



THREE hours later, we puff our way into Darjeeling, having left behind jade hills and scores of waving children. One look at the larger and more impersonal railway station and I realise that finding the salubrious climates that once drew the British will be harder here.

I am heartened to see, however, that despite its modernity and unlike most other hill stations, Darjeeling seems to have a distinct personality beyond its touristy trappings. Locals still outnumber tourists on the Mall Road, and the local vegetable- and fruit-markets are only a street away from the town centre of Chowrasta.

Sure, there are horses for visiting kiddies to ride on, but right next to them is a large stage set up for the 'Gorkhaland' agitators to exhibit their dance and oratorical skills. So after the first morning in Darjeeling, I begin to have hope for this now-congested hill town.

My faith is rewarded when I place my brunch order of bacon butties and banana milkshake at Keventer's. My sandwich is nothing more than bacon slapped between two unbuttered slices of bread, but the meat has just the right amount of fat and is fried crisp. So simple, yet so right. I know that this the way it has always been served. My banana milkshake arrives next, in an old-fashioned bubble glass milk bottle. Both winning arguments for traditionalism.

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An equally hallowed culinary institution in Darjeeling is Glenary's. Started in 1880 as a confectionery named Vado, Glenary's jam doughnuts and scones (those small, light breads that go so well with clotted cream and strawberry jam) are still prepared using secret recipes handed down by the original owners.

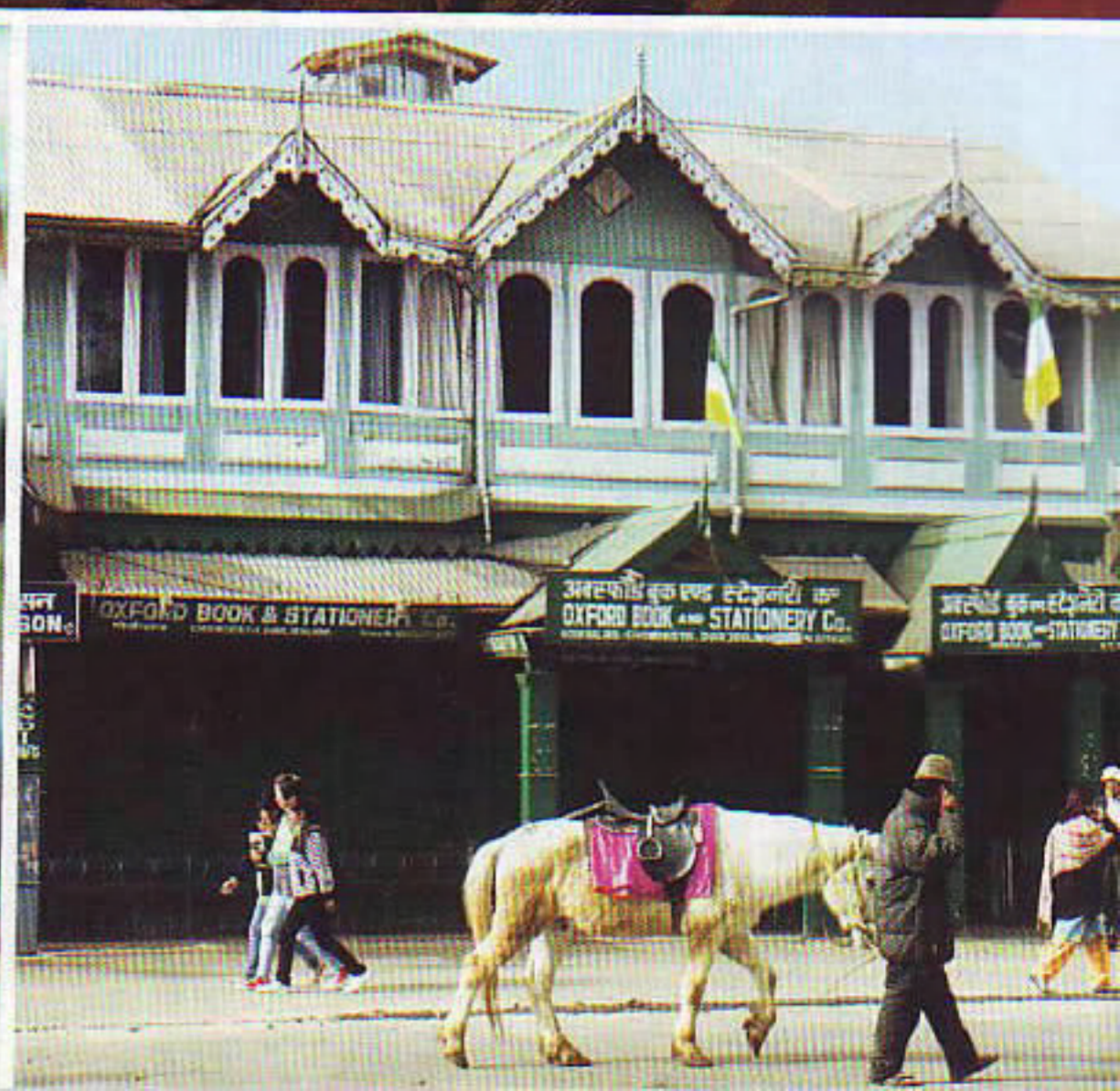
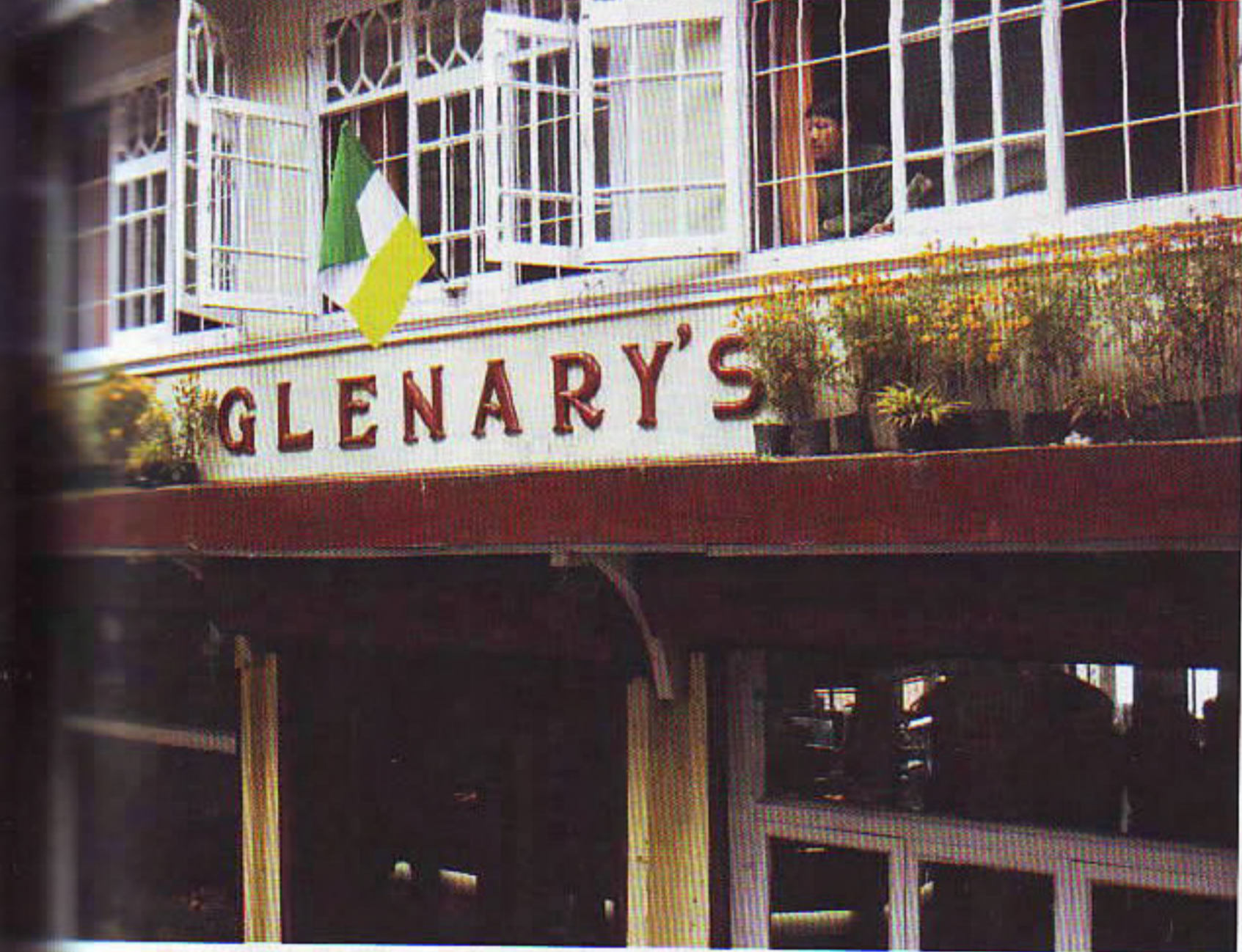
When not snacking at these watering holes, the *burra sahib* was seen tossing back a peg or two at the Planter's Club or lounging at the Ada Villa that catered to bachelor tea planters.

The Planter's Club looks like it's gone a bit to seed and is almost deserted except for a few elderly men in Gorkha hats and jackets talking animatedly over cups of tea. I smile indulgently, thinking they must be retired grandfathers meeting to talk sighingly over glories past.

But when I later bump into (Retd) Major J S Rana, secretary of the Club, he informs me that I'm mistaken and they are in fact, local

politicians, planning their latest bout of agitation for a separate Gorkha homeland. The calm nature of the debate that's taking place between the quartet is indicative of the largely peaceful nature of the century-old demand for a state independent from West Bengal. The story of the movement is much like the story of India's struggle for independence, filled with illegal arrests, exciting midnight escapes (including a hand in the decampment of 'Netaji' himself!), and ►

Top: The mighty and revered Kanchenjunga, as seen from Tiger Hill. Opposite, clockwise from left: Glenary's, a veritable Darjeeling institution; The Elgin's salon, ready for cocktails at dusk; a horse being walked on Chowrasta in anticipation of a day of riding; locals gather on Chowrasta - Darjeeling's main square



DARJEELING

'The 125-year-old train screams at cars and pedestrians along the way and is always conceded right of way, like parents indulging a naughty but lovable child'

a handful of politically awakened, gutsy leaders.

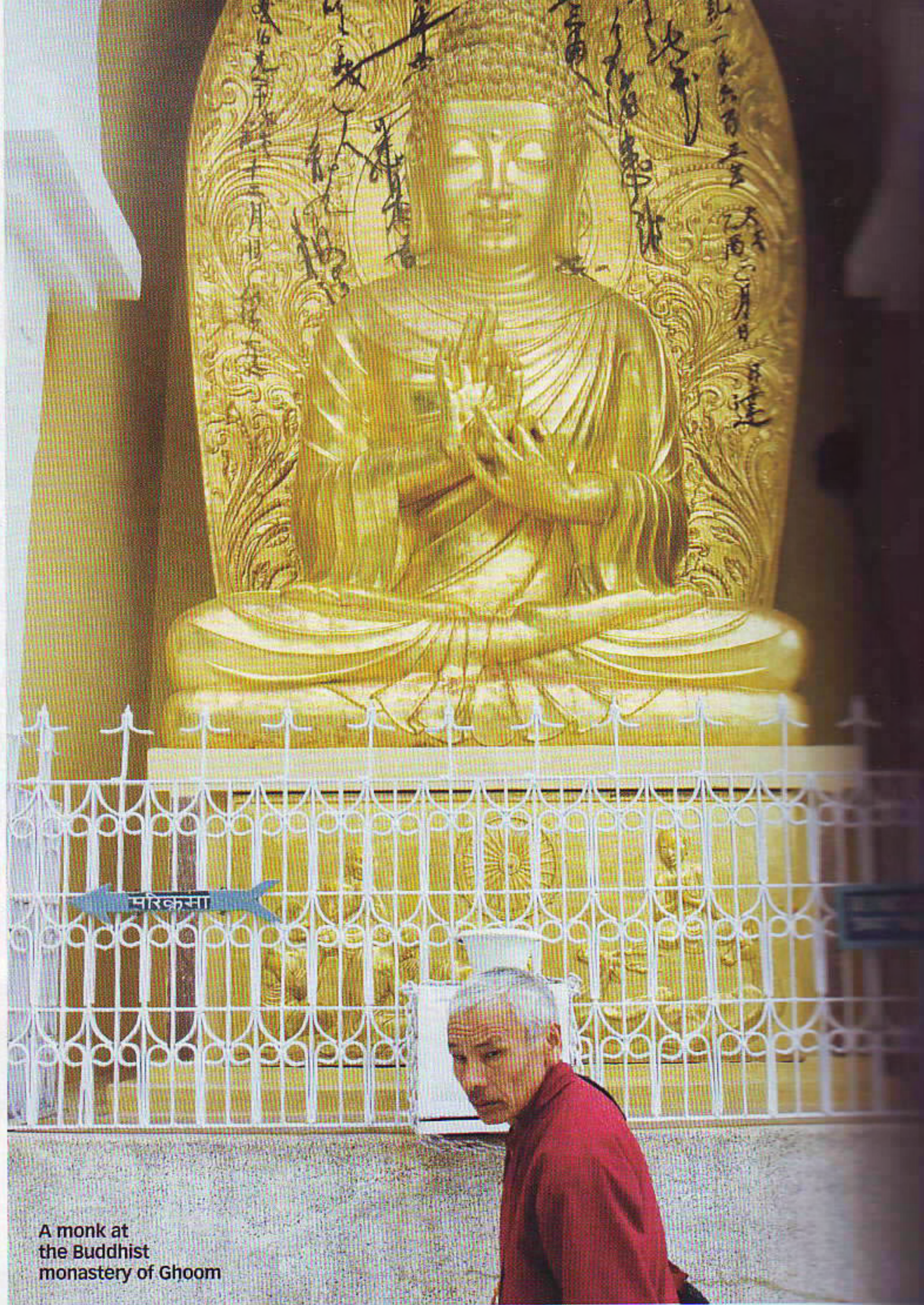
Now, when I look more closely at the gentlemen now sitting in the sunshine, I see alert eyes flash in serene, deeply-lined faces and can readily believe they would be capable of nothing less. The Club, apparently, still features high on the list of meeting places. "Nowhere as much as in the past," Major Rana says, "when British tea planters would descend upon it regularly, drinking till they were 'in their cups' and discussing tea yields and the latest news from 'headquarters'."

Today, although most of the Club's patrons tend to be Indian gentlemen, the Club has received membership requests from tea cultivators the world over. The Club's rules and working have changed greatly since 1868 — there are no restrictions on the movement of women inside the Club for example, but historical watercolour paintings by 'Snaffles' still hang in the lounge, and hunting trophies shot by members in the past greet you on the verandah. And you only have to squint a little to imagine you're back in the breeches-clad world of the Raj. Shame they've let it go downhill, though.

The Ada Villa, or the Windamere Hotel as it is now called, has fared better. Here cottages and rooms are named after some world-famous and some less famous but fondly remembered guests who frequently stayed there. 'Roerich' is named for the famous Russian painter of mountain scenery who must surely have painted the towering Kanchenjunga from here, so perfectly framed is it from the hotel's lawns.

The tradition of high tea is revered even today and a space has been created and kept sacred for residents. Non-resident guests may enjoy the same Darjeeling tea and scones, but not in the 'music room'.

I spot a white picket-fenced cottage called 'The Snuggery' and immediately fall in love. But prices at the Windamere are steep and I am only here on a cream-tea pass.



A monk at the Buddhist monastery of Ghoom

While boarding houses such as the Windamere were the norm for the "boxwallers" (the business/commercial Britons), their Indian peers were busy building the Raj version of a beach pad — a summer palace. The Elgin started out as the summer sanctuary of the Maharaja of Cooch Behar. The beautiful Ayesha, princess of Cooch Behar, spent many a summer here before marrying the dashing Prince Jai, and becoming Gayatri Devi, Maharani of Jaipur.

Later however, its rooms were let out to fashionable guests by first British and finally Indian hotel owners; the Elgin has now been running as a hotel for close to a century.

Its walls are covered with countless lithographs, line drawings and black and

white photos. The one that intrigues me the most is a black and white photo titled 'The witch of Ghoom', an elderly lady in a dress of the mountains smiling benignly into the camera while her hand reaches slowly into the folds of her dress. Creepy. Or maybe just one from a photographer with an over active imagination and one too many gin and tonics.

My stomach tells me it's 4pm and time for some Orange Pekoe tea and those scones but I am already boarding my flight home. Something tells me though that I only have to open my little chest of finest blend Darjeeling tea to be back in the first class carriage of the DHR toy train, coal bits in my hair and waving children in our wake. **LP**