

PUFF ADDICT

If you are an addict, in imprecise terms, then perhaps the memory of a trip back in time when the steam engines thundered the belly of India will cheer up your spirits. The black and white Colonial era left behind their impressions upon this land, and one of the most spectacular of those goodies, was the steam engine slicing through the parched brown lands, little children along the tracks waving impatiently. That they were waving goodbye to an era, if metaphorically, it dawned upon much later in time.

Darjelling, circa 2008, was that literal trip back in time. And right where we were, on that wooden bench befitting the station, a little mass of the blue steam engine pulled into view maneuvering a bend. Its sweet whistle as it strained along the tracks, white puffs of smoke emanating thickly from its vent, did give my spirits the elevated high. As it swayed onto the platform, the crew got down to its business, checking the bolts, the cranks, pouring oil, and all other odds defining last-minute-inspection. The tourists pre-booked for the joy ride, mused at the tiny blue and cream compartments. Children sneaked towards the engine and wondered dropped-jaw at this fable of steam like a missing chapter out of their childhood memories come alive.

This was the one of the newer engines built around 1920; numbered 804; `QueenoftheHills', a name pinched from the Hill Station itself, as Darjelling is lovingly dubbed. The engine was compact but mighty enough to drag 35 tons along the tracks, whereas the original ones built in 1881 could just boast of 7 tons drag load. Across the road, the 802 `Victor' was resting in the loco-shed being tanked up with coal carted in wicker baskets. The coolies made trip after trip, hauling black fuel into its furnace, while the archaic engine kept idling and sneezing out little bursts of white smoke thorough its 19 inch wheels.

The legend of the train's arrival dates back to the British days, and their affinity for tea, which made them line up the 83 km tracks from Siliguri to Darjelling. Till the late 1800, tea was transported by horse drawn carts down the snaking and tortuous `Hill cart' road to Siliguri, which was the nearest railhead then. Franklin Prestage, of Eastern Bengal Railway Company and Sir Ashley Eden, the lieutenant-Governor proposed the laying of the line. With the Government, spending a princely lac and a half annually, for the upkeep of the cart road due to rain damage, gladly accepting the proposal, work started in 1879. Completed in stages, first up to Tindharia, Kurseong and finally the entire line to Darjelling opened for traffic on 4th July 1881. The earliest locomotive came swanked with wooden benches and canvas canopies built in Manchester, England.

The whole line is a clever feat of engineering which includes five switchbacks and four complete loops. The last of these, the Batasia Loop, five kilometers short of Darjeeling is a popular spot for picnickers against the backdrop of the Mount Kanchendzonga, discerned on clear days. The technique of constructing the track on hilly terrain was adopted from the ways of an Austrian specialist, Chega who avoided digging through tunnels and lengthened the tracks through loops and reverses, where to encounter a steep slope the line sweeps in a bend over its own track forming a bridge, thus gaining more elevation.

Ghum, at 7407 ft, the second highest station in the world is about six kilometers uphill from Darjelling. The exposed brick masonry and pretty eaves boards, gives the station an absolute feel of ancientness. The `Mountaineer' with its rolling stock waited the arrival of the Joy train from Darjelling before continuing its journey. Whistling sharply, the drivers poised for whirring cameras in an achievement of a feat, dragging the old `iron horse' all the way up from Siliguri. As the Joy arrived, the enlightened tourists alighted to admire the waiting `Mountaineer' slither out of the station. Inching at first, straining and breathing out clouds of smoke, it picked up momentum as the carriages gradually rolled by. It would take at least thirty if not more minutes before concluding its journey at Darjelling, with a brief halt for its thirst. The steam locomotive being a notorious water guzzler, 40 gallons to a mile, water dischargers along the line come to service.

The ride on the `toy train' is a romantic approach to the mysterious Himalayas, a fact summed up on silver screen, with many Bolly., Tolly., and Hollywood stars endorsing it in an air of romance. Famous personalities have had their joy rides on the Darjelling Himalayan Railway (DHR). Twain, yes Mark Twain described his trip of 1895 as "The most enjoyable day I've spent on earth'. Soon his name was adorned on one of the carriages of those days.

Steam traction is fast disappearing, and DHR being no exception, there were calls to resign these engines to scrap yards. Attempts were also made to dieselize the locomotives, which met with sweet failure. Overpowered for the two feet tracks, many of them derailed, and the switchback to steam became imperative. The final endorsement came in 1999 by way of UNESCO inscribing DHR on the World heritage site, a status accorded to only one more railway, the *Semmering* from Austria. With UNESCO's rescue, the fantasy of the steam hauled engines will survive for many more years.

At Darjelling, with a sharp whistle the 28 ton `Mountaineer' came into view dragging its blue rolling stock. People along the cart road awed at the train thundering over the tracks. In between those white puffs, tourists contemplatively waved at the train. And perhaps, somewhere buried in their gray mass, they had their childhood memories too.