfall in about 3000 mm and during the monsoons, it is not unusual for the place to be cut off for days on end. However, the rain god's took pity on us and we got good weather with no rain during the day. Even at night there was only sporadic rain. This allowed us to actually go out and explore the region.

The next day Sunil came to take us to Darjeeling. We drive all the way down to the Teesta once again and cross it to drive along the right bank. Soon we leave the river and start climbing on a road which seemed to be worsening with every hair-pin bend. Looking down, we see the Rangeet gorge made by one of the major tributaries of the Teesta. There are lots of camp resorts at the confluence since the place is supposed to be ideal for white river rafting.

We pass several small habitations on the way. Lopchu with its tea gardens and also the Jain Chocolate Factory. When Sunil mentioned the "Chocolate Factory", I was picturing a Ghiradelli's replica nestled in the beautiful hills and forests of Lopchu. Except that the "Factory" is really a two room workshop which manufactures regular sweets which, I must admit, do taste good. The vegetation also changes as we climb up with deodar and pines replacing the *sal* trees. Lamhatta, another small village on the way, has an eco-park with the most gorgeous pine trees in a forest. The local community under some community development project has developed a part of the forest into this park with paths to explore the forest. When we went there, the clouds were coming in and it was

ethereal with the clouds blocking the view of the tall trees. One could almost picture Yash Chopra filming a romantic duet in this place at this time!

Darjeeling was a bit of a disappointment- the approach was very crowded and then there was no place to park once we reached the main city. To top it all, the crowds were like Karol Bagh on the Sunday before Divali. After driving around for some time, Sunil managed to find a place to park some distance from the Mall and we walked down to where all the action was. The Mall, like the Mall in Shimla, Mussorie and all the other hill stations popular with the British, is the center of all activity. This seems true for all the tourists atleast. The area around the Mall has been spruced up with fresh paint and beautification of the walls. This, I found out, is because one of the G-20 jamborees will be taking place here. Walking from the car to the Mall, I notice that the usual filth that accumulates in the hills when tourists take over is very much present here. Hillsides littered with empty Bisleri bottles, Uncle Chips wrappers etc. A visit by the G-20 delegates is like the Chief Minister visiting our neighbourhood- the route that he takes is cleaned up, the potholes patched, the hawkers removed for a couple of hours, the streets swept and cops posted on all intersections to avoid the usual logjams.

We have been told that Glenary's is the must-go to place in Darjeeling for food. Though there seem to be some changes in the menu to cater to the tourists used to eating Punjabi style Chow Mien, most of it seems to be unchanged from the days of the Raj. The food was actually quite good and very reasonably priced, at least by Delhi standards.

Sunil had been with us all along and was constantly on one of his phones- one of his phones was a fancy smartphone which it seems he only used for listening to Kishor Kumar songs on YouTube (of course with a Jio sim!) while driving and taking photographs or making video calls to his girlfriend in Siliguri. The other one was a basic Nokia phone which was used for calls. The conversation he was having was an animated one about some transactions and accounts. It turned out that Sunil was the Treasurer of the Taxi drivers union in Kalimpong and was being heckled by some driver who claimed he had paid his monthly subscription but it had not been recorded.

The Taxis in Kalimpong are quite expensive- partly because it is a hilly region and partly because, like in most hill stations, the drivers are unionized. They pay Rs 200-per month to the union. The union in turn, apart from looking out for them, also helps

them in case of need. If a driver has an accident, the union pays the medical expenses as well as a maintenance allowance to the family. If there is a marriage or death in the family, the union pitches in with some support.

We had wanted to get on the toy train, if for nothing else than to see how Sharmila Tagore might have felt when watching Rajesh Khanna croon "Mere Sapnon ki Rani". We saw the train at one of the stations- the tracks were running in the middle of the road that we were driving on. The compartment had changed beyond recognition- there were no longer any windows for Sharmila Tagore to stick her neck out of. Instead the whole compartment was now transparent so that one could enjoy a panoramic view of the hills. Seeing the crowds we decided to give it a pass and return to Chibbo.

The next day, once again the rain gods were benevolent and the day was clear. Our host decided that she will take us on a tour of Kalimpong town. Our first stop was the parish church of our host. St. Theresa's church is a short distance from main Kalimpong town. The church was built almost a hundred years ago and has been since restored several times. The altar is beautifully carved wood as are the pillars holding up the roof. The flooring has been changed to a marble one but some of the old wall paintings and the carvings on the pews are still original. Opposite the altar is the original organ which still works. However, as the Father woefully explained, they can't find anyone to play it anymore. It is still tuned every few years and a person comes in from Darjeeling to do it.

Just outside the church is a recently built campanile with a brass bell which is still rung to announce Sunday Mass. The congregation I am told, is not very large, about 1000 souls from the town and the neighbouring villages. Our host informs us that though there are many more Christians among the villagers, they are divided among the Catholics and various Protestant denominations. Some of the villages also have their own small church for regular services- the one in Chibbo is still under construction. Our host's mother had left the land and the money in her will for it to be built.

Kalimpong is situated on a ridge between two hills- Deolo and Durpin. On the way to Deolo we pass Dr. Graham's Homes. This school was established in the latter part of the 19th century by Dr. Graham, a Scottish missionary for taking care of the "poor white problem" of the Raj. This was the fate of the mixed race children, mostly born out of wedlock to British fathers and Indian mothers. They were basically abandoned by their

parents and left to take care of themselves. The institution, with a large amount of land and several buildings on the hillside was a self sufficient “commune” with a farm, workshops to teach the wards some trade as well as a bakery. The buildings are now abandoned and dilapidated though the school still runs for the local children.

At the top of Deolo is a hotel which also serves as a guest house for dignitaries. The gardens are very well maintained and the view is spectacular. Just below it is the starting point for paragliding, though seeing the 15 year olds who are presumably the “guides” who take you up in the air, doesn’t inspire any confidence.

To get to the Durpin hill on the other side of the ridge, we pass through Kalimpong town. The outskirts, such as they are, are just like any other small town with shops lining up the road. The houses in this case are below the shops on the hillside with steep stairs leading up to the road. The neighborhoods here are also somewhat segregated- we pass through one where all the shops (and presumably the houses below them) are owned by Muslims. Our host tells us that most of these are old time residents of the town. However, when we spot someone wearing the traditional ankle length pajamas and the checked headscarf, she says that these are the people who have been brought from Bangladesh and settled here for their votes. Unlike their local co-religionists, they are much more conservative and this leads to issues in the community.

The main bazar of the Kalimpong is quite crowded especially the main street called, very imaginatively, the Main Road. The shops here are bigger and almost all are owned by people who came here from the plains to settle years ago. I spoke to one shopkeeper who was from Purnea whose grandparents had come here to start this business. The hill-plain/“local”-non-local hostility must be playing out here too though I didn’t see any signs of it in my interaction.

The one thing I noticed in the main market was how fashionable the young women are in this place. Wearing trendy clothes and a lot of make-up, it seemed all of them were practicing for the ramp or atleast for making their own Insta reels. This also explained an inordinate number of beauty salons and hair dressing places that I saw in the town.

Before we get to Durpin hill, we stop at an old mansion which looks haunted. This is the house of Rabindranath Tagore where he spent several summers in his later life. It must have been grand in its time- with the arches, the pillars and the corridors. But now it is falling down. The view of the valley, once magnificent, is now blocked by the

Government Polytechnic with its ugly government regulation building. The grounds around the mansion are overgrown- Kalimpong weather is equally benign for orchids and weeds.

Although there is a plaque on the mansion informing the visitors about the importance of the house, it is strange that nothing is being done to restore the place. After all, Bengali's worship Tagore and given that Kalimpong is in West Bengal and more importantly, the majority of the tourists are Bengalis, it is surprising that the government has not made this into a museum.

Just above is the Crookety House. This is the house where Helena Roerich, the widow of the great Russian artist Nicholas Roerich came to live after her husband's death in 1947. The house had originally been built in 1930 for the daughter of John Graham, the founder of the eponymous school. There is another curious connection of the Roerichs and Tagore- in 1945, Tagore's grandniece, Devika Rani married Svetoslav Roerich, Nicholas' son.

The gates to Crookety House are closed and the guard refuses to let us in. The place is now owned by some Italian NGO which is making it into some kind of monument to peace. The house is being renovated and visitors are strictly not allowed. Our host tries to convince the guard but the guard keeps pointing to the surveillance camera on the gate to explain that he would lose his job if he lets us in. After some back and forth, the guard relents and lets us in only to the front lawn to take pictures.

The place is absolutely charming and has a very unusual architecture- all the first floor rooms have inclined roofs with red terracotta tiles. All the rooms seem to have fireplaces since there are several chimneys.

Durpin hill is where Kalimpong cantonment is located. The Army barracks and units are scattered all over the hill. The top of the hill has a large golf course with a breathtaking view of the valley below. There is also a guest house/tourist lodge next to it.

The Zang Dhok Palri Phodang Buddhist monastery, also known as Durpin Gompa is located on the hill. This is the largest monastery in Kalimpong and is the repository of a large number of sacred texts which were brought by the Tibetan lamas when they fled Tibet after the Chinese incursion in 1959. The monastery has some fabulous murals and

tankhas though many of them are covered by semi-transparent polythene sheets to preserve the colors from humidity and the elements.

Just behind the monastery are several memorial stupas commemorating the religious leaders and other great men and women. Helen Roerich was also cremated here and has a memorial stupa built for her.

We spent the next day and a half with our host at her place in Chibbo. She took us around the village and also told us about life there. Her grandfather owned a fairly large part of the village at one point. Then with time a part of it was sold or divided between various sons and daughters. With the Tenancy Reforms, the tenants working on his land were all given some land for their homes. Their houses are now just above our host's place. What was surprising was that all of their houses though small, are *pucca*. This I was told is a recent development courtesy the money provided by the Pradhan Mantri Gramin Awaas Yojana.

The development schemes of the government seem to be working well in this village. This might possibly be due to the fact that the village is close to the District Headquarters in Kalimpong. Or because the bureaucratic machinery is more efficient here, though this explanation seems unlikely. I am told by our host that most households have availed of the government schemes which provide assistance for piggeries, poultry and fish farming.

Our host's house, though small is very comfortable. And she and her son have been extremely warm and hospitable. From preparing meals which are not just delicious but also take care of our dietary restrictions to taking the time out to show us around the town and the village. The hospitality extends to even getting up very early to light the wooden fire for our baths on the day of our departure.

The village of course benefits from its proximity to the town in many ways. The natural (fertilized) eggs which the poultry produces are bought by the shopkeepers in town (for Rs 15 a piece) and then sold for Rs 20 for instance. For the garlic produced in a small patch behind the house to the avocados from the three trees in front- there is a market outside the village for all its produce.

Then there is the spirit of mutual assistance which though having a monetary element to it, still transcends it. At times of marriages or deaths, a lot of people would

contribute in any way they can. Some by loaning out the big utensils needed to cook, some by giving the firewood, some by lending the spare beds in their homes etc. This spirit of mutual assistance is visible in the Youth Club which runs in the village. Made with the help of grants from some foreign missionary agency on the land donated by our host, the building was made largely using voluntary labor. The place runs an informal school and also a Tae Kwando training place for the kids from the village and its neighbouring villages. The instructor is a local who happens to be a Tae Kwando expert. He is a police officer posted in Darjeeling and teaches the students on weekends when he visits his family in the village.

Our host has to rebuild a gazebo in her front yard. The go-to person for all these things is Bullo. Bullo is a plumber, a carpenter, a mason and also a butcher! Bullo is beholden to our host because she has been instrumental in getting his daughter admitted to a school and also getting a reduction in the tuition fees. So over the 4 days that we were there, Bullo worked on the gazebo. Shaping the wooden planks, building the foundation wall, leveling the ground etc. Of course he is paid. But the transaction is not purely monetary as both parties know well. Thus for instance, when Bullo's son comes over to give him some message, the son is asked by our host to clear the weeds and make the trellis for the French beans growing in the vegetable garden. The teenager, oblivious to the world with his earpods plugged in, worked for several hours in the Sun without any money.

And of course everyone knows everyone else. While taking a walk with our host, I noticed that almost every household we passed, she would stop and chat with the people there and enquire about their health or some recent event in their family. This also means I get to know a fair share of the village gossip as I walk around the village with our host!

Sunil picks us up at 730 am on the day of our departure. Our flight is in the afternoon, but having seen the traffic jams on the way to Kaplimong from Bagdogra, I want to be doubly safe. It turns out that we are lucky and not only are there no traffic jams but the traffic is also very light. We thus are at the airport with about 4 hours to spare.

The scene inside the airport is worse than what it is at New Delhi Railway station around the time of the Chatth festival. There are tons of people waiting for entry into

the terminal, and then many more waiting in line to get their bags scanned. We find a place to stand somewhere while we wait for the scanning for our flight to begin.

After checking in, there is another line for security. And as expected, here there is complete chaos. It turns out that one of the X-ray scanners is not working and so the ladies bags are also being scanned by the machine in the gent's line. After a while I hear a lady shouting at the top of her voice about a missing cell phone. The CISF person is trying to calm her down but she and her husband are not easily shut up. It turns out that someone picked up her phone after it had passed through the scanner. They try ringing the phone but get no answer. This goes on for some time and soon, as usual in such circumstances, there is a crowd around to pitch in with their comments and advice. Someone curses the facilities at the airport, while someone else accuses CISF of being in cahoots with thieves and a third offers some technical advice on how to trace the phone etc.

The airport is actually an air force establishment and so is closed for a certain period for civilian flights. This means that all the flights have to be accommodated in a limited time. And the airport cannot handle the rush given that this is the only airport serving the whole region including Sikkim. The only place we can find to sit is right next to one of those ubiquitous large screen TVs where 24 hour news channels always seem to be on. Shriill anchors are either gushing over the deeds of the powers that be or questioning the motives of the opposition parties. After a few days of sitting in the verandah in Chibbo and enjoying the silence as the night creeps over the valley, we are back in civilization!

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