The Best of India, One Cup at a Time

By MATT GROSS

The cool, fertile foothills of the Indian Himalayas grow some of the world’s most prized teas. The region is also one of the most inaccessible in the world — 7,000 feet above sea level, reachable by a slow, narrow-gauge train or flights into Bagdogra, a military airport. But tea estates from Assam to Darjeeling are now converting British-built 19th-century bungalows into luxury lodgings, catering to a growing band of sophisticated palates seeking the perfect cup of tea.

A good time to visit is March, when the tea harvest begins. This is the first flush, when the youngest, most fragrant tips are plucked by workers on plantations across the state of West Bengal. Guests at Makaibari (www.makaibari.gq.nu), the world’s first certified biodynamic tea farm, can hike through rain forests in search of tigers and leopards, watch tea leaves being plucked from slopes as steep as 80 degrees, and sleep in a four-bedroom stone house.

And, of course, there are daily tastings of the farm’s crop, proclaimed as the Champagne of teas (and nearly as pricey — the Silver Tips Reserve sells for around $158 a pound in the United States).
THE Himalayas rose almost out of nowhere. One minute the Maruti Suzuki hatchback was cruising the humid plains of West Bengal, palm trees and clouds obscuring the hills to come; the next it was navigating a decrepit road that squiggled up through forests of cypress and bamboo. The taxi wheezed with the strain of the slopes, and the driver honked to alert unseen vehicles to our presence — one miscalculation, one near miss, could send the little car over the edge and down thousands of feet, returning us to the plains below in a matter of seconds.

For an hour or more, as we climbed ever higher, all I saw was jungle — trees and creepers on either side of us, with hardly a village to break the anxious monotony. Finally, though, somewhere around 4,000 feet, the foliage opened just enough to allow a more expansive view. From the edge of the road, the hills flowed up and down and back up, covered with low, flat-topped bushes that looked like green scales on a sleeping dragon’s flanks. Tiny dots marched among the bushes and along the beige dirt tracks that zigzagged up the hillsides — workers plucking leaves from Camellia sinensis, the tea bushes of Darjeeling.

Flying to a remote corner of India and braving the long drive into the Himalayas may seem like an awful lot of effort for a good cup of tea, but Darjeeling tea isn't simply good. It's about the best in the world, fetching record prices at auctions in Calcutta and Shanghai, and kick-starting the salivary glands of tea lovers from London to Manhattan.
In fact, Darjeeling is so synonymous with high-quality black tea that few non-connoisseurs realize it's not one beverage but many: 87 tea estates operate in the Darjeeling district, a region that sprawls across several towns (including its namesake) in a mountainous corner of India that sticks up between Nepal and Bhutan, with Tibet not far to the north.

Each has its own approach to growing tea, and in a nod to increasingly savvy and adventurous consumers, a few have converted bungalows into tourist lodging, while others are accepting day visitors keen to learn the production process, compare styles and improve their palates — a teetotaler's version of a Napa Valley wine tour, but with no crowds.

Still, such a trip requires a certain amount of fortitude, as I discovered when I set out to blaze a trail from estate to estate last March, during the “first flush” harvest, said to produce the most delicate, flavorful leaves. (The second flush, in May and June, is really just as good.) It wasn't just the roads once marvels of engineering, now tracks of terror that produce daily news reports of fatal plunges that made the journey a challenge. It was the egos.

The men who run the estates are royalty and they know it. When visiting their domains, you are at their disposal, not the other way around. At times, this can be frustrating; at others, delightfully frustrating.

I HAD my first such encounter — the latter sort — at Makaibari, an estate just south of the town of Kurseong, around 4,500 feet above sea level. Founded by G. C. Banerjee in the 1840s, during the region's first great wave of tea cultivation, Makaibari remains a family operation, run by Banerjee's great-grandson Swaraj — better known as Rajah.

Rajah is a Darjeeling legend: He's arguably done more for Darjeeling tea than anyone else in the district. Back in 1988, he took the estate organic; four years later, it was fully biodynamic, the first in the world.

Today, it produces the most expensive brew in Darjeeling, a “muscatel” that sold for 50,000 rupees a kilogram (about $555 a pound, at recent exchange rates of around 41 rupees to the dollar) at auction in Beijing last year. You won't often spot his logo — a five-petaled flower that resembles the underside of a tea blossom — on grocery store shelves, but you'll find his leaves in boxes marked Tazo and Whole Foods.
After checking into one of the six no-frills bungalows he has erected for tourists, I marched into the Makaibari factory (opened in 1859), climbed the wooden steps to Mr. Banerjee's office and sat down across the desk from a vigorous patrician with thick gray hair, a clean-shaven angular jaw and black eyebrows in permanent ironic arch. What, he asked, smoking a borrowed cigarette, did I hope to accomplish at Makaibari?

“Well,” I began, as the smell of brewing leaves wafted in from the adjacent tasting room, “I guess I'd like to see how tea is made.”

“Ha! You've come to the wrong place for that,” Mr. Banerjee declared with an eager grin. “This is the place to see how tea is enjoyed!”

Then he poured me a cup — bright but mellow, with a faint fruity sweetness that lingered on my tongue. It was to be the first of many perfect cups.

Enjoying tea at Makaibari was an involved business, one that began before I'd even woken up. At 7:30 every morning, a knock would come at the door of my bungalow, and Mr. Lama, the grandfatherly caretaker, would present me with a cup of fresh, hot "bed tea," which I'd sip groggily before leaving my woolen blankets for the chilly mountain air.

At breakfast in the glassed-in common room, more tea, after which I'd march down to the factory. On one side of the road were the dragon's green flanks. On the other, the red, white, yellow and blue prayer flags of a tin-roofed Buddhist monastery fluttered in the Himalayan breeze. Uniformed children on their way to school would shout “Hello!” while their parents, many of them Makaibari employees, would put their palms together and quietly say, “Namaste.”

In Makaibari's wood-paneled offices, I'd have a cup while waiting for Mr. Banerjee to arrive — it was with him, not some hospitality manager, that I would plan my days. Sometimes he'd show up early, other days late, but the office was filled with memorabilia with which to pass the time: portraits of Mr. Banerjee's father, grandfather and great-grandfather; certificates announcing new record prices; a chart of tea-tasting vocabulary; and a small tea plant that concealed two “tea devas,” curious insects whose bodies mimic the shape and color of a tea leaf.

After making his entrance — sometimes on his black gelding, Storm, but always wearing a highwaisted safari suit he designed himself — Mr. Banerjee would expound on everything from Rudolf Steiner's biodynamic farming theories to the fall of Atlantis to his youth on Carnaby Street in London, where he made a fortune before retreating to Darjeeling to grow tea.
Eventually, we’d move into the tasting room, where Mr. Banerjee would inspect the day’s production. No tea bags here — this was “SFTGFOP,” the labels noted: super-fine tippy golden flowery orange pekoe, the healthy, unbroken leaves from the very top of the bush. Earlier, an assistant had weighed out precisely two grams from several batches, steeped them in nearly boiling water for five minutes, and strained the tea into white ceramic bowls.

As with wine, tasting tea is no simple process of gulping and grading. Mr. Banerjee first inspected the infused leaves for color and nose, and only then sipped from each bowl, inhaling sharply to oxidate the liquid and release its flavors, and sloshing it loudly around his mouth before spitting it into a nearby tub. Then, with hardly a moment’s hesitation, he’d move on to the next bowl, and the next, and the next.

Then it was my turn.

“Taste those two,” Mr. Banerjee ordered the first day, “and tell me which you prefer.”

I did as he said. Both had the gentle floral aroma typical of first-flush Darjeelings, but the second had a pronounced strength and astringency that appealed to me, even though I knew that Darjeeling growers try for subtlety over punch. I told him my decision.

“Bah!” he said after resampling them. “That one only has undertones of peach. The first one has peach flavors and is much more complex. It’s far superior!”

I blushed — I had much to learn. And for the next few days, I studied hard.

First, I followed the tea pickers — mostly ethnic Nepali women — into the fields, where they spent all morning and all afternoon moving across the steep slopes like mountain goats, with bamboo baskets on their backs. “Dui path, ek suiro” was what they plucked — “two leaves, a bud” — slowly transforming each bush from bright yellowish green to the deep sheen of the older leaves.
In the factory, massive steel machines were turning the harvest into drinkable tea by the “orthodox” method. After 16 to 20 hours in withering troughs that remove much of their moisture, the fresh leaves go into rollers that curl them into precise formations once achieved only by hand. Then comes the fermentation, during which the tea develops its flavor, becoming a half-fermented oolong or a fully fermented black tea. Next the tea is fired — baked — to stop the fermentation, and the leaves are sorted, graded, packed and sent to the tasting room for Mr. Banerjee’s approval.

One day, he asked his manager, Deb Majumder, to bring me into “the inner sanctum,” the room where he prepares his special biodynamic fertilizer ingredients: oak bark, valerian flower, chamomile, dandelion. Another, quartz crystal, is ground up and mixed with large quantities of water in direct sunlight, supposedly absorbing cosmic energy and transferring it to the crops.

“At first,” Mr. Majumder said, “I didn’t think it would work. I thought things would go down. But after a few years, things began to improve.”

The harvest increased, but he said he noticed other benefits: two troublemakers assigned to mix the quartz solution calmed down and became friendly, a result perhaps of the cosmic energy.

After a few days of studying tea, exploring Makaibari’s hundreds of acres of wilderness and devouring home-style vegetarian meals, it was time to move on. For one thing, other teas were awaiting my taste buds, but I was also growing uncomfortable in my bare-bones bungalow, with its low-wattage lamps and frequent water problems. (Mr. Banerjee is in negotiations with hotel companies to turn the bungalows into an upscale eco-resort.)

A COUPLE of days later, however, I found myself no more relaxed. Instead, I was on a spine-shaking early-morning jeep ride down the worst roads I’d yet experienced. In 90 minutes, we’d traveled only 20 miles from Darjeeling town, the gritty, urban heart of the district, and I could hardly imagine a pleasant ending to the journey.

Then we reached an oasis, Glenburn. This century-old planter’s house, meticulously restored, stood on the edge of a plateau, its porch, strewn with sofas and chairs, looking out to the terraced slopes of the valley. The suites were vast, kitted out in teak club chairs and four-poster beds that evoked the Raj.
Breakfast had just begun, a fabulous spread of fresh-baked croissants with pomelo marmalade, a spicy Parsi scrambled egg dish, bacon, sausage, papaya, custard apple, orange juice. ... I sat down among the other guests, a mix of 10 Indians, Britons and Americans, and gorged in bliss.

The man responsible for Glenburn's tea was Sanjay Sharma, 33, whose self-satisfied smile suggested he was well on his way to developing a Rajah-size ego. And perhaps with good reason — at 28, he was appointed estate manager, the youngest ever in Darjeeling, he said. He has tried to push the production in new directions, and he asserted that Glenburn now ranked No. 17 in the district.

In my limited experience, it could have been No. 2 after Makaibari. Mr. Sharma's first-flush teas had that wonderful flowery scent and a long, lingering aftertaste, with just a hint of bite.

Alas, Glenburn was booked, so I endured the jackhammer trip back to Darjeeling, consoled by a single thought: soon, I'd be checking into Goomtee, a resort recommended by Nathmull's, the best tea shop in Darjeeling.

In terms of luxury, Goomtee stood somewhere between Makaibari and Glenburn. The comfy planter's house recalled 1950 rather than 1850, with huge rooms and a garden of azaleas in purplish bloom, and since the owners of the cypress-dotted estate were strict vegetarians, so were the guests — myself and four Japanese women from a tea-appreciation society. After checking in and getting a traditional welcome dollop of green-tinted rice pressed to my forehead, I followed them and their translator to the fields.

And I began to fade. Maybe it was that I'd seen too many tea bushes, maybe that I couldn't understand Japanese, maybe that later I once again found myself waiting in the office of another estate manager, wondering if I'd ever get a taste of his leaves.

I was about to drop off entirely when an assistant brought in a full tea service and poured us each a cup. I sipped. This is what they mean by “brisk,” a bright flavor that fills your mouth and wakes you right up.

“Oishii!” the women cooed. “So tasty!”
I soon learned more about briskness, when I set off one morning for Muscatel Valley, Goomtee’s farflung organic fields. It was a more serious hike than I’d expected, about four and a half miles up narrow, rocky paths that eventually led to an awe-inspiring landscape.

If Makaibari had been wild and Glenburn a fantasyland, then Muscatel Valley was positively prehistoric, with massive stone outcroppings amid lonely fields of tea bushes stretching into the Jurassic distance. Sunlit mist shrouded the far mountains, and all traces of civilization vanished. There was nothing but me and the tea.

When I returned to my room, I flopped down in exhaustion. It wasn’t the hike, though: I was tea’d out.

How, I wondered, could these professionals differentiate among the infinitely subtle gradations of flavor and scent? What stuck in my mind was the tea-ness of tea, floral aroma, hints of fruit and wood on the palate, and a fragile astringency that buzzed in my mouth long after the liquid had gone down. But which cup had that been, the Makaibari or the Glenburn? Or had I just imagined it?

A day later, on a slow Internet connection, I received an instant message from a friend in New York: Could I bring her some first flush?

“It’s for a dear friend from Darjeeling,” she wrote. “He’s dying, and he hasn’t lived in India for more than 60 years, but he still dreams about the tea.”

I had a mission. On my way home, I bought a wooden box of Makaibari’s first flush and delivered it to my friend soon after my return. A few weeks later, she forwarded me her 97-year-old friend’s thankyou e-mail note.

“It was so precious,” he wrote, “that I shared part of it with the Namgyal Monastery” in Ithaca, N.Y. The “beautiful little casket” of tea now sits at the feet of the monastery’s Buddha, he added, and “in the major pujas to come, it is your gift that will be brewed.”

Prayer ceremonies in the Finger Lakes, I thought: a fitting end for this tiny box of fragrant leaves. Namaste to that.
**VISITOR INFORMATION**

**HOW TO GET THERE**

**Continental Airlines** has daily direct flights from Newark to New Delhi; round trips start about $1,250 in early November. From New Delhi, **Jet Airways** (www.jetairways.com), **Indian Airlines** (www.indianairlines.in) and **Air Deccan** (www.flyairdeccan.net) fly to Bagdogra Airport near Siliguri, about 50 miles from Darjeeling.

The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway or Toy Train — a quaint, steam-powered narrow-gauge railway — will get you to Darjeeling town in seven hours from Siliguri; first-class tickets are 247 rupees; second-class, 38 rupees (about $6 and $1, at 41 rupees to the dollar).

A taxi ride will take three hours and cost 700 to 1,000 rupees. Hotels or tea estates can arrange for one.

**VISITING THE TEA ESTATES**

**Makaibari** (91-354-233-0181; www.makaibari.org) charges 750 rupees a person a night or 1,400 rupees for two, all meals included. Reservations can be made through its Calcutta office (91-33-2287-8560). Homestays with Makaibari workers can also be arranged.

Those seeking more comfortable lodging can book Cochran Place (132 Pankhabari Road, Kurseong; 91-354-233-0703; www.imperialchai.com), a colonial-style lodge about 15 minutes’ walk from Makaibari. Doubles range from 2,200 to 3,700 rupees with breakfast, but 50 percent less during monsoon season, mid-August to mid-September. Cochran Place will also arrange tours of Ambootia, another organic estate.
**Glenburn** (91-33-2288-5630; www.glenburnteaestate.com) charges non-Indians $400 a night for two, all meals included; day trips from $50 a person, including transportation. Glenburn will arrange helicopter arrivals for those unwilling to brave the bumpy journey.

Reservations for Goomtee (www.darjeelingteas.com) are handled by Girish Sarda at Nathmull’s Tea Room in Darjeeling (91-354-233-5066). Doubles are 5,600 rupees a night, all meals included. The best place to stay in Darjeeling town is the Elgin (91-354-225-4082; www.elginhotels.com). Doubles with all meals are 6,445 rupees. It offers quite a nice high tea every afternoon (250 rupees).

**BUYING TEA**

Every estate sells its own tea at a good price, but for the full spectrum, head to [Nathmull’s Tea Room](Laden La Road, Darjeeling; 91-354-225-6437; www.nathmulltea.com). It sells the best of the district, except Makaibari.
Olympics end tea break
SANJAY MANDAL

Calcutta, July 1: A consignment of Makaibari green tea will leave tomorrow for guests at the Beijing Olympics.

With the bandh in the hills temporarily suspended, Darjeeling tea gardens have rushed to send their consignments to Calcutta for export to the global auction markets.

After a break of nearly three weeks, the first consignment of second flush Darjeeling tea will be loaded on a Singapore Airlines flight tomorrow.

A 333kg consignment, which includes second flush green tea from Makaibari Tea Estate, costing Rs 7,000 per kg, will be sent for the Beijing Olympics. Two other consignments, of 616kg and 110kg, from other tea gardens will be flown to Tokyo.

“The consignment was scheduled to be sent on June 22 but it got delayed. It is one of our best quality teas and is sent for special guests at the Olympics,” said P.K. Chakraborty, manager, Makaibari Tea Estate.

Emirates is scheduled to carry Darjeeling tea after July 15, an airline official said.

Since June 10, no consignment of Darjeeling tea could be exported out of Calcutta’s airport and port because of the shutdown forced by the Gorkha Janmukti Morcha.
“Around 80 per cent of the second flush Darjeeling tea is exported. So, with the bandh temporarily lifted now, the planters are trying to clear their warehouses as quickly as possible,” said Basudeb Banerjee, chairman, Tea Board of India.

“However, this does not mean the entire product would be rushed for export. The mercantile export agents in Calcutta would hold the stock for better prices and also to keep supply going if there are further disruptions,” a tea industry source said.

Exporters and planters said the supply of tea was still irregular and they feared another round of disruptions once the bandh resumed on July 5.

A brief spell of showers in May kicks off the second flush season, after the first flush ends in late April. As the rains set in, monsoon flush tea is produced. The quality then deteriorates and fetches lower prices.

Darjeeling produces about one million kg of tea in June, the average price being Rs 800-1,000 a kg. Tea worth Rs 2 crore is exported every day and a day’s loss in production costs the planters Rs 3.33 crore.

The annual production is 10-11 million kg, of which 70 per cent is exported to meet the huge demand in the US, the UK, Germany, Japan and other developed countries. Darjeeling accounts for 7 to 8 per cent of the Rs 1,800-2,000 crore India earns from tea export every year.

Along with tea, Kalimpong’s flower export will also resume. A 300kg sample consignment of orchid will be sent to Tokyo. “We are expecting large consignments later this week,” said a Singapore Airlines official.
If Darjeeling is the champagne of teas, Makaibari is the Krug or Henri Giraud. At the 677-hectare Makaibari Tea Estate nestled in the eastern Himalayas, you not only taste the finest of its aromatic, amber brews, but experience tea as a way of life. Gurkha tea workers host visitors in chalets attached to their own homes, which dot the seven villages of the estate, situated roughly 1,400 m above sea level.

After a day's induction — with tea-tasting sessions and a guided tour of the factory to see how luscious, freshly plucked leaves are processed into green, white, oolong and black teas — visitors get some hands-on experience. Those who prefer to be in the tea gardens can choose between planting tea bushes, plucking tea ("two leaves and a bud" is what you need to break off each time) and tending the nursery. Those who enjoy more vigorous challenges can try milking cows or cleaning cattle sheds. And at the end of a hard day, you relax with a home-cooked meal made with locally grown organic produce, then drive home with a cuppa brewed from leaves you plucked the previous day.

There's no TV, so after a fireside chat with your hosts — who will happily share folk tales, folk songs and plantation lore — you'll probably turn in early, and that has an added bonus. If you rise when the first sun rays touch the valley, you stand a good chance of sighting exotic Himalayan birds like the pied hornbill and the sultan tit. If you're very lucky, you may even spot a leopard or two before hiking back to your hosts for that tantalizing first brew of the day. Not a tea lover? You will be at Makaibari.
Brazil to kick off World Cup mornings with Darjeeling tea

Arpit Basu

Though India will be nowhere near the playing arena in Brazil during the World Cup, tea from the famous Darjeeling garden of Makaibari will kick off the mornings for the players, guests and VIPs of the tournament.

The Makaibari Tea Estate, located in Kurseong (around 30 km from the hill station of Darjeeling), is sending a large consignment of tea to Brazil during the World Cup.

The tea from the hills of Bengal is expected to serve at cafeterias, VIP and official boxes in the stadium during the World Cup that begins on June 12 and continues till July 13.

Established in 1859, the Makaibari Tea Estate is one of the world's oldest tea factories.

The estate spans 670 hectares and has pioneered in organic farming practices in the tea trade.

“Our marketing partner in England, Hampstead Tea and Coffee Company, is exporting consignments from England to Brazil. Hampstead Tea and Coffee is one of the largest tea selling companies in the world that has several notable names in its clientele,” Rajah Banerjee, the owner of Makaibari Tea Estate told HT.
Their high end products such as Royal Camomile, black tea and the first flush are bound for Brazil. One of the world’s most expensive teas Silver Tips Imperial is also in their export list to Pele’s country. The tea cost $40 (around Rs. 2,400) per 100 gms.

“We are sending this consignments through our wholesalers so I cannot comment on the exact quantity of the assignments. We export Makaibari tea to 17 countries and I am happy that Brazil is adding to the list and that too, during such a global event,” Kiran Tawadey, an NRI and the founder of the Hampstead Tea and Coffee Company told HT.

This is not the first time that tea from Makaibari will be served at a global sporting event. During the 2008 Beijing Olympics Banerjee sent a consignment of 300 kg of Silver Tips to the Chinese capital.

The tea was exclusively sampled and distributed to the VIP guests there.
Makaibari cuppa for cognac price

KOLKATA: A special lot of handcrafted tea from the 155-year-old Makaibari Tea Estate in Kurseong sold recently for $1850 (around Rs 1.11 lakh) a kilo, thus becoming the most expensive Indian tea ever sold.

Three buyers from UK, USA and Japan bought 20 kilos of this silver-tips imperial organic tea to sell to select buyers. For the end-buyers, this tea will cost nothing less than Rs 700 a cup if brewed at home. And if you fancy a cup of this Makaibari tea at a five-star hotel, it would set you back by Rs 4,500 and Rs 5,000 — the same as a peg of rare Scotch like Blue Label Limited Edition or a Remy Martin Cognac.

Rudra Chatterjee, executive director of Luxmi Tea, which recently bought Makaibari, said that it has sold this organic tea to Hampstead Tea & Coffee of UK, Eco Prima Inc of the US and Makaibari Japan Ltd. "Makaibari Japan is an independent company run by Yoko Ishi, who exclusively buys Makaibari tea. This time they have bought 5 kg of this tea. Hampstead, one of our old customers, has taken 10 kg and the rest was bought by the American company," he added.

Makaibari chairman Rajah Banerjee said their tea estate held the earlier record as well. Makaibari tea was the record holder at Beijing Tea Auctions in 2006, where it sold for $1800 a kilo, and at Calcutta Auctions in 2003 where one lot sold for $450 a kg. "This unique tea (the one sold recently) is a handmade semi-fermented light liquoring Oolong Tea that captures the essence of summer solstice. It was manufactured exclusively on June 13, nine days before summer solstice. This ensures the highest degree of flavor for any vegetation," said Banerjee, a fourth-generation owner of Makaibari before he sold it to Luxmi Tea earlier this year.
The Japanese buyer, Ishi, said: "We always expect the world's best tea from Makaibari. The best produce from Makaibari has a loyal following among our Japanese customers. We supply Silver Tips to Ritz Carlton Tokyo Roppongi Hotel, where customers buy Makaibari Silver Needles Tea at $45 (a little over Rs 2,700) per pot."

President of Darjeeling Tea Association S S Bageria told TOI that this lot of Makaibari tea has set a new record not only for Darjeeling, but all Indian tea. Sanjay Bansal, former president of the association, agreed with Bageria that at $1850 a kilo, this would be the highest price fetched by any Indian tea. "I cannot recall any price higher than this," he said.

Officials of Calcutta Tea Traders Association agreed with Banerjee. "Makaibari tea holds the record for fetching the highest ever price — $450 a kilo — in an Indian auction. But at that time the exchange rate was Rs 46 a dollar whereas it is a little over Rs 60 a dollar now," an official said.

Chatterjee, the young owner of the garden, is obviously delighted at his estate's tea creating yet another record. "I am delighted that Makaibari continues to produce exceptional tea. After Luxmi's acquisition of Makaibari, our first priority was to ensure that only the most exceptional teas are produced. Makaibari is one of Bengal's and India's treasures," he said.
Rare tea picked every 108 years on a full moon night in June between midnight and 3am goes on sale in UK ... but a jar making just 10 cups will set you back £50

By ANUCYIA VICTOR FOR MAILONLINE

- Pricey brew comes from Makaibari Tea Estate, Darjeeling, India
- Family-run plantation the world's first biodynamic tea estate
- Only 420 12g jars of rare £50 tea available

It’s been described as the Holy Grail for tea connoisseurs - and a cup will set you back £5.

The pricey brew comes from India’s Darjeeling Makaibari Tea Estate and there are only 420 jars of the rare tea on sale in the country.

Moonlight Silver Tip’s tea-leaves are harvested between midnight and 3am once every 108 years on a full-moon night in June. And each £50 12g jar makes just ten cups of tea.
Rare tea picked every 108 years on a full moon night in June between midnight and 3am goes on sale in UK ... but a jar making just 10 cups will set you back £50

By ANUCYIA VICTOR FOR MAILONLINE

The high value is due to the small window of opportunity available to pick the leaves, which has to be done at the right celestial moment.

And the weather conditions have to be perfect as well; the night the tea is picked has to be bright and clear.

Mark Nicholls, tea taster at Hampstead Tea in London, where the jars can be purchased, said: 'The rarity of Moonlight Silver Tips is due to the optimum picking conditions occurring once every 108 years.

'This tea was picked during the summer solstice and a full moon, giving this rare planetary configuration.

'In addition, the tea was picked by moonlight, with the conditions of the night of 13th June, between midnight and 3am, optimal.'

The white tea comes from the world's first biodynamic estate on the oldest tea plantation in Darjeeling.
Rare tea picked every 108 years on a full moon night in June between midnight and 3am goes on sale in UK ... but a jar making just 10 cups will set you back £50

Biodynamic agriculture is a form of organic farming. Described as a holistic understanding of agricultural processes, it treats soil fertility, plant growth and livestock care as as ecologically interrelated tasks, emphasising spiritual and mystical perspectives.

Moonlight Silver Tips tea has a light pale white sherry depth, with a delicate peachy flavour. The tea leaves benefit best from being brewed with filtered water.

The white tea comes from the world’s first biodynamic tea estate on the oldest tea plantation in Darjeeling.
The King of Tea-Times
By Shabnam Srivastava

Makaibari signature tea—Silver Tips Imperial is the benchmark for others in the industry to emulate, and it is the symbol for the pursuit of excellence.

Luxury teas and tea blends have become a popular dining accompaniment even as premiere café’s and tea-rooms are becoming the favourite haunts of the well-heeled, much-travelled tea-snobs and wellness-enthusiasts alike. In India, no mention of fabled tea brands is complete without the mention of the iconic Makaibari tea estate, located in Kurseong, the land of the white orchids in Darjeeling. Pioneering in many aspects, Makaibari is known to house the world’s first tea factory, and its legacy dates back to 1859.
Makaibari is known to house the world’s first tea factory, and its legacy dates back to 1859.

Verdant green landscape flirting close with the cloud-laden horizons make Makaibari a scenic extravaganza, not atypical of lush tea plantations which transport you back into time and nature. What adds to its singular charm is the rich bio-trope with tea bushes co-existing with the diverse flora and fauna, encouraged by the much-talked-about sustainable biodynamic farming practices championed by the inimitable ‘Rajah of Makaibari’, Swaraj Kumar Banerjee. This tea plantation is a must-have stopover for the global traveller, the environmentalist, the ornithologist and the urban eco tourist, for whom there are quaint home-stays, run by the Makaibari locals, providing an authentic experience of tea-estate living.

Interestingly, Makaibari Tea was also the official tea partner at Beijing Olympics in 2008 and was served again at the 2014 FIFA World Cup.
So much for beauty, now for the flavour itself that the name stands for! With its single estate tea reflecting the pure essence of this iconic plantation, Makaibari has been recognized as one of the finest tea gardens in the world commanding highest prices at tea auctions for some of its brands, like the Silver Tips. Fourth generation planter, Mr Rajah Banerjee, says, “The passion is to make the specific personality of Makaibari reflect in a cup anywhere you drink it in the world. Darjeeling tea is not an industry. It’s a handicraft, a very specialized art”. Interestingly, Makaibari Tea was also the official tea partner at Beijing Olympics in 2008 and was served again at the 2014 FIFA World Cup.

The Luxe Café: Could you please tell us about the Makaibari signature tea—Silver Tips Imperial, which is apparently the most expensive tea ever sold?

My great grandfather Girish Chandra Banerjee established Makaibari in 1859. Prior to Makaibari, only hand-made teas were available from China and Japan. What has carried us through harsh times is the magic that this special area has. The diversity of flora and fauna, is unmatched elsewhere. The tea is the surplus of this essence that has created Brand Darjeeling globally. Realising this, successive generations of Banerjee’s continued honing their passion for the perfect tea, till I got lucky. However, though the Silver Tips is a peak, we at Makaibari feel that there are more pinnacles to scale. Indeed, the Silver Tips Imperial is a benchmark for others in the industry to emulate, and it is the symbol for the pursuit of excellence.
As a fourth generation ‘tea planter’ steering ahead this iconic estate, could you please share your expert insights on some exclusive varieties of tea?

Makaibari tea is a single estate, bio-dynamically grown ‘magical Himalayan herb’ which has some its own exotic varieties like the Makaibari Tea Treasures collection, comprising the First Flush Vintage, second flush muscatel, the Silver Green, the white tea or Bai Mu Dan.

“I still contend that being a trainee tea taster in an old established tea broking house at Kolkata is the best learning ground for the nuances of tea tasting,” Banerjee says.
With tea becoming ‘trendy’ in the recent times, what is your take on the trend of tea sommeliers? Are there any national/international names you’d recommend?

What a delight that tea is gaining popularity amongst the young and trendy, as opposed to being a stuffy old maid’s drink in my generation! This has spawned many tea institutes which educate one on source of origin, and offer a gateway to tea being a great career option futuristically. I still contend that being a trainee tea taster in an old established tea broking house at Kolkata is the best learning ground for the nuances of tea tasting. This could be further honed by working at tea-houses in China, Japan, U.K, to acquire the holistic fullness of learning about the other varieties of tea. Keeping this in mind, Makaibari is contemplating a Tea Institute to bring in all these aspects under one roof, replete with tea masters from famous regions.
Tea drinking is an experience enhanced by the accessories—silverware, china etc. Would you have any personal brand favourites in terms of such tea-time accoutrements?

My preferences is always for the exquisite bone china tea sets, which are simple, elegant and transport a tea buff to the realms of their dream world with every sip of the Makaibari tea.

“The wondrous part of tasting any Makaibari treasure is the retention of the delicate aftertaste in the palate for at least a half hour after a sip.”

Makaibari is the ultimate brand for a connoisseur of Darjeeling tea. How can one distinguish this authentic tea, in terms of texture, taste, aroma, and colour?

The parameters of tea-tasting and wine are absolutely similar. A single sip of any of the Makaibari Tea Treasures, imparts a soft genteel aroma of peaches, grape or mango stein, following the seasonal subtleties. The wondrous part of tasting any Makaibari treasure is the retention of the delicate aftertaste in the palate for at least a half hour after a sip.

Time Magazine featured Makaibari Teas as one of Asia’s top ten produces, not only for its flavour but also for the working practices behind it. Given that you introduced many of these practices, what would you have to say about sustainability and luxury?

The world is marching on borrowed time, as the world is focussed solely for improving the ‘flavour’ in the balance sheet. Makaiabri offers one a window to pursue the holistic flavour of life by growing and participating and contributing positively to the environment. The last bit is the ultimate luxury.
**Darjeeling tea is craft, not industry,** says Rajah Banerjee. **"The personality of each estate is reflected in the cup. You can taste it."**
June 11, 2003
Rajah Bannerjee
Makaibari Tea Estate
Kurseong, Darjeeling
India

Dear Rajah,

I recall our first meeting at Makaibari vividly, even though I do not recall the specific though I think it was 1984 in June, after second flush. Your visitors log captures those details that we need not keep track of. But what’s not fuzzy about our first meeting is my memory of the passion you displayed for creating a sustainable environment - not only to elevate product quality but to improve conditions for those who live and work at Makaibari.

It was a very difficult time in the region when we first met, and I recall our conversations about your vision of transition to organics and Bio Dynamics during a time of intense unrest in the local government. It was a time when most would stay with the status quo, but your persistence to convert your family’s property to a sustainable community drove you to create the roadmap for sustainability not only in Darjeeling, but in Assam, Lanka and China. No one in the industry at the time saw what you clearly saw in 1984.

The empowerment of the workers and the development of the joint bodies to make decisions for themselves, which you spearheaded are the template from which many of the tea gardens work today. The introduction of bio-gas units which reduce deforestation and reduce the amount of time spent by villagers collecting firewood and income producing opportunities that have developed as a direct result of your community involvement and support. In fact, our Mercy Corps project (Tazo Chai - Collaboration for Hope and Advancement in India) would have been impossible to put together without your counsel and assistance.

It is with great anticipation that I return each year to see what is new at Makaibari. I visit many gardens in India during my buying trips, but none as special as Makaibari. It is unusual to have the owner live and work on the garden and more unusual for the owner to create an environment where the workers feel they have a vested interest and have some decision making capabilities.

Looking forward to seeing you mid- July.

Best,

Steven Smith
Founder, Tazo
A division of Starbucks Coffee Company
Rauschend und mit Gebräuchlichkeit der Toy Train Richtung Darjeeling, Erstlügen die Engländer die Schmalachbahnstrecke zwischen 1879 und 1881 für den Teertransport bauen, heute ist der Toy Train eine Touristenattraktion.


Auf dem Obstanbauer herrscht Ortsteilwesen in Darjeeling, berühmt für die Teeschulen, die in der Region fulgt.

Ein Land des Totes. Rajah Banerjee hat eine der teuersten Teesorten in den Silver Tips Imperial.

«Mein Ugrossvater hat die Teepflanzer Makaibari 1859 gegründet. Unser Silver Tips-Imperial-Tee ist das beste Anti-Aging-Mittel, das es gibt.»

Rajah Banerjee, Teeproduzent.

Rajah Banerjee und sein Team jedes Jahr 120 Tonnen Schwarze. Alles biologisch. Mitten in dieses prachtvolle Teegarten steht auch Rajah Banerjees Dschungel-Palais.\n


Ein Land des Totes. Rajah Banerjee hat eine der teuersten Teesorten in den Silver Tips Imperial.

Ein Land des Totes. Rajah Banerjee hat eine der teuersten Teesorten in den Silver Tips Imperial.
Despite the idyllic surroundings, Happy Valley nearly closed four years ago. Unlike the same challenge confronting the rest of the Indian tea industry—intense global competition, fickle consumer tastes, and labor disputes that have occasionally turned violent—India produces more tea than any other country in the world except China, but after years of neglecting investment in marketing or technology, India has seen its exports fall behind those of Sri Lanka, Kenya and China in the 73.5 billion global tea market.

Since 1990, when a glut of tea from low-cost producers caused prices and profits to plummet, Indian growers have struggled to pay the country's 3 million tea workers. Landlords have abandoned their estates, while other owners sold or simply abandoned their plantations. "Many tea plantations became totally unviable," says Shiv K. Sarma of Sonaachi India Ltd., which owns six tea farms in northeastern India. Estate workers bickered because their wages fell below the cost of living and because they were selling at below-cost prices and could not afford even the basics.

This year India's tea industry has finally begun fighting back. The central government has promised Rs. 10 billion over the next 10 years in loans and subsidies for new, more productive plantations. Coping with the dearer marketing of tea producers in Sri Lanka and Africa, Indian entrepreneurs have begun to build their own upscale brands. Some producers, meanwhile, are branching out into tea bars for the conventicle tea-consuming young professionals, Italian tea producers may never capture the growth of a busy day but they are drawing in a new generation.

When the Ambastra Tea Group bought the 1,350-acre (547-hectare) Happy Valley tea estate in March, its tea basket was 20,000, its machinery was obsolete, and its workers were paid regular wages for months. Seven months on, the estate's new owners have hired new managers, started regular maintenance of the plants and soil and began a move to organic farming. Perhaps most important, productivity is inching up. In addition to a guaranteed minimum wage of Rs. 1,38, workers get incentives to pick more. Darjeeling's once-lost estate it is turning its original factory into a working museum. "The Indian tea industry, of course, depends on the work of tea estates. Tea estates are the backbone of the industry," says Sujoy Banerjee, who says that he has turned around a floundering estate. "That's how I'm able to demand ridiculous prices for my tea." Darjeeling tea, for instance, can sell for up to $7 a kilogram. This is how to make the tea experience a special one.

The only long-term sustainable solution is for estates to give workers a stake in the earnings. For Plantation Workers Rights, December 3, 2002
BIODYNAMICS

Demeter Rhythm in Darjeeling - Makaibari

by Christine Murphy

I
n the northeast corner of India a
crown of land extends like a finger
spurring to the Himalayas. It is the
province of Darjeeling, developed by
the British into the best known area
for tea in the world. In February I visited a Demeter
certified biodynamic tea estate in Darjeeling,
India. It was a revelation for my family for
four generations, and I saw S.K. Banerjee,
known as Rajah.

As we drive down the long road to the tea
estate, the fields stretch for miles, dotted
with small buildings of red brick and
white, where tea is processed. The air
is fresh and clean, and the lush green fields
are a sight to behold. The tea leaves,
white and green, are plucked by hand,
and sent to the factory where they are
washed, dried, and sorted. The process
is repeated several times until the leaves
are ready for use. The tea is then packed
into large sacks and sent to market.

The tea estate is run according to biodynamic
principles. This means that the land is
managed in a way that respects the
natural cycles of the earth and the
health of the soil. The coffee beans are
planted in a way that maximizes the
nutrients in the soil, and the plants
are allowed to grow in a natural way,
without the use of synthetic fertilizers
or pesticides.

The tea is harvested by hand, and
the leaves are then fermented
before being dried in the sun.
This process helps to bring out the
natural flavors of the tea. The tea
is then sorted by hand, to ensure
that only the highest quality leaves
are selected.

The tea estate is surrounded by
a beautiful landscape of mountains
and valleys, and the views are
spectacular. The air is fresh and clean,
and the scent of the tea leaves
fills the air.

The tea is enjoyed all over the world,
and appreciated for its unique flavor
and health benefits. It is a wonderful
drink to enjoy, whether you
like it hot or cold.

BIODYNAMICS

Village Representation (Rajah Banerjee is at top center)

the only thing lacking in this abundance.
In the afternoon there is a "council meeting" of the village residents, including the women. They talk
over various issues, including their new loan program.

Several people have requested loans and the women will administer them. It is an animated meeting, very fine. It is a
wonderful example of the right sphere being
developed as well as the economic and
philosophical side. Right now each householder has the ability to sell milk, eggs, compost
or produce to the larger community.

Plans are underway for herbal and other
products as well. Festivals are numerous,
and there are many cultures and religions
living together here.

We began the day with tea, and at
the end of it we were invited to a tea tasting. First
Pancha Green Tea, Oncol, Silver Tips. There
are several varieties in all, recognized abroad
as the top of the line. These teas are
equitable, nourishing, and hold that
indefinable something called "quality" that all
bio-dynamic food has in common; a
combination perceived at the gift of the earth,
the gift of those tending the plants,
and the gift of the spiritual world.

Rajah, who now comes to biodynamics,
was a chef in a small tea factory in
Darjeeling and Siddik in what is called
"alternative tea." Biodynamic tea has
now come to India in a big way.

Much luck to you, Makaibari.

Shortly after the book was biodynamic
published in French, it will be
translated into other languages,
including Spanish, German,
and Chinese. The book will
be available in all English-speaking
countries, including the United
States. The book is currently
available in Europe.

Winter/Spring 2000
April 3rd, 2010

Mr. Rajah Banerjee
Chairman
Makaibari Tea & Trading Co. Pvt. Ltd.
West Bengal

Dear Mr. Rajah Banerjee,

I am extremely happy to note that the Makaibari Tea Estate, which was the world’s first tea factory set up in the year 1859, is celebrating its 150th Anniversary of its establishment. My heartiest congratulations on this special occasion and would like to wish all the best for its continued efforts for maintaining a sustainable human environment.

I have been informed that Toyota Kirloskar Motor would like to donate a “Toyota-Innova” vehicle, as a part of its Corporate Social Responsibility, to assist your organization for transporting the basic needs of the people living in the hilly areas of your tea estate. I hope that this vehicle should work for you.

Makaibari organic tea has been a favorite beverage for years and we wish that it would continue its reputation for a long time to come.

We value our long standing relationship and wish you all the best in all your future endeavours.

With Best Regards,

Akira Otsabe
Senior Managing Director
Member of the Board
Ref. No. 126/165
April 24, 1975

Dear Sir,

Following the visit of the German Tea Council and members of the German Press to Darjeeling, an article has been published in one of the German newspapers on Darjeeling tea.

We thought you would be interested to have a copy of the article.

Congratulations for your valuable contribution to Darjeeling tea!

Yours sincerely,

[Signature]

Mr. Raja Banerjee
Makaibari Tea, Ltd.

The text of the article is a translation (approximate) of an article in "Das Goldene Blatt" of 5.4.95.

"The World drinks from his hands -

Rajah Banerjee owns the most famous tea garden.

Tea drunk from fine china cups, golden coloured like the late summer sun - its delicate bouquet is like a breath of a thousand and one nights, like wood, and spice and lemon. Darjeeling, that famous tea, is enjoyed every day by millions of tea drinkers. One man makes it famous: the Indian Rajah Banerjee (47) from Makaibari. He created one of the biggest tea dynasties in the world.

"No, at 17 years of age, I would never have thought that tea would become the passion of my life," says Banerjee. At that time he was a student, living a hippie’s life in London with no time for bothering about the sad neglected tea garden back home in Darjeeling. At 26 he had an accident that nearly cost him his life. At that time, Rajah had a vision: "I saw the neglected tea gardens, the eroded soil and I saw how nature had suffered. I was begging for my holy. That was the turning point in my life. "Rajah returned from "Father": he said, "I shall be a tea planter."

Rajah kept his promise, planted new tea bushes which soon began to thrive. He developed his own method of organic cultivation, which has since been adopted in neighboring tea gardens all around. Banerjee uses other plants such as bamboo and lemon grass between the tea bushes to give back nutrients to the soil. The tea tastes better and more natural from year to year.

However, the happy ending did not come straight away. On the contrary. The early years were a catastrophe. The harvest decreased, because the tea bushes were used to being treated with chemicals. There was resistance to his new methods, even amongst his own pluckers. Owners of neighboring gardens scolded him. But gradually, things began to look up. Rajah Banerjee discovered that organically grown tea is very popular here in our country, and this discovery eventually saved Makaibari.

In neighboring gardens, the scorn has dispersed. The planters come to Banerjee for advice and to convert their own gardens to organic. What luck for the world, that it can drink from Rajah's hands. Otherwise, millions of consumers would never have learned to live golden Darjeeling tea!"
Fair Trade Profiles

Makaibari, India

The Makaibari tea garden lies in the Darjeeling hills of Northeastern India. In continuous operation since 1859, Makaibari is one of the oldest of all Indian tea gardens. The garden is home to 510 teaworkers and their families.

The Makaibari tea garden is a pioneer in innovative management. As early as 1971, garden manager Rajah Banerjee made the decision to switch production to a 'permaculture' based system, and since 1991 production has been 100% organic and biodynamic. Mr. Banerjee lives on the garden and takes great pride in the high quality of Makaibari teas, which have consistently been ranked among the best of all Darjeeling teas.

The premium they earn through sales of Fair Trade teas has enabled the worker community at Makaibari to take an active role in improving their own lives. Projects the Makaibari workers have financed through Fair Trade include:

- Microcredit. Makaibari's workers have chosen to create a community loan fund. So far the fund has made more than 100 small loans for housing, medical needs, education, livestock, and small business.

- Educational and medical loans carry no interest, and the fund enjoys a 100% repayment rate.

- Scholarships. Several young tea garden members have received scholarships to study horticulture at a center in Darjeeling.

- Village electricity. With premiums from Fair Trade, the workers of Makaibari were finally able to bring electricity to their villages and homes.

- Organic fertilizer. The pickers sponsored workshops to learn how to produce organic fertilizer in their homes. The garden then buys the fertilizer to use on its tea plants—an arrangement that nourishes the garden as a whole.

"We give our tea plantation constant, natural, assistance with biodynamic techniques. One look at our land, even to the untrained eye, will show a forest teeming with wildlife and plant life, a bounty of the sky with butterflies and birds, and all these synthetic life forces show up in the cup."

—Rajah Banerjee, Owner and Manager, Makaibari

Back to Producer Profiles index
A journey into India’s tea territory

By Matt Gross

The Himalayas rose almost out of nowhere. One minute the Maruti Suzuki hatchback was crossing the15land plateau of West Bengal, palm trees and clouds obscuring the hills to come; the next it was negotiating a descendent road that snuggled up through forests of cypress and bamboo. The road thinned with the strain of the slopes.

For an hour or more, as we climbed ever higher, all I saw was jungle with hardly a village to break the structure monotonous. Finally, around 1,200 meters, or 4,000 feet, the foliage opened just enough to allow a more expansive view. From the edge of the road, the hills sloped up and down and back up: covered with low, flat-topped bushes. Tiny dots marched among the bushes and along the dirt tracks that zigzagged up the hillside—workers plucking leaves from Camellia sinensis, the tea bushes of Darjeeling.

Flying to a remove corner of India and braving the long drive into the Darjeeling region is an adventure, but it’s also a bit of effort for a good cup of tea, but Darjeeling isn’t simply good. It’s about the tea in the world, fetching record prices at auctions in Kolkata and Shanghai.

In fact, Darjeeling is synonymous with high-quality black tea that few tea-conscious realize it’s not an upper beverage but many 87 tea estates operate in the Darjeeling district, a region that sprays across several towns (including its namesake) in a mountainous corner of India between the Eastern Himalayas and the Bangladesh border.

Each has its own approach to growing tea, and as a nod to its long traditions, as much as to the learning curve, a few have converted bungalows into tourist hotels, while others are converting old dwellings to learn the production of leaves, coffee, and other products.

I set off from the estate to take the last March during the “first flush” harvest, said to produce the most delicate, flavorful leaves.

(3) Makaibari.com/travel

The first flush, in May and June, is really just as good.

My first stop was Makaibari, an estate just south of the town of Kurseong, around 1,500 meters above sea level.

Despite the label’s beauty and the fact that Makaibari is one of the oldest and most respected tea estates in the world, their tea is not the best in the world. In fact, it’s one of the least expensive. Makaibari tea is a bit of effort for a good cup of tea, but Darjeeling isn’t simply good. It’s about the tea in the world, fetching record prices at auctions in Kolkata and Shanghai.

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Taste of Darjeeling tea for wine-country five

The French love their wines but there are some among them who’d like to try Darjeeling tea for a change.

A chance to study the “exotic Darjeeling tea” drew five students from France to pursue a six-week certificate course at the department of tea science in North Bengal University. The course got over on August 16.

Marion Chevalier, Thibaine Peran, Klaudia Bouvetage, Gaetan Charbonnier and Le Zian — students of agronomy engineering in two agricultural institutes in France — took the opportunity after an agreement was signed between the varsity and the French ministry of agriculture and fisheries early this year.

“I was acquainted to Josephine Gaccenik, an official with the French ministry of agriculture and fisheries. She had also visited the department of NBU last year and we were keen on getting students to do short-term courses on tea at the varsity,” Syed Edward Kabir, an assistant professor at the department, said.

“We worked out an arrangement to offer a six-week certificate course at the department to foreign students and an agreement was signed between the varsity and French ministry early this year. The first batch of five students from France started their course from July 15,” Kabir said.

The department of tea management was established in 1968 at the university and is the first in the country to offer an MSc degree in tea science.

A one-year post-graduate diploma in tea management and short-term certificate course for small tea growers are other courses the department offers at present.
High tea in the Himalayas

Imagine sitting comfortably on the verandah of an old bungalow, lying softly into a chocolate brownie in between quick sips of hot, aromatic tea and enjoying the beauty of the foothills of the Himalayas that stretch in front of your eyes. Welcome to the world of tea and tea tourism!

The tea gardens of the Eastern Himalayas are serving up a rich brew. Apart from growing some of the world's finest teas, the picturesque plantations are also giving back to the community through a variety of initiatives. The tea gardens are a perfect place to unwind, relax and immerse yourself in the tranquil beauty of nature. 

The tea gardens are not just a source of income for the local communities, but also a way to preserve and promote the rich heritage and culture of the region. With the increasing interest in tea tourism, these gardens are becoming more popular among visitors looking for a unique and authentic experience.

Tourism is the new crop in the eastern region's tea gardens, says Santanu Ganguly

Makaibari Tea Estate's Rajah Banerjee, the new man in town: (Right) A peek into one of Makaibari's tea gardens.
Is Tea Had Any Better?

A tea planter in Darjeeling is training workers to take over his estate. And he is not doing it for fear of insurgency— it's because that's the only way to grow the best tea in the world.

JAIDEEP NARUMBAR

But it's not as simple as rolling the 550 acres and handing over the small plots to the workers to do as they please. The owner of this 150-year-old tea garden, known for his excellent entrepreneurial skills and innovative ideas, has drawn up a win-win scheme for the workers and himself: "The workers, who'll become owners of the individual plots, will produce handmade tea, as the Chinese do," reveals Banerjee. This tea fetches a higher price in the international market and Banerjee is currently working on a technique of making it at Makaihari. His role, after giving away his estate to the workers, would be that of a partner and mentor. "I'll run the factory and market the tea, and most of the profits would go to the plot owners and the small growers," he explains.

This egalitarian idea came to Banerjee from a personal experience. "I went to Nepal and saw the small gardens there. The yield from those small gardens is much higher and the quality is much better. That's because there's an individual and close attention to each garden, which is impossible in a big garden. And it then dawned on me that the future of Darjeeling tea lies in being produced in small, individually owned gardens," Banerjee says. His mantra is "partnership, not ownership." The charismatic Bengali, whose travels in the garden outside the world, is now preparing his workers for the transition. "They have this self-imposed feeling of being mere workers. I'm trying to change this so that they inculcate the proper mindset of being entrepreneurs of small gardens that Makaihari will become," Banerjee, who lives with his wife in a well-appointed bungalow that overlooks the estate.

The process of empowering the workers had, in fact, started 17 years ago in Makaihari with the formation of the "Makaihari Joint Body" (MJ). It has 115 elected members from the seven villages inside the estate, and two persons nominated by the workers' union, two by the management and two from the factory. Banerjee presides over the body that looks after all social development and even gives loans for small ventures. This MJ runs creches, a library, a computer training centre, a vocational training centre for workers and their families, conducts health and hygiene initiatives throughout the year and offers healthcare, including pre- and post-natal care in the health centres. These activities are run with funds obtained from the Fairtrade Labelling Organisation (FLO), an international body that accredited Makaihari its Fairtrade certification in 1997, another first for a plantation in India. "FLO charges a small premium on all the products it has certified that are sold in the US and Europe. This premium is remitted to the MJ for its various initiatives," Banerjee says.

Another initiative by Banerjee was the gift of cows—150 of them—to workers' families in the mid-90s. Today, the cows provide free milk, that's a steady source of income for the families. The dung is processed into compost that's sold to the workers for the purchase of the tea estate. The biogas generated is fuel for cooking, thus freeing the womenfolk from the rigours of collecting firewood, and also saving the forest consequently," says Banerjee.

Another major project in the homestay for tourists that Banerjee has been working on for a few years. Workers who have spare rooms in their houses have converted these into guest rooms for the steady stream of volunteers from Western countries and the tourists we get. There are twenty such homestays that can accommodate 20 people now. "We'll have more homestays soon when the Makaihari model of ten houses comes up," says Nayan Lama, co-ordinator of the homestay project. The homestay, Rs 350 a day for putting up guests. Loans and training are provided by the MJ to start such ventures. Sanjukta Biwaskar, a worker at Makaihari factory, started her homestay three years ago. "The money earned from that has gone towards providing education to our daughters and learnt a lot of new foods," she says. Many workers have set up small shops or purchased tea with loans from the MJ, Ravi Banerjee himself.

But Makaihari, as an idea, has transcended its boundaries. "We cannot be doing this here, it doesn't work," says Banerjee, referring to the success of Makaihari.

"And it then dawned on me that the future of Darjeeling tea lies in being produced in small, individually owned gardens."

SWARAJ K. BANERJEE, Editor of Makaihari
2-LEAF BOOTY

The most expensive tea in the world comes from a unique organic garden

by JAMSHED MAZUMDAR IN KURUNGO

The royals at Buckingham Palace can’t do without it on any morning, nor can the Ramakrishna Mission in Ireland, the Basilique Notre-Dame in France, or the Buddhist Monasteries in Japan. Their morning cuppas are made of premium tea which comes from Makalbari, a garden nestled in the mist-kissed hills of Darjeeling in North Bengal. But Makalbari’s claim to fame is not just that its produce fetches the highest price in the world—the oldest tea garden in the subcontinent. It was also the first to go organic, a pioneering experiment that attracts researchers from all over the world.

Though Makalbari Tea Estate is spread over 1,478 acres, tea grows only on 500 acres, while the rest is covered with subtropical forest. The garden’s bio-dynamic ecosystem is home to over 540 species of birds and animals. Chemical fertilisers, pesticides and herbicides haven’t been used in the gardens for decades. It is also unique in having a tea garden where the labourers are genuine stakeholders and share a part of the minuscule profits.

Swami Kumar Banerjee, Makalbari’s proud owner, says his premium tea established a record two years ago when it fetched the highest price at auction—Rs 18,000 a kilo. But that’s nothing compared to the price he got through private sale—Banerjee sells his finest variety, Silver Tips Imperial hand-picked and hand-crafted, to the Sultan of Brunei for Rs 15 lakh a kilo, while his green tea sells in Japan for nearly Rs 4 lakh a kilo. The British royal pair bought his 2 kilos for a kilo of Silver Tips Imperial, a name that has been copyrighted by Banerjee.

Banerjee, a four-generation planter—his great-grandfather G. C. Banerjee purchased the garden from Captain Cawder, a British army deserter who established the garden in 1894—says Makalbari’s decades of harmonious coexistence with mother nature has led to the evolution of a new insect (the tail is the only real evolutionary aberration) that he has named Tea Poras. “When life forms are becoming extinct all over the world, the last that this unique insect (which looks like a bee) has evolved here is nothing short of a miracle,” Banerjee told Outlook’s Tea Desk, which feeds on insects such as harm tea leaves, has attracted the attention of entomologists worldwide. Makalbari’s journey down the organic path started in 1995, when Banerjee’s father noticed the erosion of foliage from the leaves on which the tea bushes grew. “He immediately started creating grass banks—or a metre of it for every tea acre of tea bushes—from which the grass would be cut at regular intervals and laid on the earth between and under the bushes. This mulching process preserved the topsoil, stymied the growth of weeds, retained soil moisture and when the cut grass is dried for compost. But that was just the beginning. Banerjee then tried to persuade his father to stop using chemical fertilisers and pesticides. His organic experiment began on a three-acre isolated patch of the estate: “I put together a dozen workers and every night for more than three months, we stole cow dung to apply in the area and used crushed neem leaves as pesticides. When the plucking season arrived, I had the leaves from this patch plucked and processed separately. During the tea testing sessions, every time my dad would taste this tea, he would say it was excellent. He finally agreed to let the whole garden go organic,” says Banerjee.

Tea bushes are also interspersed with young trees, leguminous shade trees and shrubs like crotonias, indigo ferrees and moringa, and fruit trees like jamun. Each serves a purpose—the roots of the leguminous trees give out nitrogen that nourishes the soil. The fruit-bearing trees attract birds that also feed on insects that can harm the plants. Banerjee, a keen bird watcher, said he had built a kilometer-high hill with a clipped British seven, sprincle to life when birds stop outside its modest office, whose walls are covered with certificates and accolades from all over the world.

Dressed in khaki jacket, hiking boots, breeches and a planter’s hat, he takes hearty through the steep slopes of Makalbari. After his daily inspection, he rides one of his thoroughbred horses back to the bungalow.

Banerjee purchases all the fertiliser he uses—cow dung compost—from his workers. He distributed 1,300 tons among 600-odd farmers and that was also his way of empowering the women who earn by selling the milk. The cow dung also feeds biogas plants, so that the women no longer have to waste time going to the cow shed or plucking.”

Geschenkgutscheine

Formulare

Ladenausstattung

Neue Motive!

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Geschenkgutschein
Cosmic secrets behind Makaibari magic

Sunderpur, Makaibari: Ask Michiko Ishii about the ‘silver tips imperial tea’ she just brought from Makaibari, and she closes her eyes, takes a deep breath and says she had never tasted such a ‘magical and mystical brew that provides an other worldly experience’.

No wonder she happily paid 35.561 (or Rs 31,111) a kilo for this tea. Michiko, vice-president of Makaibari Japan Ltd (an independent entity that sells Makaibari tea in Japan), says this is a sign of distaste (or “cosmic experience”)

Thiasum—the most expensive Indian tea ever sold—is indeed related to the cosmos, or specifically planetary positions on the full moon, right after summer solstice (June 21).

The leaves for this special lot of tea were picked on the full moon night of June 13, from a minute past midnight to 1 am, by about 300 female garden workers. Makaibari chairman, Rajah Banerjee, told TOI: “20% of preparation went into this. The leaves plucked the two days before and a day by the light of yellow torches (animal fat torches). The plucking time of 3 hours 36 minutes was calculated after intensive study of the biodynamic calendar and precise astronomical charts. The leaves plucked the two days before were green leaves that was processed and made into 50 kilos of the ‘silver tips imperial tea’.

Rajah Banerjee explained that during the full moon, water content in all life forms increases. “What you have in theAndes is that chemical essence of the plant with all its subtle flavours and characters.” Hence, leaves picked during a full moon night makes for excellent tea. This full moon night of June 13 presented a unique planetary configuration that shines only in 18 years,” he explained.

Michiko, who has just landed in India to undertake her “transmutation” to Makaibari tea gardens in Kurseong along with her mother Yoko (president of Makaibari Japan) said he had no hesitation in paying the high price for this tea. Especially after witnessing the transformation that her art form, Yoko underwent after drinking this tea (Banerjee had stoped a sample to them in Kurseong) in Tokyo. “He had been very depressed for some time and was not getting any better. I asked him out to dinner one evening to cheer him up. But he remained morose. Then I told him about the distaste we had just received from Makaibari. He took a sip and his body started shaking and there was this sudden energy around him. He is completely changed man now,” she recounted.

“We buy about 125000 of Makaibari tea a year and 50% of the buyers are institutional,” said Yoko. These include the Grand Hyatt Tokyo, which sends tasters from one of its restaurants to Makaibari tea gardens in Kurseong to “promote the marriage” in the process of manufacturing, to get a feel of the garden and its practices and enjoy the Makaibari experience so that they can then share with manmade.

“My father’s (Volshin) was highly impressed by Rajah Banerjee’s personal, his organic practices and this company. Both are taking an interest in tea and we decided to become his collaborator. All these qualities, and her trade practices, the way Makaibari is managed and run, and all the benefits that accrue to all stakeholders of Makaibari, fit with what our company is all about.” Shad Mirza.

“Happy Birthday Makaibari Village. Makaibari is, astonishingly finds place among Happy Birthday”
**The tea of passion**

It was my first visit to a tea estate. And that too, the one that boasted of the world’s oldest tea factory. A friend of mine knew the owner of the Makalbari Tea estate in Kurseong district of West Bengal. It was with him and a few friends that I got down at a tea plantation at the gate of the tea estate, established in 1859.

We were taken in a room on the first floor of a building standing opposite the main tea factory. There I saw a person in a hat and a white shirt standing between two tables, with his back towards us. He had an array of small bags lined before him and two of his assistants stood beside him. He took a sip from one of the cups, rolled the liquid in his mouth and then within seconds spat it out in a spout placed there. He then said something in Bengali to one of his assistants who nodded in a diary that he was holding. All this before Kishor Banerjee, the fourth-generational owner of Makalbari, turned around to say a cheerful hello to us. He took off his hat and shook our hands with an extremely firm grip. I saw notice that he was dressed in white, wore high boots and a belt on his white shirt-like apron. The man in his mid-50s filled that small room with his personality, the kind one reads of in classic stories.

With the formalities over, we went back to the table to taste tea from two more cups, making allowances at the white that were being duly noted down in the assistants’ diary. I was astonished for me as for the first time I was witnessing a professional tea taster at work. He then again turned back to us and pointed at a sample bag of full tea leaves long in shape and light in colour.

“You are looking at Silver Tips, the world’s most expensive tea,” he said in his happy, booming voice. “You have come for this, I’ll treat you to it.” He smiled and instructed a woman standing in a corner to prepare it for us. It was about five minutes later that the waiter came back with a tray full of cups. We all took one each and as soon as we lifted it up for a sip, there came a loud “stop” from Banerjee.

Alarmed, we looked at him. “You are about to drink the elixir of the Himalayas,” he said. “It is not only the costliest brew in the world, it also brings good luck,” he continued as we gaped at him. “Now take a sip,” he ordered. One of us, who clearly had been affected by what had happened so far, muttered under his breath: “This tea has costliest taste.” Banerjee thought that I had heard him. This man, who was not even for a moment, had extremely keen hearing. “What did you say?” he asked our colleague, who further stressed in presence. “This is not tea, don’t call it tea.” This is a magic, mystical Himalayan brew.

He was abnormally accustomed to the bemused reaction we all had on our faces. “You don’t believe me?” he asked in a put-on incredulous tone. “Close your eyes, make a wish and then take a sip,” the demonic tone continued. “Your wish will come true after 24 days.” Such was the effect of this performance that all of us, believers and non-believers, closed our eyes before taking a sip. “Only one wish,” Banerjee laughed with such mirth that it instantly put us at ease. He then told us about Silver Tips: Silver Tips leaves are picked from a full moon night by the best women pickers. In 1961 it fetched a world record price of $400 per kilo, and in 2003, it was sold for Rs. 33,000 a kilo. As for its taste, I’ll quote a professional American tea taster: “Goof! The aroma was grape forest with very little subtle hint between fantastic aroma. Taste-wise, it started off with a slight milky note and gradually grew into a sweet, malty sensation on the tongue. Wide opening, off it, little tingle of fruit on the finish of your palate.”

Putting on his hat, Banerjee asked us to accompany him to the tea garden. On the way he picked up a wooden ruler and with him we marched upon an area where some women were plucking leaves. On the way he told us about the estate, which was the first bio-organic tea garden in India. Makalbari, he told us, literally means “Mzea Land.”

“Our decision for organic growth was made out of desperation,” said Banerjee. All over this region, nature was destroyed; trees were cut down, we had huge problem with erosion and many animals died due to insecticides. We were forced to change something. This change meant converting the estate to permaculture. Today, it has six tiers of forests — the highest form of permaculture. Instead of regimented lines of tea bushes, you find tea growing amidst fruit and bamboo trees, and herbs and clover. The soil is dark and rich, fed with the organic compost prepared on the estate. The total area of the tea estate is 1,000 acres, out of which 650 acres is under forest. The estate is home to a wide variety of wild animals and birds and 12 forest rangers are appointed to keep track of it. He gave us information even as he instructed a plucker, measured heights of some tea bushes with the wooden ruler he carried, and alerted a worker about a lurking snake in the bush behind him. His passion for tea and all that goes into bringing it to a cup was evident. This tour with him made me realise that the cup of tea that I take every morning has an experience of a life poured into it. Today, it’s not just a cup of tea I take, but a brew that has the passion of Kishor Banerjee and others like him mixed into it.”

- Text & Photos: Himanshu Jadh
Darjeeling tea is aromatic and substantial, harvested by hand from some of the finest tea estates in the world. It is the allure of these world-famous teas that brings me to this part of India.

I check into my hotel just in time for afternoon tea. As I make my way to enjoy the tea service, I search out the renowned vista of the hotel's veranda. The gate opens wide and I am greeted by a wide panorama of ancient and majestic tea plantations.

Darjeeling's elegant Windamere Hotel is a gracious colonial gem whose grand views include the surrounding tea and cardamom estates, as well as the Himalayan mountain range. Here, handcrafted staff serve afternoon tea in a cozy, twisting corridor in the area of the front parlor, where books and newspapers are loosely strewn around. The deep Victorian sofas, antique gilted mirrors, and framed photographs of stately posed people are somewhat reminiscent of a lived-in mansion, especially so with a Vera Lynn song playing on a grand piano somewhere. Similarly the landscaped garden with its quiet crevices and moss-covered corners, adds a touch of mystery and poetry to the stone structure.

While enjoying my tea, I happen across a charming, somewhat eccentric local, Rajesh Banerjee, who looks very sharp in his colonial dhoti. He is making a tremendous fuss over how tea should be poured and drunk; it gives me immense pleasure to learn that my late father was not the only person to claim that he himself was the one who drank tea from his saucer.

"To all," says Rajesh. "That is possibly the better way to enjoy tea."

Rajesh is a first-generation Bengali tea farmer, highly regarded by the locals who refer to him as the "godfather of Darjeeling Tea." He relays accounts of the wonderful life on Makaibari, his vast tea estate, to a captive audience of fellow guests who rapidly swell in numbers as late afternoon progresses into early evening. I encounter many of them the following day when I am welcomed to the tea factory built by his great-grandfather and watch tea, quite literally, being handmade.

A Darjeeling legend, Rajesh has done much for the tea industry of his region. Back in 1988, he turned to organic farming methods, which means no chemical fertilizers were used. Four years later, his became the world's first fully biodynamic tea estate. "Here in the Himalayas, rare herbs have been in use for more than 500 years for crop protection, so sustainable practices for some time already," explains Rajesh to that, and now more than ever, "tea for Singer is truly sublime." This philosophical and environmentalist from Makaibari spans 670 hectares of land, but tea covers only 570 hectares; woodlands cover twice that area. There are dense forests to monitor the life. "Within the estate, various and other insects such as beetles, and various species of monkeys; turquoise; and black birds; and so on," Rajesh explains.

The last room, adjacent to the furnished with a long table and chairs, is filled with tea, against the rear font. The tea is boiled and left for exactly four minutes, then placed over a cup of the infused leaves are then removed for inspection. I sip each tea, not just around its tongue somewhat. First is the Silver Tips Imperial, a Buckingham Castle; then the Silver Tips Second Flush, and finally, the Oolong Tea. There is a certain order in which the teas are prepared. After the golden color, the tea bushes lose in the fire, the golden light of the sun.

The tea is then poured into a cup. The infusion is then poured into a cup. The infused leaves are then removed for inspection. I sip each tea, not just around its tongue somewhat. First is the Silver Tips Imperial, a Buckingham Castle; then the Silver Tips Second Flush, and finally, the Oolong Tea. There is a certain order in which the teas are prepared. After the golden color, the tea bushes lose in the fire, the golden light of the sun.

Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel is a modern and luxurious boutique hotel in the heart of the Glenburn Tea Estate, surrounded by lush gardens and hills. The hotel offers contemporary accommodations with modern amenities, while maintaining the charm and character of traditional tea plantation architecture. The property features a restaurant, bar, and an outdoor pool, providing guests with a relaxing and tranquil environment.

Glenburn is a working tea plantation estate that offers guests a unique stay experience. The estate has a long history of tea production, dating back to the early 1900s, and continues to be one of the largest tea producers in the region. With its picturesque setting and peaceful atmosphere, Glenburn is the perfect destination for tea lovers and nature enthusiasts.

The hotel, located on the outskirts of Glenburn, offers premium accommodations in a variety of tastefully decorated rooms and suites. Each room is equipped with modern amenities such as air conditioning, Wi-Fi, and flat-screen TVs, ensuring a comfortable and relaxing stay for guests. The hotel's in-house restaurant serves a variety of traditional and contemporary dishes, made with fresh ingredients sourced from the estate's gardens and local markets.

The Glenburn Tea Estate is also known for its organic tea production, with a focus on sustainability and environmental responsibility. The estate uses traditional methods to cultivate and process the tea leaf, ensuring high-quality output while minimizing the impact on the environment.

In addition to its stunning natural beauty and rich cultural heritage, Glenburn is also a popular destination for outdoor activities such as hiking, birdwatching, and nature tours. The surrounding tea gardens provide a rich environment for wildlife, including a variety of birds and butterflies, making it an ideal spot for nature enthusiasts.

Overall, Glenburn Tea Estate & Boutique Hotel is an ideal choice for those seeking a truly unique and memorable stay experience in the heart of the Glenburn Tea Estate. Whether you're a tea aficionado or simply looking for a peaceful retreat, Glenburn is sure to exceed your expectations with its beautiful setting, excellent accommodations, and a focus on sustainability and environmental responsibility.
GROWING TOGETHER
By Rajah Bauerjee – Makaibari Tea Estate, India

THE TIMES WE ARE LIVING THROUGH have created a complexity of social issues which are extremely difficult to comprehend. Hence, when we wander out into nature-the sense of peace prevails-immediate relief from the confusion of our daily grind. If we turn our attention—we realize the wisdom of nature and its simplicity only through observation. For example, if one is to travel from Kurseong to Delhi, the social implications of travel and execution of the work at the estate and is indeed very complicated. One is focused on the execution of the job—hence one only has to cope with a few issues without too much thought on the social implications. However, the moment one takes a little time out to mull over the social ramifications— it would be confusing, to the analyst. Hence an individual bestowed with intelligence and good education is inadequately equipped conceptually to fulfill the needed concepts for an understanding of the social situation. This is an urban phenomena in India, which is rapidly spreading to the rural scenario, with industrialisation of agriculture and improvements in all communication systems.

In the vast majority of villages, there still exists a different social system: the place of worship or temple is the source of inspiration, where the community gathers. Time-tried spiritual insights, handed down from the great era of the enlightened ones—the Rishis or Yogi are still followed and practiced in social life. The mantra, mantras naturally by the Brahmanas or priests, touch the soul of the people and social activities are based on this principle. The ruling of the masses, from the tip of the pyramid to the base, is reflected by the work on the land—which is the foundation of life. This is the basis for holistic sustainable agriculture: where the work on the land is a streamlining of the cosmic forces and its effective conversion for the diverse life forms, even below the earth to its offerings from crops, fish and other sustainable resources. It is a social story. As one sees down (draws down one’s roots so to say), one evolves to a clarity of thought processes—logical thinking emerging out of this intellectual development. Technological solutions are a fallacy of thinking. Scientific thought is localized to the physical world and is benefit of any spiritual stimuli. Hence, this thinking is dead. In the height of the Kali Yuga—where we are living through now this dead thinking dominates our lives at all levels.

Logical thinking creates industry and machines. Machines divide human labour—which in turn regulates production and ultimately the economy. To tame the economy—profitably, specialists are rampant at all macro and micro levels of this society. The social unity is thereby lost in the jostle for one ego-maniac, which is based on fanning the ego for domination over needless competition. Biodynamic agriculture offers a positive solution to reverse this trend, regain biological and just one back course for a positive evolution. Industrialised or conventional agriculture does create temporary surpluses as experienced by the introduction of chemical fertilizers, pesticides etc. But at what cost? These are all tools of long term destruction.

The analogy to an alcoholic is a training, as the temporary gains, can only be maintained by continual increased quantities of even greater toxicity of chemical inputs. It is preferable to have an artificial, temporary stimulus by a shot of whiskey (which is is attained by continual increased quantities after one month of regular drinking and proportionately increases with time) in the body, in contrast to the alcohol level linearly or to have a flow of energy sustained by a balanced diet. The history of Darwinism is clearly substantiates this fact, where the crop has been declining over the past three decades in spite of pouring lethal doses of chemicals as a magical cure all. After the initial euphoria of major crop increases, the rapid decline in production, the devastation caused by thoughtless mono-cultural tea planting coupled with wholesale applications, the dwindling productivity, the disruption of social unity has reduced this

magical array to a state of near chaos, hopelessness and the brink of desensitization. At Makaibari, this trend has not only been halted, but reversed by biodynamic practices.

Biodynamic practices awaken one to realize that agricultural practices are determined by the evolution of the earth. The earth is a cosmic creation—hence our thinking is determined by natural force and not the machinations of industry exalting from our thoughts. We have the freedom to create machines—but all flora and vegetation grow by natural laws—something that can be controlled by natural laws only—by removing the chemical inputs. All industrial production is independent of time, of any natural rhythm, of day or night, of seasons, whereas all agriculture is dependent on the rhythms of nature. We at Darjeeling cannot grow fruits like in the desert or Australia—we have to wait for extended days lengths, climbing temperatures and gentle spring rains for the gathering of this vintage. Similarly, we cannot expect to make several flushes in autumn or the first flush—as a whole new set of natural forces are at play during those periods. Understanding these forces and working in harmony with them, evolution and ultimately fulfills all concerns with it. Natural forces are holistic in its production and reproduction, whereas machines are not. A tea bush yields leaves and tea, not for replacement when needed. A machine wears out and has to be replaced. This is the fundamental difference between social order founded on dead thinking and one that stems from natural laws.
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TUESDAY 11 JULY 2006

Statue boost to Buddhist circuit

OUR CORRESPONDENT

Gangtok, July 10: Residents and administrative officials of Ravangla in North Sikkim have come together to commemorate the 300th birth anniversary of Lord Buddha by constructing a statue.

The statue, which will be installed inside a garden, is to come up on a raised plinth on the Ravangla-Rangpo road, some 2 km from the town.

"The project is part of the government's year-long plans to celebrate the birth anniversary," D.D. Bhutia told The Telegraph. Bhutia is the urban development minister and the legislator from Rangpo. The project will have chief minister Pawan Chamling as its chief patron.

According to government sources, the project is expected to provide a boost to the Buddhist tourism circuit in the state. Ravangla is located in the middle of three major monastic complexes: the monasteries at Tashiding, Ralang and Pemayangtse — which draws a large number of domestic and foreign tourists every year.

Makaibari on Japan canvas

VIVEK SINGH

Kurseong, July 10: People in Japan will soon have access to an artist's impression of the world-famous Makaibari Tea Estate, 8 km from here.

Japanese picture book writer Akira Kurashige, who is currently in Makaibari, is studying the flora and fauna surrounding the placce as she plans to base her new book on the area. Her book aims at introducing the exotic locale to her country, especially in the visual pockets.

"I have been working on this idea for the last one year and are staying with a family here. I intend to write a picture book on this theme. Picture books are fast becoming popular as they are easy to understand," Kurashige told The Telegraph here today.

The picture book, the title of which is yet to be decided, will contain hand-drawn pictures accompanied by details in Japanese. The sequence would be in the format of a story, Kurashige said. The author plans to stay here for another two months to complete her work.

A source told The Telegraph that the garden already has a tea-distributing centre — Makaibari Japan — in Japan. Kurashige's picture book will be displayed on the web page of the distributing centre.
GROWING ORGANIC

The Champagne of Teas is going organic. Darjeeling planters are reinventing their iconic, but beleaguered, brand to stay ahead.

by Ritwik Mukherjee

T he clichés were counting a little less—true and false. Darjeeling teas are the "Champagne of Teas"; they are the world’s most expensive teas and so on. At one level, all those statements were (and remain) true. But at another level, these descriptions almost mocked the harsh reality at these gardens. Most of these were losing money, they had little control over the geographical indication "Darjeeling Tea", and the future seemed bleak.

Then things began to turn—a little by chance. In 1988, T’Classic (Darjeeling) Pvt Ltd, which owned the famous Makaiabari Tea Estates, faced a major cash crunch; it couldn’t afford to buy fertilisers and pesticides. Result: it began experimenting with locally sourced organic inputs. Says Rajesh Banerjee, the fourth generation scion of the family that runs the world’s oldest single-owner tea estate, "It was partly a spur of the moment, partly a conscious decision. I realised that nature doesn’t require any external help to sustain and evolve life forms that make up the ecosystem. How do so many varieties of trees exist in a sub-tropical rain forest and sustain the wide diversity of organisms that exist in them? The mulch (a protective covering of leaves placed around tea bushes to prevent the evaporation of moisture) creates good top soil, but millions of useful organisms were annihilated by a single dose of fertiliser. I therefore, banned chemical applications.” It’s paying off. Earlier this year, he sold a 55 kg lot of Makaiabari Silver Tips at an astronomical $1000 per kg—a world record—at a tea auction. This wasn’t just a flash in the pan. Makaiabari regularly sells small lots of organic teas at $250 per kg. The buyers: high-end stores, pop stars, etc.

Cover Story

MAKAIABARI TEA ESTATE

Makaiabari®

This is a beautiful, sunny and chilly November morning of 1955 at Kurseong—a small town of Darjeeling district. Kanchanjunga was glittering gloriously under the canopy of a cloudless, indigo blue sky. Two jeeps were rolling down from Kurseong towards Makaiabari Tea Estate by the nightfall. By road this was around 8 o’clock and I was a passenger in one of the jeeps with my parents and younger sister. It was my first visit to the Himalayas and I was overwhelmed by the gorgeous scenic beauty.

Our journey ended a thousand below Kurseong at the gates of a beautiful wooden bungalow. A smiling young man in his thirties was welcoming us for two huge Abhatians. He was P N Banerjee, the proprietor of Makaiabari Tea Estate. He had two small sons who had also come out to welcome us. Mr. Banerjee was very eager to show us his garden and factory rightaway. So, we went for a tour of his garden before entering his bungalow.

It was a huge garden where we spent more than two hours. Smiling coconut and teak trees worked with smiling babies stripped to their bodies. We saw the processing plant—a great experience for us. Poresh Banerjee was a nice gentleman and soon he seemed like our long time friend.

After the garden visit, we entered his beautiful wooden bungalow. He was a great hunter and the entire bungalow was decorated with mounted heads and trophies of different types of deer, antelopes, leopards, Royal Bengal tigers and other animals. All the rooms in the bungalow were covered with tiger skins.

At that time there was no legislation against hunting. Poresh Banerjee came with snakes and two in an ornamental gold-lined luna shaped rice service with a pale blue floral design on a white base. We spent another hour listening to Mr. Banerjee’s hunting experiences, while enjoying the wonderful tea. He recalled how once they had a leopard cub which had wandered into their tea garden from the neighbouring jungles. It was small, but huge. He had never seen anything like it. He had met many tigers, leopards, and any other animal. He had been there for about two weeks, and it eventually died in the bungalow. Mr. Banerjee showed us the deep paw marks under his knee. All this was highly exciting to me—a sitting in a remote tea garden, with a connection between man and nature.

We left the garden with two boxes of tea gifted by Mr. Banerjee.

After five years, I still cherish every moment of that day. A couple of years ago, while visiting the same area I noticed that the Kanchanjunga Road was no more, and its dangerously steep stretch that I had encountered with my father. The surrounding forest had thinned out considerably and human habitation—mostly teashower and staff quarters—had encroached into forest land. The forest was fenced away from the remote forests and many hills were lost forever.

Joel Last

WITH NATURE: Raju Banerjee with wife Sulochana

STILL FRAME: With Makaiabari tea in Kurseong, 1985

Makaiabari Memoirs

Manishree Mitra

Makaiabari is a single-proprietor garden, a tradition that has been carried down the last four generations. Since 1956, Makaiabari has been producing a second flush, muscatel-style Silver Tip, which carries the best aroma of all. Nigérian Silver Tips were awarded the world record price of US $1,200 in 1999 by the American Tea Mates Association. It is considered by connoisseurs, tea lovers, and connoisseurs of tea in the world. Besides, Makaiabari produces some of the best green teas and condiments anywhere.

The mystery and secrets of nature and the importance of forests are known to Rajesh Banerjee, who does not believe in monoculture plantation. It means 70 per cent of its area under forest cover.

Makaiabari’s Project Leopard was begun by P N Banerjee, father of the present owner, 40 years ago. Today, it is a grand success boasting a community of 11 leopards—once there were only two. Makaiabari has actually reversed the trend of last decline in the leopard population in the sub-tropical rainforests of the Himalayan foothills. The growth of the leopard population is a great success story for conservation.
Growing Organically

The Champagne of Teas is going organic. Darjeeling planters are reinventing their iconic, but beleaguered, brand to stay ahead of the game. Retwik Mukherjee

The cliches were sounding a little tired—and true: Darjeeling teas are the best in the world, they are the “Champagne of Teas”; they are the world’s most expensive teas; etc., etc., etc. At one level, all these statements were (and remain) true. But at another level, these tabulated descriptions almost mocked the harsh reality that existed at these gardens. Most of them were losing money, they had little control over the geographical indications “Darjeeling Tea”, and the future seemed bleak.

Then things began to turn—almost by chance. In 1988, T’Classic (Darjeeling) Pvt Ltd, which owned the famous Makaibari Tea Estate, faced a major cash crunch; it couldn’t afford to buy fertilizers and pesticides. Result: it began experimenting with locally sourced organic inputs. Says Rajesh Ranerjee, the fourth generation son of the family that runs the world’s oldest single-owner tea estate: “It was partly compulsions and partly a conscious decision. I realised that nature doesn’t require any external help to sustain and evolve the myriad life forms that make up the ecosystem. How do so many varieties of trees exist cheek-by-jowl in a sub-tropical rain forest and sustain the wide diversity of organisms that exist in them? The mulch (a protective covering of leaves placed around tea bushes to prevent the evaporation of moisture) created a wonderful topsoil, but millions of useful organisms were annihilated by a single dose of fertiliser. It, therefore, banned all chemical applications.” It’s paying dividend.

DARJEELING TEA: THE BIGGER PICTURE
No. of Gardens: 86
Organic Gardens: 28
Total Production: 11 million kg
Organic Tea Production: 1.9 million kg
Projected No. of Organic Gardens by 2010: 44

COSTLIEST ORGANIC TEAS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>BRAND/GARDEN</th>
<th>COMPANY</th>
<th>PRICE/KG</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Makaiibari Shey Tsechuk Makaibari</td>
<td>T Classic Darjeeling</td>
<td>$19,980*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEIT Ceylon Tea</td>
<td>CEIT Ceylon Tea</td>
<td>$16,000**</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cluny Orange Pekoe</td>
<td>Cluny Orange Pekoe</td>
<td>$10,900***</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ambrosia Premium Organic</td>
<td>Ambrosia</td>
<td>$9,900</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organic Shey</td>
<td>Shey</td>
<td>$9,900-10,300</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*250 cups of 2g tea
**250 cups of 1.5g tea
***250 cups of 1g tea
AND GOD SAID

“Let there be Tea”

Others view him differently. In an industry characterised by absentee landlords – garden owners who seldom visit their properties – he is a true “bush man”.

A sk any expert from the world of tea “what does it take to grow the root (weed best) tea in the world?” and the answers will be readily generic. A Derbyshire garden for the Darjeeling district is tea, where the Charnwood district is its namesake), with pre-ordained locations, a complex system of planting, pruning and the production of black, oolong and green teas, is the hallmark of the Darjeeling and the Darjeeling is the best in the world, the true spirit of life.

Meet Rajah Banerjee – the man, the legend, the name that is the personification of the best tea in the world. Period.

A fourth generation planter, various people in the know describe him in various ways. Some call him the man of the full blooded Brits. Indeed dressed in his riding breeches, with his impeccably gentlemanly ways, his command over the queen’s tongue and single minded devotion to planting, one is wont to mistake him for the bushman who lives life early British Planters. Add to it the fact that his love for the garden, its people and all creatures big and small is another trait common with the legends of yore and the leniency bestowed on the man begins to surface. Put him on a thoroughbred and indeed the picture of the lord surveying all that is his, is complete.

Others view him differently. In an industry characterised by absentee landlords – garden owners who seldom visit their properties – he is a true “bush man”. Someone who has spent his life in the garden and is the process, keeping the eyes on the crop and the history of Makalburt, but has also become a walking encyclopedia, of all things tea.

Yet to others, he is the true spirit of the hills – a life dedicated to not only growing the best tea, but also to ensure that along with it the best garden is created, with the best management worker relationships (it has to be seen to be believed) and the best business practices are embraced. That is perhaps reason why in an area imbued with social-political strife, Makalburt continues to be an oasis of peace (yes, with Rajah Banerjee holding the reins, even an oasis in the tsunami is not an impossibility).

On another level, he is a visionary – a lone lama fruiting his path to cosmic union. To him the act of growing tea is the manifestation of life itself – something to be celebrated with the finest of beaks. The “balance sheet of life” (to quote one of his favorite terms) to him is what is worth working upon, not the pecuniary trappings that move lesser mortals to tell. That is perhaps reason why, more often than not, their terms were even known to the master of the industry (he took the garden as the organic way. His mind, this was a day when the industry was busy pumping in more and more chemicals with the hope of increasing crop yields and thereby adding to the bottom-line (“that’s conventional balance sheet speaks for you” Rajah I imagine would have said, with no smirk on face, for such is the merciless man).

The vision that dictates that the tea bush is not an isolated entity but a more part of a complex life system that has evolved over millennia and that by pumping chemicals with the ulterior motive of making the tea bush only go to force it to destruction is not one that is easy to comprehend and even more difficult to embrace. For, who wants to sacrifice the tranquility of a comfortable present, that too for the sake of maintaining ecological balance, which may or may not bear fruit in a future, when in any case we will all be dead?

And this is precisely where the greatness of the man lies. For not only has he wagered his present and indeed his all for a cause that he believes in, but has also been a relentless exponent, tutelage, learning and sharing his knowledge with the world at large, creating and spreading awareness.

A garden where the ratio of the crop area to the forest cover is one to one, is a garden. Producing hand crafted teas that are completely organic. Empowering people who have been empowered at the very grassroots with innovative means that are nothing less than revolutionary. Constantly adding to mankind’s knowledge and elevating the process of tea making to that of an art. Teaching and spreading awareness in different corners of the globe and transforming them into better human beings. Imparting that special finesse into the finest teas, so as to better your records, that he himself has set. This would have been enough for any mortal as far as achievements go, but Rajah Banerjee is made of stuff that is even greater.

Ask the lady behind the bush perched perched in the steep slopes of the garden, picking the “two leaves and a bud” with tender loving care, or the old man painfully trudging uphill with a heavy load of firewood over his back, or the little children gleaning through comic books in the garden children’s center or the young boy who has come all the way from Australia to volunteer his time for the betterment of the local lot while learning about organic farming, or the buyer of the finest teas from faraway Japan and the answer is simple. Almost, as though they were speaking in one voice. “What according to you is Rajah Banerjee?” I asked and they replied. “It’s God.”

Not a messiah, not an angel. Not a son of God, or the chosen one either. Just God. In all his divine glory. At his abode, in the seven villages that constitute Makalburt, busy unfolding his ever-lasting story of creation.
The Makaibari Estate

The Makaibari Tea estate is in Darjeeling, North East India in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains. Located at between 3000 and 40000 meters above sea level, it is at the perfect altitude for tea growing. The entire estate stretches over 673 hectares, the tea is ensconced within, occupying 250 hectares. Within the woods, several species of plants, butterflies, birds and animals flourish.

The Makaibari estate is the last private, wholly family-run tea estate in the Darjeeling district of India. At the Makaibari estate, tradition means quality, and akin to the legendary vintners of France's vine regions, the well-kept manufacturing secrets that are perfected over the years and earned by effort and total commitment are handed down from generation to generation. So it is not surprising that Hampstead Makaibari tea has consistently won 'best tasting tea' awards in the UK.

Growing tea is a part of Rajah Banerjee's heritage. He is a fifth generation tea planter, and the great-grandson of the original Makaibari estate owner. In 1859, an area of Darjeeling was given to Rajah's great-grandfather as a part of special services rendered to the British Empire. The British had identified Darjeeling's climatic conditions as being ideal for growing tea and provided encouragement and guidance to young planters. The senior Mr. Banerjee never looked back, creating exquisite teas soon to be known all over the world. A new era of fine tea was born and Makaibari was right on top of it.

Evolution to Biodynamics

Rajah embarked on a lonely path using his experiences of the topography and climate towards a self-sustainable agricultural system. He moved on from mono-culture (the practice of planting just one single crop) to permaculture where there are many levels of vegetation. He incorporated the forests into the tea areas using valuable herbs and plants growing there to fight pests and provide nitrogen. This was an intuitive move and Rajah later said "I just felt right".

Rajah was involving himself more and more in the teachings of Rudolph Steiner, the far-sighted Austrian philosopher. Steiner was responsible for creating the first ecological farming system which would be known as Biodynamics. Whilst organic agriculture is farming without the use of chemical inputs, Biodynamic farming goes further and takes into account the visible and invisible forces that create a healthy ecosystem.

The Makaibari difference

Unlike the neighboring tea estates, where clear cutting and mono-cropping is the status quo, the Makaibari estate maintains 50% of its acreage as undisturbed rainforest. The forests support the natural ecosystem and the wildlife that depend on it.

The picture at left shows a neighboring estate that practices conventional farming. The picture at right shows how Makaibari's teas are processed.
SIPPIN' on luxury

World's most expensive tea — the organic Makaibari's Imperial Silver Tip — comes from the world's oldest single-owner tea estate in Kurseong

How to go organic

Organic tea is defined as tea grown without the use of artificial pesticides, fungicides, and chemical fertilizers. Tea bushes get their nutrients from preventing the use of specially formulated inorganic minerals and compost, seaweed, and/or other suitable material. The tea in this book is of course organic, and it's made with love.

GOURMAND Vin Sanghvi

Cookery shows have evolved quite dramatically from being mere recipes stirred up in designer kitchens to extreme shows where celebrity chefs go to the strangest of places to eat the weirdest things. With India being quite the flavour of the season, Discovery Travel and Living has launched 'A Matter of Taste with Vin Sanghvi.'

The seven-part series sees the columnist/chat show host go to different parts of India and explore the various food facts and fallacies that abound in our country. The first episode on 'Sino Ludhianvi cuisine,' which explores the genesis of Indian Chinese food with interviews with the creator of the Manchurian and also visits a place in Delhi that serves Chinese Chaat.

In 'Two Leaves and A Bud,' Sanghvi goes on the tea trail visiting the Makaibari tea estate and talks to Rajah Banerjee, the proprietor of the estate who rides about on a horse quite like an urban cowboy. The Makaibari tea estate produces the most expensive tea in the world. There is also 'My Old School' where Sanghvi traces how Rajputana royalty have reinvented themselves and their glorious palaces.

Can there be talk of Indian food and no mention of tandoori chicken? 'The Migratory Bird'
Thank You