



# Darjeeling: The Colorful History and Precarious Fate of the World's Greatest Tea

*Jeff Koehler*

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Darjeeling's tea bushes run across a mythical Indian landscape steeped in the religious, the sacred, and the picturesque. Planted among eighty-seven tea estates at high elevation in the heart of the eastern Himalayas, the linear rows of brilliant green waist-high shrubs that coat the steep slopes and valleys produce less than 1 percent of India's tea. Yet with its bright color and muscatel flavor, Darjeeling is generally considered the finest tea in the world.

Built from scratch, India's tea industry grew to be the largest on the globe and came to symbolize British imperial rule in India. The jewel of its production was, and remains, Darjeeling, and its story is rich in people, intrigue, and *terroir*. It includes Robert Fortune, whose mid-nineteenth-century smuggling of tea plants and expertise from China brought the British East India Company the quality tea it sought; the charismatic and controversial Rajah Banerjee, whose family owned the iconic Makaibari plantation for 150 years; the tea pluckers who underpin the industry; and the lone auctioneer who bangs down his hammer oversees the sale more than half of Darjeeling's entire crop. But it is also the story of how this Edenic spot in the Himalayan foothills is beset by labor and political unrest and alarming climate change that threaten its future.

With passion and perception, Koehler illuminates a historic and arcane world, such that an ordinary tea bag and the cup enjoyed by tens of millions each day take on entirely new meanings.

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