

THE BRITISH SOUTH ASIAN HILL STATION: A LANDSCAPE TEXT OF THE ANGLO-INDIAN
COMMUNITY

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Hill stations were a relatively new colonial settlement form when, in 1838, Emily Eden wrote from the Himalayan hill station of Simla to a family member in England:

It certainly is very pleasant to be in a pretty place, with a nice climate. Not that I would not start off this instant, and go dak all over the hot plains, and through the hot wind, if I were told that I might sail home the instant I arrived at Calcutta, but as nobody makes me that offer, I can wait here better than anywhere else - like meat, we keep better here (Eden, 1983, p. 129).

Miss Eden's sentiments regarding hill station life would be shared by generations of Anglo-Indians. Between 1819 and 1870 approximately eighty settlements were built by the colonials in the higher elevations of South Asia to serve as retreats from the summer heat of the plains. Medical theories of the early nineteenth century concurred with Miss Eden's observation - like meat, the British "kept" better in the hills.

Research by geographers Mitchell (1972), and Spencer and Thomas (1948) explain this role of the hill station in the physical and mental health of the colonials. However, while it initially may appear sufficient to limit our understanding of the hill station to its use as a spa and sanitarium, there are certain questions left unanswered. For example, it was not until the early nineteenth century, two hundred years after the arrival of the British in India, that these British settlements were constructed. This fact raises questions about the motivations of their builders. An examination of the physical and cultural landscape of a hill station may provide clues to explain the existence and function of these hill stations.

A LANDSCAPE TEXT

The advent of the hill station can be considered a sign of a significant change in attitude of the British in South Asia. This attitude was influenced by a new belief in their colonial role. An examination of

this thesis requires an analysis of the hill station landscape and the context of its development. Geographer James Duncan has argued that a landscape is in large part a transformation of a particular form of social organization and a set of beliefs. He further states:

Our job is to interpret landscapes, to elucidate the role that they play within a cultural system, how they are both a product of and at the same time help produce the other elements of the system. This implies that we approach landscapes as a system of communication which people use in order to express their value systems. Landscapes communicate in symbolic terms either affirming or less frequently denying the validity and worth of other elements in the cultural system (Duncan, 1986, p. 2).

This communication system might be described metaphorically as a landscape text. Literary criticism's reception theory reinforces use of this metaphor by explaining that a text does not have a stable meaning, but must be interpreted within the context of historically and culturally specific discourses (Duncan & Duncan, 1987). Literary theory suggests ways to examine the text-like qualities of landscape and to see them as transformations of ideologies and social practice. It is as a text that the development of the hill station landscape is analyzed. By considering the landscape text as well as the ideological and social organization texts, a greater understanding of the Anglo-Indian community can be gained.

Our intention is to consider the influence of the hill station in structuring the beliefs and social relations in the Anglo-Indian community. This will be done by examining the hill station landscape in the context of the dominant ideology and social organization of the colonials. The following discussion selects out certain strands of meaning and focuses on: 1) the significance of Utilitarianism and Evangelism and 2) the socio-spatial organization of the nineteenth century Anglo-Indians.

The landscape text that has been chosen for analysis is Ootacamund, a hill station located in the Nilgiris of southern India. Well established as part of the Anglo-Indian social world, Ootacamund underwent its greatest expansion in the 1860's and thus took on the Victorian resort appearance that marks it today as a remnant of India's colonial past. The Victorian heritage is preserved not only in the hill station's cottages and halls and the lay-out of its country lanes, but also in the two titles Ootacamund carries. One is the affectionate sounding nick-name Ooty and the other is the more formal claim to being the "Queen of the Hill Stations" (Panter-

Downes, 1967, p. 1). Sharing the arcadian setting and informal lay-out that was typical of the colonially built hill stations, Ootacamund is just one, albeit regal example of the nostalgic recreation of British upper-class values in the Indian hills. As is the case with many reproductions, however, the product is not entirely true to the original. Upon examination, the landscape reveals not only those values that the nineteenth century colonials chose to bring with them from home, but it also reflects beliefs about their role in India.

UTILITARISM AND EVANGELISM

Utilitarian and evangelical views were the product of the dominant ideologies of the time. One of the early visitors to Ootacamund was the British statesman and utilitarian Thomas Babington Macauley. As described by his biographer, his travel into the Nilgiris brought him to:

..... a pleasant surprise of an amphitheater of green hills encircling a small lake, whose banks were dotted with red-tiled cottages surrounding a pretty Gothic church. The whole station presented 'very much the look of a rising English watering place' (Trevelyan in Price, 1907, p. 64).

This "rising English watering place" was a relatively recent development in hills that before 1819 had been unknown to the British and sparsely settled by Indians. A person of Macauley's philosophic inclination was relatively new to India as well. He was a representative of the new orientation of the East India Company and the British commitment to a reforming role.

The spirit of reform had been raised in Britain during the last quarter of the eighteenth century. The influences of the Industrial Revolution, growing population pressures, urbanization and periodic famines were breeding discontent, and among the governing classes, fear, and social conscience. In the seriousness of the time, a concern for the personal and social morality prevailed accompanied by a perceived need for the return to religion, or at least the rejection of selfish instinct. Utilitarian and Evangelical reformers called for changes both in Britain and her colonies. India was viewed as a particular challenge that required the assistance and superior knowledge of Britain. The success of these appeals for reform was expressed in the Charter Act of 1813. With this act the monopoly of the

'John Company' was broken and Parliament became the ultimate authority in India.

Middle class British values had greater accessibility to India when Parliament assumed control of Indian policy. Charles Grant, who was both a noted reformer and director of the East India Company, described this new social concern:

..... not merely that we might draw an annual profit from them, but that we might diffuse among their inhabitants, long slung in darkness, vice and misery the light and benign influences of the truth, the blessings of well-regulated society, the improvements and comforts of active industry (Morris, 1973, p. 74).

With duty replacing trade as the expressed value, a greater sense of permanence in India was felt. Only forty years earlier the governor of Bengal, Warren Hastings, had stated that "the dominion of all of India is what I never wish to see" (Hutchins, 1965, p. 129). The nineteenth century English evangelical reformer William Wilberforce expressed other intentions:

Let us endeavor to strike our roots into their soil, by the gradual introduction and establishment of our own principles and opinion; of our laws, institutions and manners; above all as the source of every other improvement, of our religion, and consequently of our morals (Morris, 1973, p. 74).

This pronouncement of imperial interest, early in the nineteenth century, was the expression of a nation challenged by the needs of India. Whereas Hasting's era might be typified by the nabob, the nineteenth century would be associated with the administrator and military officer.

FOUNDING A HILL STATION

Returning to Macauley's first view of Ootacamund, the individual parts of the landscape reflect those beliefs related above. He describes a pretty Gothic church as the center of the new settlement. The church has significance not only in its centrality but also in the symbolic nature of its building materials. St. Stephen's was built in the first years of Ootacamund using teak taken from the defeated Tipu Sultan's palace for the structure's timbers. The church stands as a landmark to British colonial expansion to this day.

Other significant elements of Ootacamund's landscape were introduced in the first decade of its development. The lake, which in addition to the church formed the focal point of the settlement, was a creation of Ooty's earliest settler. John Sullivan, the district collector, created the lake by damming several small tributaries. As explained by the chaplain of the Madras Establishment in 1826:

..... the scenery of Ootacamund may be said to have been without water, until the present Collector supplied the great desideratum. This he accomplished by uniting, with a dam, the converging extremities of two ranges of hills. The waters of a brook, formed by six or seven mountain rills, being thus intercepted, have overflowed a beautiful valley, and now form a serpentine lake This sheet of water would vie with the head of Windermere, were the fertile hills that enclose it cultivated to its borders, and adorned with stately mansions....But while the scenery is improved by the sheet of water just described, this was not the principal object of its formation the mere tributary stream of the Myaar river will be converted into an immense reservoir of water, for the cultivation of the plains below, during the season of drought. Those who have witnessed the distressing effects of famine in India, which is occasioned by the failure of water, will be able to appreciate this excellent design (Price, 1907, p. 27).

Although Sullivan's plans for the lake's 'utility' in irrigating the plains were not successful, he created an aesthetic focus for the hill station which was to remind numerous colonial visitors of the beauty of the lake District. In fact, an early historian of Ootacamund stated in 1909 that the failure of Sullivan's dreams to irrigate the plains should be congratulated:

That his schemes in this direction proved abortive, is a matter for congratulations, as had they been successful, one of the most beautiful features in the scenery of the valley would have been much less so than it is, and the station would probably been less healthy (Price, 1907, p. 23).

Practical objections did prevent the project from being carried out, but as the above quote suggests there were other considerations. As Ootacamund increasingly became a part of the official social world of its Anglo-Indian visitors, the significance of its role as a resort overshadowed its contribution to the material improvement of India.

EXPANSION OF THE HILL STATION

In the years after the major 'Indian Mutiny', the popularity of hill stations increased significantly. Retreats to the hills provided an alternative environment where the constraints of 'the heat', 'the station', and the 'natives' could be left behind. In such a controlled environment and separated from those they ruled, the colonials sought some relief from the 'White Man's Burden'. A cult of conduct and the ideal of career service were concepts of administrative duty for the nineteenth century colonials. Confidence in the specialists gradually changed from the Utilitarian notion of reform to the assumption of their 'White Man's Burden'. Career service coupled with the increasing accessibility of India resulted in a domestication of the Anglo-Indian community. The separation of Indians and the British had already begun prior to this domestication, but with women and children present, colonial behavior could be shaped in a style more reminiscent of Britain.

The rapid expansion of Ooty in the 1860's reflected this same pattern. Although documentation is not available, events suggest that it was during this period of time that Ootacamund was declared 'Queen of the Hill Stations' and acquired the less desirable title of Snooty Ooty. One can speculate that as the social center for southern India, its claim to queenly status was intended as a challenge to the other hill stations of India, particularly Simla. It had an atmosphere of English country life which attracted maharajahs as well as the higher echelons of Anglo-Indian society. The Ootacamund Hunt, established in the 1860's, was known throughout India for its jackal-hunting hounds.

It is possible, however, that its status was based on its relative stature among the hill stations of the Nilgiris. Its brief period of egalitarianism ended with the closure of the military sanitarium in 1834. The medical statistics gathered over the four years of its operation were disappointing and, with the cost of operation, the sanitarium did not prove "so attractive, or so successful as had first been anticipated" (Price, 1907, p. 169). By 1841, all troops were removed to their permanent station farther down the Nilgiris in Wellington. Conoor and Kodaikanal, whose atmosphere was influenced by their missionary patrons, were less costly stations. On the other hand, Ooty, with its frequent visitors from the

Madras government, could claim social superiority in the regional competition.

As the unofficial center of Madras's summer government, Ooty grew steadily. A railroad was extended to the foot of the Nilgiris in the early '60's which resulted in "increased discovery of Ooty from outside the Madras Presidency" (Price, 1907, p. 239). Travel was still difficult, since carriage use had only recently been adopted and the consequence of that was "that only vehicles with really strong springs and bodies could traverse (the roads) without great risk of becoming utter wrecks" (Price, 1907, p. 239). Walking and riding were the most common means of getting around Ooty, allowing the Anglo-Indian to admire the view, collect flora and 'take the air' while being certain that there would be others to meet along the way. A popular strolling area in Ootacamund was Charing Cross. Although quite different from its namesake, it did signify the English quality of the landscape. For the more active sportsman, there was not only the Ootacamund Hunt but also polo. A polo club was formed in 1867, after a particularly polluted part of the Ooty lake was drained to form the ground in Hobart Park, the new recreation area named for a governor.

With construction going at a rapid pace during the period from 1860-1870, the Victorian character of Ooty was formed. Journalist Mollie Panter-Downes describes this appearance:

It recalls the Victorian resort, running to a wealth of sharp gables with the elaborately fretted bargeboards and touches of ironwork and spines of decorative chevaux de frise bristling along roof-tops to the inconvenience and possible vital injury of strolling cats. The prevailing colour is a deep terra-cotta red, here and there with white stone trim. It is a style that flourishes, too, in quiet residential streets of Putney or Harrow; the difference is that these are Victorian buildings sawed off mostly to one-story cottage height (Panter-Downes, 1967, p. 14).

The bungalows that were the predominant housing on the plains were adapted to the resort atmosphere of the hills, and while not quite recreating an English landscape, it suited the homesick colonial. Even in Ooty, one is reminded that while the colonial had the means to live luxuriously, life was not necessarily comfortable. There were several, significant outbreaks of cholera in Ootacamund during the period 1865 to 1877. The lake, which provided the attractive center for the settlement,

was so polluted by sewage that the government was asked to address the potential health problems and the stench. Improvements came after cholera became an issue again in 1877.

In contrast to the plains, however, Ootacamund was undoubtedly paradise:

..... I have seen Ootacamund. Having seen it, I affirm it to be a paradise, The afternoon was rainy and the road muddy, but such beautiful English rain such delicious English mud (Price, 1907, p. 63).

Lord Lytton's 1877 letter to his wife flattered Ooty in its resemblance to England, a standard to which very few places in India could be compared. One avowed Anglo-Indian supporter of Ootacamund described Lytton's praise as a little too liberal but suggested that the superlatives were in contrast to the famine conditions of the plains that year (Price, 1907, p. 63). In contrast, the green of the Nilgiris must have seemed paradise.

SUMMER CAPITOLS

By the 1870's Ootacamund's unofficial status as the summer capitol of the Madras Presidency had been legitimized. Over the years, there had been long debate as to whether it was appropriate to move the offices of government away from those who were governed. As early as 1840, one governor had disregarded the wishes of the government of India and had spent the better part of a year administering the presidency from Ootacamund. The separation of the rulers and the ruled took its extreme form in the summer governments based in the hills. As the historian Francis Hutchins points out, it was possible for those advocating a 'modernizing imperialism' to maintain that "they were governing India for Indians and feel that there was no incongruity in the fact that this government was not by Indians (Hutchins, 1965, p. 17). Although official policy focused on reform and the promise of improvement, there was an underlying assumption of superiority that would be reinforced with increasing social and spatial separation of the ruled and rulers.

Colonial administration with its emphasis on the role of the specialist in government did not require immediate proximity to those governed. In the hill station of Ootacamund, Government House was a

significant part of the landscape. However, with the exceptions of the maharajahs, the Indian presence in Ootacamund was limited to servants and shopkeepers. Even after the formal adoption of summer government status, the population as well as the landscape was conspicuously British. It was not until the first decade of the twentieth century that any guest accommodations were constructed to serve Indians who had government business to conduct. The landscape was one of the colonial elite where Indian society was not represented except in its extreme forms. The anglo-Indian 'reader' of this landscape text was reinforced in his belief of the appropriate participants in control of the government.

CONCLUSION

As Britain's long term commitment to India was defined, members of the Anglo-Indian community discovered and created the 'English' attributes of the hill station landscape. The physical and social separation within the settlements of the hills and plains contributed to and reinforced a colonial belief system which took shape as the 'White Man's Burden' in the period after the Indian mutiny.

The landscape of the hill station remains as evidence of India's colonial past. Rather than conclude with that simple 'reading', however, further meaning can be obtained from the landscape text. The hill station was structured by colonial society's beliefs and social organization and, consequently, had its role in structuring beliefs and social practice.

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