

# THE TIMES OF INDIA

## **Taj brand to enter Hills at Makaibari**

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Darjeeling/Kolkata: Peace in the north Bengal Hills has renewed efforts for entry of the Taj hotel brand in Kurseong. The hotel, to be operated by hospitality major Taj Hotels, will come up within the iconic Makaibari Tea Estate as per an agreement between former estate owner Rajah Banerjee and Bengal Ambuja Neotia Group chairman Harsh Neotia signed two years ago. If all goes well, this will be the first star-brand to enter the Hills after Hotel Mount Everest, owned by the East India Hotels (EIH) closed down in 1984.

“The Neotia Group will own the property, while it will be run by Taj Hotels, a subsidiary of the Indian Hotels Company,” said Rudra Chatterjee, MD of Kolkata-based Luxmi Group that currently owns Makaibari tea estate.

Entry of a star brand is crucial, as the tourism industry in the Hills has complained for long that high-end tourists with the capacity to spend have been keeping away owing to the non-availability of adequate infrastructure.

“Investors are showing interest in the Hills. After the Taj, we expect ITC and Hyatt to show interest. Nicco Park also has projects here. These are good signs. This will be discussed with chief minister Mamata Banerjee when she comes to Darjeeling on September 3,” Gokhaland Territorial Administration (GTA) chairman Binoy Tamang said.

Violence in the Hills that lasted for several months in 2017 had a major impact on the local economy. Normalcy returned after Tamang ousted Bimal Gurung as the GTA chief. He has had his work cut out ever since. The only way to prevent the launch of another agitation calling for a separate state of Gorkhaland is to bring about development. Though tourism is big in the Hills, those involved with the industry have pointed out how budget tourists are not bringing about the desired level of development.

“Nearly 70% of those who visit the Hills spend between Rs 500-2,000 per day. This doesn't help the economy that is dependent on tourism. The number of foreign and domestic tourists with money to spend is few and many have complained that there aren't sufficient good places to stay. Hopefully, entry of the Taj brand will start a movement in the right direction,” a tour operator said.

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