



IN 1917, DURING THE FIRST WORLD WAR, LORD LANSDOWNE HAD WRITTEN THE VAIN 'LANSDOWNE LETTER' TO THE PRESS, ADVOCATING PEACE

A HERITAGE OF MILITARY MIGHT

Unlike other hill stations, Lansdowne was not groomed to be a vacation spot by the British. Its beauty, however, turned it into one by default, writes SOMEN SENGUPTA

After suppressing the Indian mutiny of 1857 with an iron fist, the colonial rulers realised that there was a need for an army of regiment. This army would be loyal beyond every doubt and would also be brave enough to fight for the British Union Jack at any corner of the world. When Delhi was recaptured by the East India Company in 1857 with Sirmoor Battalion, it was found that 33 per cent of that Army belonged to the Garhwal region of Himalayas. This was enough to give them a hint that the people of this region along with the people of Kumaon who are all born and bred in tough hilly topography were warriors by nature and were ready to die for self-pride.

Soon, the rule of the East India Company was over in India and the British crown under Queen Victoria overtook its biggest colonial landmass. Finally, after an year of plunder and killing, peace returned to India. However, neither the memory nor the lesson of the mutiny was forgotten under the new structure. In the year 1886, Sir FS Robert — then Commander-in-Chief of India — planned a regiment named after The Garhwal Rifles. Finally in 1887, the 39th Garhwal Regiment was formed under the Bengal Army. It became a part of the British Indian Army.

Rest, as they say, is history. This regiment went on to the battle front of France during the First World War and again moved to Burma and Africa during the Second World War to fight on behalf of the British Commonwealth. Very few regiments of the world have had this unique honor of participating in both the World Wars.

Attached to this is the story of a unique cantonment hill station of North India. It is named after a British Viceroy



who ruled India from 1888 to 1893. He was called Lord Lansdowne. Just 248 km from Delhi, it lies in the lap of the Pauri Garhwal region of the Himalayas. Through the 19th century, it became a good alternative to Shimla.

The original name of this place was Kaludanda. Here, the Garhwal regiment was stationed and trained under the shadow of the blue pine and dark oak forest. The Army town had snow-capped Himalayan peaks running over the horizon. Small cottages built in European style, churches, army canteens, old cemeteries, war memorials and, above all, restriction on the expansion of urbanisation, made Lansdowne a town that is almost too good to be true.

Interestingly, Lansdowne was never designed to be an answer to Shimla or Darjeeling. While Shimla and Darjeeling were places dedicated to retreat and amusement, Lansdowne was always considered a military gory.

Even the oldest church of the town, named St Mary's church, is very small in size. It is small yet beautiful in its typical Anglican look. Built in 1895 by AHB Hume (Royal Engineer of the church), and set on the 'Tip N Top' point, it is known as the 'jewel of Lansdowne'. This Protestant church has a majestic bell tower and a semi-circular structure made in brown brick. No wonder that some of the rare, black-and-white photos displayed inside the church were clicked at the weddings and other important ceremonies of the European residents.

In 1947, after India became independent, the population of Lansdowne declined. Soon, the church went unoperational and then became dilapidated. Later on, the Army renovated it. It has now been converted into a reading room. An audio visual documentary about the glory of Garhwal Rifles is now shown here. Now, the only running church of Lansdowne is the St John's church. Built in 1936 for



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Catholic people, this church was also in an abandoned position after 1947 when most of the European residents had left the town. It was reopened in 1951.

Footprints of military cult are visible here in every corner. A war memorial was set up and unveiled here on November 11, 1923 — Armistice Day — by Lord Rawlinson of Trent. In the First World War, the highly coveted Victorian Cross was won by Darwan Singh Negi as he had displayed unimaginable bravery in France. Negi died in 1963 but is still a legend in Lansdowne and adjacent areas. Darwan Singh Sangrahalay, a war museum in Lansdowne, was named after him. It was set up in 1983 and displays rare photographs, Army uniforms, and articles left behind in the Indo-Pakistani War of 1965.

A lake hardly 1 km from Lansdowne is called Bhulla Tal. In Garhwali, *bhulla* means brother. It is believed that the lake's name is a reflection of the affection of those who had once created it.

No hill station of India is complete without a temple and a related mythological tale. Lansdowne boasts of Tarakeshwar Mahadev Temple. As per mythology, Tarakasur the demon satisfied Shiva through his penance and derived the boon of being immortal. Shiva's own son was the only one who could have killed him. Blinded by the power of his boon, the demon tortured the people around him. Annoyed, Shiva decided to put an end to his life. He married Parvati to give birth to Kartikeya, who finally killed Tarakasur. Before his death the demon asked for clemency. Tarakeshwar Mahadev Temple is believed to have emerged at the place where Tarakasur died.

The story of Lansdowne remains incomplete without a mention of the haunted British bungalows and cemeteries. Mingled with a hundred stories of ghosts, old cemeteries still send a shiver down the inhabitants' spines. Gone are the days when Lansdowne housed only about 3,000 people. Even if busier and slightly more urbanised, the town is still just as charming. The old bungalows whisper tales from the bygone colonial era.