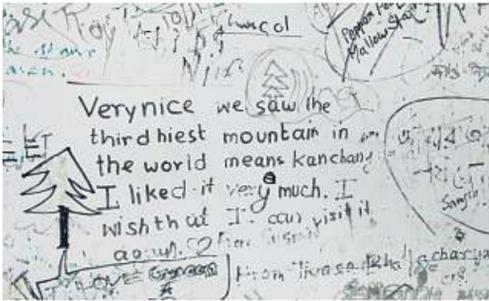
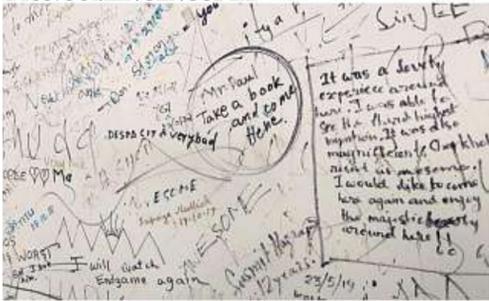


# Charkhole:

## Whispering Sky & Silent Mountains



PICS: SOMEN SENGUPTA



By **SOMEN SENGUPTA**

**W**hen our train crossed Kisanganj in Bihar and re-entered Bengal, I had no reason to notice any change in landscape because in this part of geography it is hard to differentiate between Bengal and Bihar. Here the zigzag railway track heading to Siliguri frequently runs between two bordering states.

Soon we started getting ready to disembark at NJP station from where our onwards journey to the hills was planned. Suddenly there was enough to explode in joy. We all were in celebration mode to catch the panorama through the window where over the crystal blue sky what we initially thought was a lump of solid cloud, was in fact a view of Mt Kangchenjunga - It was huge and clear.

Kangchenjunga visible from train near NJP is not an ordinary daily event. It happens only when the weather is very sunny and the sky is almost free of clouds. The day when I was off to NJP for exploring another off beat hamlet from where Kangchenjunga looks like a sleeping beauty was indeed a blessed one. It was a photo finish for a man who can walk miles to see Kangchenjunga.

My wife did not fail to notice my enchanted face.

"So your objective is fulfilled - Let us go back to home from NJP itself. You got to see your Kangchenjunga from train itself. No need to explore another unknown hamlet causing enough discomfort to your family," she mocked. As usual I was again under the blade of criticism for my many expeditions to witness Kangchenjunga.

I had no reason to take her seriously as I knew my wife can do anything but not to scrap a weekend holiday planned in hills. Be it Himachal or Sikkim it is she who surfs the internet to find new destinations from where we have been seeing many spectacular Himalayan ranges over the years. She knows atleast this much of me that I can never refuse any chance if the end result is Kangchenjunga.

This time I chose Charkhole village of Bengal.

Calling Charkhole a village will be an overstatement.

It is better to call her a small mystic hamlet at 5500 mt height, inhabited by handful of Tamang and Gurung community families who are dependent on organic farming and orange plantation. This is a verdant place, abounding in lush greenery that pleases the senses as the vision travels from below to the top - where the majesty of Kangchenjunga awes you.

As my hired Innova started scaling the height and whizzing through the dark shadows of the wet mountain roads, I was looking over the horizon through the window. The giant peaks of Kangchenjunga group were gradually appearing one after another. My son soon identified Mt Kumbhakarna and

then Mt Kabru.

At every single turn of the road the panorama was

getting more awesome. An over excited me was almost jumping from the car to click the range. This caused my so far humble and polite driver to express his disgust.

"Sir It seems you will put me in trouble. We are getting late. This damn Charkhole is an unknown place to me and you are too much engrossed here with the same monotonous Kangchenjunga."

Kangchenjunga and monotony!! Is he trying to mix cheese and chalk in one cup?

"This peak is my obsession", I retorted.

"You have to pack your photo gear for now, sir. We have to reach Charkhole in time, came the reply.

He was not wrong.

The direction of Charkhole is complex and roads are extremely bad in many places.

Finally when we reached the village it was found that the last part of the road leading towards the resort is not motorable. A frustrated me tried to call the manager of the resort and much to my dismay I found there is no mobile connection available.

Before I was subject to criticism by my wife I saw a villager walking towards the car. Asking him for help to locate the resort I found he worked there.

"Leave your bags there in car - I will carry them to top. You all just follow me."

A flight of stairs finally took us to top where some picture postcard type stone and glass tastefully coloured cottages were awaiting us.

"Wow - it seems a small village of Eastern Europe" - I saw smile on my wife's face after many hours. It was a signal that another great weekend is here for us.

"Baba look what is there" - my son pointed out a huge white wall inside the resort full of hand written messages.

As I walked closer to the wall it was found to be a wonderful marquee of short travelogues written by many people in many languages. Guests who have stayed here before me have poured their feelings with few lines and illustrations. One had written "Just come here with a book," while another one had written "Do not mind if world ends tonight because beyond this no lust prevails".

"Will not we write something on it Baba?" - my son asked me in excitement. I assured him saying that we will write before our departure.

We got a room in one of the double storied European styled cottage that has an outstanding balcony directly facing Kangchenjunga. Two chairs placed on that balcony seem the most expensive theatre ticket of the world from where the opera of nature can be watched best.

It was noon and still Kangchenjunga was sparkling like a crystal cut glass.

At lunch table another pleasant surprise arrived - A full plate complementary onion salad. Finishing a quick lunch

I sat on balcony with a book. Sunshine was still dancing on the snow.

As all three mobile phones were inactive I soon mingled in that relaxed milieu and by closing my eyes I felt the sound of birds and winds passing by my ears. At little up on the hill, winds where dashing the dark woods of pine, oak and fir. I opened a book close to my chest but could not progress much as for every then and now I was looking at Kangchenjunga, the 3rd highest peak of the world and highest in India.

In late afternoon as twilight approached I called my wife and son to join me to witness the magical sky of Charkhole.

"Look - the lava is melting from sky" - excitement gripped my son the most.

It is 4:30 pm in evening at Charkhole a calm, tranquil village where sound of automobile does not come and mobile phone does not ring. With 180 degree view of Kangchenjunga in one side it was unlocking a fountainhead of colours that engulfed the sky. From golden to orange to purple to azure a riot of colours dominated the sky. Soon the light travelled to the surface of Kangchenjunga. In evening just before the dusk the train of peaks from Pandim to Kumbhakarna including central Kangchenjunga all got washed in majestic colour of pink and orange.

Soon darkness came like a silent cavalcade.

Within 10 minutes except few sparks of light on the lower hills the entire surrounding sunk into profound darkness and silence. The only electric light burning was inside our room and with that a bone rattling cold wave started blowing.

Steaming coffee came soon with another piece of surprise. Again a basketful of onion and cabbage pakoda was served but this time with a price.

We thought of going for night walk inside the resort. The uneven surface and darkness soon discouraged us to take a long walk. So we settled again in the balcony braving the biting cold. It was deadly dark outside and the sky was full of stars. My wife has better idea in Astronomy. So she soon identified some known galaxies.

"This clear sky will make you happy tomorrow - Your morning encounter with Kangchenjunga will be memorable," she reminded me.

I was more than happy the next day when the first rays kissed the summit of central Kangchenjunga.

All that one can pray to see a sunrise over the snow peaks was given to me on that morning.

My long wait in the balcony paid off when the clouds broke just as the first rays landed on the snowy filled peaks. In a moment the majestic peak woke up regally from her royal bed. Its skin turned from light pink to deep orange and after few minutes it turned golden. The moment it turned golden there was an added energy in the atmosphere. It awakened the birds and from every single tree birds flew out of their nests to welcome

another day of their lives. We too, in state of deep salvation, welcomed that alluring aura.

It was not the first time I was witnessing Kangchenjunga. I have been seeing her for the last 18 years or so. Still the peerless rocky shapes that form a giant Buddha sleeping with his arms rested on it chest has the power to move every time.

Standing before the giant I found a pure unification of my mind and heart. When Sun was bright and shining, the sky turned deep blue and the peak took its usual white and grey shades. In that bright light I saw blossoms of mountain flowers and blooming rhododendrons on the slope all across. Various organic flowers, and orchids were also in abundance.

On the other side of the village, in the orange firming estate people started their day. With few more clicks and few more loving looks towards Kangchenjunga I reluctantly walked towards breakfast room.

Even from there visual escape from Kangchenjunga was tough as it was visible from every window of the room. I finished my breakfast quickly and again ran on the grass to reach at the edge of hill from where the view looks even more breathtaking. Both my wife and son joined me there for few more unforgettable family photos keeping the Kangchenjunga in backdrop.

Departure was on time and when we were about to start my son reminded me that I have not written anything on the wall.

I ran again to reach the wall. With all my emotion loaded in one line I wrote "Good Bye Darling Kangchenjunga - will soon be back to lock my lips with you again."

**Travel Logistics :**

Charkhole is just 38 km from Kalimpong town of Bengal.

Nearest railway station is NJP and nearest airport is Bagdogra.

From NJP station nearly 4 hours plus it takes to reach - Roads are not good.

Do not take small car - It may fail to negotiate the road.

Few hotels are there - All are well managed but do not expect luxury.

Mobile connection is almost zero but some locations have connectivity.

Neora valley national park is near by and can be covered in a day tour.

Lolegaon another famous place to see Kangchenjunga is just 20 km from here.

