


Darjeeling

The ship's first stop in India was the port city of Madras, where Sister Teresa was stunned by the “indescribable” poverty she witnessed. Although Skopje’s population included many poor people, and ragged children sometimes begged for change in the marketplace, Sister Teresa had never seen anything like this. In an article for *Catholic Missions* magazine, she described whole families sleeping on the streets: “Day and night they live in the open on mats they have made from large palm leaves—or often on the

The overwhelming poverty in the streets of India had a huge impact on Sister Teresa.





“If our people could only see all this, they would stop grumbling...and offer thanks to God...”

—Mother Teresa

people could only see all this, they would stop grumbling about their own misfortunes and offer thanks to God for blessing them with such abundance.”

The southern part of India is very close to the equator, and for someone accustomed to snow at Christmastime, the tropical heat and relentless bright sun was hard to take. India is also a feast of color.

The city of Madras was crowded with brightly painted carts and wooden rickshaws, women wearing saris of orange and peacock blue, and humpbacked cattle wandering loose in the streets.

The sounds of unfamiliar languages and

bare ground. They are all virtually naked, wearing at best a ragged loin cloth.” She

concluded: “If our

“Champagne of Teas”

The name “Darjeeling” is known around the world for the rich, flavorful tea that comes from this region. Tea is a drink with a long and colorful history; its popularity influenced exploration and trade for centuries. In the 15th and 16th centuries, Europe’s demand for tea and spices prompted naval explorations by Christopher Columbus and Vasco Da Gama. And in 1600, the British East India Company was founded by royal charter to promote trade in Indian goods, especially tea and spices. The company became a colonial power; in the 1700s, the East India Company even had its own military department.



The snow-covered Himalayas are a breathtaking backdrop to Darjeeling's hills. Kachenjunga, at right, is the third highest peak in the world.

musical chanting, the scents of jasmine blossoms and spicy foods

fried by street vendors must have seemed otherworldly.

After a short stay in Madras, the ship continued sailing up India's eastern coast to its final destination, Calcutta. This larger, poorer, and infinitely more overwhelming city would be home to Mother Teresa for the greater part of her life. But this first visit was brief. In a matter of days, she was sent to the Sisters of Loreto's convent in Darjeeling to complete her training.

HILL STATION

Hill stations are Indian towns at elevations of 3,500–7,500 ft (1000–1500 m), often used as cool retreats from the summer heat.

The town of Darjeeling sits in the foothills of the Himalayas, the tallest mountain range on Earth. Local legend holds that the snow-capped



Himalayas are the sacred resting place of the Hindu god Shiva. The name Darjeeling comes from the Tibetan words *dorje* (thunderbolt) and *ling* (dwelling place). Together, they mean “land of the thunderbolt.” Darjeeling enjoyed cool mountain air, a good climate, and breathtaking views, making it a popular “hill station” and resort for British colonials and wealthy Indians during the summer months, when the heat and humidity of the coastal cities was too much to bear.

COLONY

A colony is a foreign territory ruled by another country. Settlers from the ruling country are known as colonials.

The 400-mile (700-km) train trip to Darjeeling was very dramatic. The Darjeeling Himalayan Railway climbs

The British Raj in India



The United Kingdom consists of England, Scotland, Northern Ireland, and Wales, which occupy two islands in the north Atlantic. But for centuries, the British Empire extended much farther. The British, avid explorers and seafarers, claimed colonies on many continents, including North America, Australia, Africa, as well as “the jewel in the crown,” India. The British rule of India from 1858–1947 was called the *Raj* (the Indian word for “reign”).

NOVICE

A novice is a provisional member of a religious community, who may live and work as a nun but is not yet fully initiated.

thousands of feet in elevation, laboring up steep slopes and around tight spiraling curves, one of which is called "Agony Point." Most of the Darjeeling district is

more than a mile above sea level, and its steep hillsides are ideal for growing one of India's most important crops, tea.

In this picturesque region of lush tea plantations and snow-capped peaks, the Loreto Convent was a world apart. Behind its stone walls, the nuns and novices followed a rigorous schedule of daily study and prayers, rising early and working hard all day long. Their training was closely supervised by the novice mistress, who was charged with evaluating their work. Sister Teresa was known for her tireless and cheerful disposition,

Workers harvest the famed Darjeeling tea, sometimes known as "the champagne of teas."



but she was not good at everything. One of her teachers would later recall her clumsiness at lighting the tall candles in the chapel. She continued to study English, and also learned two of India's major languages: Bengali and Hindi.

Every morning, Sister Teresa and the other novices taught local students at St. Teresa's school, a one-room schoolhouse serving about 20 girls and boys. She was well liked by her young students, who nicknamed her "Ma" (mother) and "Bengali Teresa" because of her ease and fluency in that language. She was also assigned to work for a short time with the nursing staff of a nearby medical station, and her contact with the desperate, ill, and sometimes starving people—many of whom had walked for hours to get help—made a lasting impression on her. So did a painting of Jesus surrounded by sufferers that hung on the hospital pharmacy's wall. She wrote

India's Many Languages

Indians speak hundreds of different languages, ranging from the official language of Hindi to dialects spoken in only a handful of villages. A 2001 census identified 22 languages that were spoken by over a million people, including Bengali and Punjabi in the north, Marathi in central and western India, and Tamil and other Dravidian languages in the south. To make matters even more complicated, many Indian languages have their own scripts and alphabets. English is also a recognized and common language.



in *Catholic Missions*, “Each morning, before I start work, I look at this picture. In it is concentrated everything that I feel. I think, ‘Jesus, it is for you and for these souls!’ Then I open the door.”

On May 24, 1931, Agnes Gonxha Bojaxhiu took her first vows in the convent’s chapel, pledging herself to a




A New Name

Agnes Gonxha chose her new name to honor Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, a humble French nun who lived a quiet life of prayer and died at the tender age of 24. Her nickname was “Little Flower”—an appropriate choice for the “little bud” Gonxha, who stood barely over five feet (1.5 m) tall. Since another nun at the Darjeeling convent already bore the French name Marie-Therese, Agnes Gonxha adopted the Spanish spelling Teresa instead.

life of poverty, chastity, and obedience to God. At that time, the ceremony included prostration, or lying face-down on the floor, a symbolic death of the postulant’s former life and worldly desires. When she got up, she had become a new person, embarked on a lifelong vocation of religious service. The tradition of her religious order also dictated that she must now confirm the new name she had chosen for herself in Ireland.

Though not all orders require members to change their names, this practice is common in



Roman Catholicism and other religious faiths.

To symbolize the start of a new life, a person leaves behind his or her birthname, and instead chooses a name with

some special meaning or

tradition. Since the Middle Ages, popes have chosen new names upon taking office, often in honor of former popes or favorite saints. In some forms of Buddhism, high-ranking religious teachers choose spiritual names (sometimes called Dharma names) for their students. It is also common for a person to take a new name when converting to a different religion, as demonstrated by the boxer Muhammad Ali (formerly Cassius Clay) and the basketball player Kareem Abdul-Jabbar (formerly Lew Alcindor), both of whom changed their names when they converted to the religion of Islam.

Not long after she took her first vows, Sister Teresa was reassigned to teach at St. Mary's, a convent school run by the Sisters of Loreto in Calcutta. This would be her home for nearly two decades. For the second time, she boarded the Darjeeling Himalayan Railway train. This time, however, she was traveling away from the peace and beauty of the Darjeeling hills and heading toward poor and troubled Calcutta, soon to be her new home.

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—Mother Teresa