

Indulge Your Wanderlust: E-Savvy Queen of the Hills Beckons

Amitabha Bhattacharyya is an Associate Professor in the Department of Physics at Sikkim University. He has obtained his M. Sc degree from IIT Kanpur, Doctoral degree from Raman Research Institute, Bangalore and Post Doctoral from Institut Francais du Petrole France. His areas of interest include soft moferials, especially liquid crystals, soaps and detergents.

Abstract

Historically, Darjeeling has been known for its world renowned tea, and also for the 'Toy Train'. In this article, attempt has been made to uncover many other factors that have contributed to the development of this place as a prime tourist destination. The whole work is based on field surveys and reviews along with internet surfing. The websites consulted are mentioned in the text.¹

Keywords: Darjeeling, Tea, Tourism, Hotel, Nursery, School, Monastery

The Darjeeling Mail of 25th September 1922 stopped at Parbatipur (in modern Bangladesh) on 26th morning as the line further down was under water. After four days of waiting, the passengers were taken to Calcutta by a long route. The situation is very different today. One can fly straight to Bagdogra. The trains run much faster, there are many more trains and regular bus services as well. The major changes in the tourism ethos of Darjeeling in recent times are due to mobile phones and the internet. Let us take a look at the effects of the internet on tourism. We can classify these effects into two kinds: (1) Organizations who use the internet for their work, whom I shall refer to as direct beneficiaries, (2) Organizations that benefit from the comments on their service that are made by satisfied tourists, referred to as indirect beneficiaries. As it is said, Darjeeling is famous for Tea, Tourism, Timber, Teaching and Toy Train. To this I would add the famous nurseries and the Buddhist monasteries. Of these, the direct beneficiaries include Toy Train, Hotels, Tea Sellers, Nurseries, Schools and Colleges.

Toy Train

This train, which is one of the symbols of the Hills, is better known to the cyber-savvy world than the rest of us. The blog sites praise this fantastic train in many different ways.

This fascinating narrow gauge train operates with the original steam engines and the loops and the zigzags along the route are remarkable feats of engineering. The short ride from Darjeeling town to Ghoom becomes a joy ride in itself. The Toy Train is an engineering marvel and some call it one of the wonders of the world, to be preserved forever.

¹ All the organizations and individuals mentioned in this paper have helped me with their comments and suggestions. In addition, I acknowledge the help and encouragement of my friends, family and colleagues. I also thank the makers of mobile phones and the designers of laptops with long battery backup which helped me work during the long power cuts in Darjeeling.

However, the sites and blogs dedicated to the Toy Train are too numerous for this article, and would require a complete paper to explore and analyze.

Hotels

Let us take the Hotels first. The oldest hotel of Darjeeling, Fortune Resort Central, uses the Newest Method of Marketing through the homepage www.fortunehotels.com. The Parklane Hotel uses an email address ajaymukhia@yahoo.co.in to get in touch with the customers, and they prefer this mode to the brokers and travel agents.

Many other hotels also use the internet to get in touch with customers and make bookings:

1. Hotel Shangri-La : www.shangri-la-regency.com
2. Hotel Seven Seventeen : www.hotel717.com
3. The Elgin Hotel : www.elginhotels.com
4. The Snow Lion Hotel : www.snowlionhomestay.com
5. May Fair Hotel : www.mayfairhotels.com

Information about different hotels can also be obtained directly from the following sites.

6. www.darjeelinghotels.net
7. www.travelmasti.com/darjeeling.htm

Tea Sellers

Now let us take a look at the famous Darjeeling tea. Teas grown on the misty heights of Darjeeling, popularly known as the "Champagne of Tea" are famous the world over, for their exquisite aroma and taste. The premium Darjeeling Teas are mild in character and have distinctive natural fruity or muscatel flavors.

Maybe we do not know, but the e-savvy world knows that

1. Darjeeling Tea is regarded as the best Tea in the world, and the most sought after by connoisseurs.
2. This highest quality Tea of the country is however less than 2% of the total tea produced.
3. The exquisite Darjeeling tea comprises of Orthodox Tea and high quality, unfermented, Green Tea.
4. Some premier Tea Gardens also manufacture the semi-fermented White or Oolong Tea.

The famous *Nathmulls* of Darjeeling are the pioneers in India to successfully conceptualize the sale of Tea by Mail Order and now on the internet at an international scale. They use the home page www.nathmulltea.com. At one time, 80% of their sale was over the internet. At present, they still sell more than 50% over the net.

The *Golden Tips of Darjeeling*, also known for their teas, uses the site www.goldentipstea.com to market tea internationally. The orders are received in Kolkata, the money is transferred to the account and the tea is sent from Darjeeling either by speed post or courier, as per the customer's instructions. Their home page informs us that "All tea comes from the dried leaves of *Camellia Sinensis*, the tea plant that was first cultivated in China and later found growing in India. Tea is the second most popular beverage in the world (after water). Several factors affect the flavour of tea: where the tea is grown, the climate, soil conditions, and the processing."

House of Tea, a franchisee of Goodricke's, uses an email vijaypuriss@hotmail.com to sell tea. They also claim to perform a considerable part of their sale over the net. The family run *Nirvana Tea House* located at H. D. Lama Road also sells tea through their home page www.nirvanateahouse.com and email info@nirvanateahouse.com. In addition, they run a courier service, and use it to send tea all over India.

A quaint small tea shop located in the bazaar area, *Radhika & Son Tea Collection* sells tea all over the world, using just an email address radhika_son@yahoo.co.in!



They send the packets preferably by post, but also by DTDC if the customer insists. Money is paid by bank transfer. The elderly Ms Radhika, who used to be in the shop till a few years ago, remembers selling the best tea at 62 paise a kilo.

Nurseries

Now let us look at the nurseries, which are mostly located in Kalimpong. There are a few nurseries in Mirik as well. *Pine - View Nursery* grows exquisite South and North American Cacti, which are sold, both on location and over the net through the home page www.pineviewcactus.com.

Ganesh Mani Pradhan & Son, a family owned and family run flower nursery specialises in growing and exporting a wide range of temperate and tropical plants. They specialise in various genera of Gingers like Amomum, Curcuma, Globba, Hedychium, Kaempferia etc. They sell their products internationally through their site and email addresses nagdhara@ganeshvilla.com, nagdhara@satyam.net.in, or the website www.ganeshvilla.com.

Apart from these two, there are numerous flower nurseries in Kalimpong. It is claimed that over 15% of the population depend on these nurseries for their livelihood. The site www.darjeelingnews.net/kalimpong_flower_nurseries.html contains the list of nurseries

Schools and Colleges

The famous residential schools and colleges of the hills are also using the internet to their and their students' benefit. The famous *St. Joseph's School*, better known as *North Point School*, is accessible through internet; their site offers information about general functioning, admissions, discipline etc. Their home page² says:

The Government of India acquired Darjeeling as a health resort in 1835. By 1846 the town had an excellent girls' school conducted by the Loreto sisters. Several attempts were made to open a similar institution for boys, but for years none was successful. Finally, in 1887, when jurisdiction over the Catholic community in Darjeeling was transferred from the Bishop of Patna to the Archbishop of Calcutta, the Jesuits there were able to satisfy a long-standing request of Calcutta Catholics and establish a school for boys in Darjeeling.

The even older and famous *St Paul's School* is also on the net, at www.spsdarjeeling.com. Their homepage records that sometime during 1864, on the large Jalapahar estate, Darjeeling, St. Paul's opened its doors with thirty-one boarders and a few day scholars and the Rev. J. C. Nesfield as Rector. Located 7500 feet above sea level and acclaimed as the highest public school in the world, the origin and early history of this well known institution, the second oldest in Bengal, dates as far back as the year 1823 when John William Ricketts, a prominent Anglo-Indian leader, conceived the idea of founding a public school to meet the needs of the growing Anglo-Indian population in Calcutta.

The *St. Helen's Secondary Boarding School for Girls* at Kurseong maintains a website www.sthelenskurseong.com. Their homepage tells us that the school, fondly hailed as a "Lovely Mountain Home", is a "Minority, Catholic Educational Institution", owned and administered by the Congregation of the Daughters of the Cross, under the Article 30(1) of the Constitution of India primarily for children of Christian Minority; but other students are also admitted, irrespective of caste, creed, race or language, on merit, and according to the legal norms, pertaining to Educational Institutions of Minorities.

² URL: www.sjcnorthpoint.com.

Salesian College (SC) is a Government recognized, minority educational institution of the Catholic Church, run by Salesians of Don Bosco, Kolkata Province providing regular courses in Arts, Commerce and Science (UG) under the North Bengal University (NBU) and MBA & MCA post graduate courses (PG) under Assam Don Bosco University (ADBU). It is a UGC certified College of Excellence, NAAC re-accredited with 'A' Grade.³

Indirect Beneficiaries

Let us now look at the indirect beneficiaries, those organizations that do not have their own websites or emails, but nonetheless are benefitting from the internet. Thus the internet does not only render help to the bigger institutions, but is equally useful for the smaller establishments. Internet costs can be kept to a minimal; many shops and hotels use just an email address and need to connect to the net only once in a day or so. These organizations are mentioned in the home pages and blogs of visitors and customers and as such have become famous in the e-world.

Darjeeling has two famous NGOs working for the upliftment of people, which are well known all over the world. *The Hayden Hall* was founded in 1969 and focuses on providing opportunities to poor families through empowering women. They have a simple philosophy: to help women help themselves economically, and create a positive effect on their children and families. The *Tibetan Refugee Self-Help Centre* was started on October 1, 1959 when, following the dramatic escape of His Holiness the Dalai Lama, thousands of Tibetans fled into neighbouring countries. A ten member committee was formed in Darjeeling, which organized a rehabilitation centre. While *Hayden Hall* has a simple website, the *Tibetan Refugee Centre* does not have one. However, many blogs refer to them.

Let us now take a look at an unusual individual who has become a legend in the world of tea, thanks to the net.

The Five Second Lady

Her actual name is Kusum. Let us see what the website tracingtea.com/tea-blog/?m=200807 has to say about her.

You meet her when you go to Happy Valley Tea Estate, but she is famous internationally. Kusum claims she is known across at least 4 continents as the 5 second lady - if you have heard of her do please let us know! And why, I hear you ask is she the 5 second lady? Well, it's all down to the tea she brews. Her specialty is...wait for it...

Super Fine Tippy Golden Flowery Orange Pekoe Number 1.

³ URL: www.salesiancollege.net

This first flush organic tea, takes just 5 seconds to make a perfect, golden brew. Kusum uses a t-spoon of tea per cup, puts the tea in a sieve, and pours the water straight through it for a very-fast-the-way-she-counts 5 seconds. It's delicious. What is more, as the leaves have not stewed in the water, they can be used in the same way twice more. Clever. The tea is sweet, Kusum a fabulous sales-woman, and you're unlikely to escape her clutches without her 5 second method ingrained on your mind.



Tea Service à la Kusum

Here is an example of a tiny restaurant becoming an institution, courtesy the internet.

Hot Stimulating Café, the Café Unforgettable.

The site www.tripadvisor.com gives the opinion of many satisfied customers of this small but interesting café.

- On the road between Darjeeling and the zoo/Himalayan Mountaineering Institute - this is basically just a tin shack with a tiny balcony out the back with some great views of Darjeeling. It looks a little grubby but the owner makes the food from fresh (sic) when you order it. We had two plates of momos, one fried and the other steamed and a glass of fresh lime juice for only 75 rupee (about 90p sterling) - absolutely delicious.
- The surroundings may be basic but the view is fabulous, the food very interesting, freshly made and cheap. The people who run it are exceptionally friendly and the service is great. Had Momos in several places, these were the best.

Monasteries

The Monasteries in and around Darjeeling are becoming tourist savvy. A good example would be the Samten Choling Monastery built in 1965, near Batasia Loop, on the Hill Cart Road. The name of the monastery is written in English, with the tourist in mind. The older Yiga Choeling Monastery, located in Ghoom, built in 1850, has put a

new signboard in English. Unlike most religious organizations, this monastery allows photography and videography inside the prayer room, at a price!! The Druk Thrupten Sa-Ngag Choeling Monastery, better known as the Dali Monastery, has opened a very good cafeteria inside called the Kunga Paljor Coffee Shop, run entirely by monks, for benefit of the tourists. They also have a souvenir and book shop, with books and CDs in English and Hindi, and they are now also selling pen-drives with their monogram. The monasteries are mentioned in some blog sites of the tourists as well. In spite of becoming tourist savvy, the monasteries are yet to be e-savvy.



*The Samten Choling Monastery,
with English signboard*



*The Kunga Paljor Coffee Shop, inside
Dali Monastery*

Let us now look at a very unconventional beneficiary of the internet revolution. There is a voluntary teaching programme, for tourists to teach English and other subjects to children in Lepcha villages, while staying in their homes, thus learning about their culture and life. The home page¹ of the organizers of the programme, describes the Lepchas as:

The original inhabitants of this area - in the foothills to the south of Bhutan - the Lepchas, a tribe who are cultured but simple people, have been pushed to the margins by successive waves of immigrants. These people, full of grace, humanity, humor and a zest for life, are incredibly easy to make real friendships with. Apart from some ginger and spice that they grow in tiny terraced fields in valleys of spectacular beauty, they farm just enough for their food needs. Here Buddhism and Christianity exist alongside a much older worship (of nature). They certainly have much to teach the world about how to live in harmony with its surroundings, and you will have the chance to learn all about them whilst volunteer teaching with the Lepchas.

This is a case of a 'primitive' tribe, marginalized by immigrants, making its presence felt with the help of a modern tool like the internet.

Conclusion

The tourism related organizations of Darjeeling are making good use of the internet, but the potential remains high and yet to be tapped. I feel, nay believe, that with time more and more information about the hills will be available to the discerning tourist, who will be able to make his/her own plans independently, without relying on the ubiquitous travel agents (read brokers or dalals). A lot still needs to be done; most organizations have just started using this method. In tourist friendly internet savvy Taiwan, there is a site www.hug.com.tw/hug/ to sell best quality watermelons during the season.