

Hill Stations in India: A British Creation

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Abstract

A unique contribution of the British to the urban landscape of India was the creation of hill-stations. A number of hill-resorts were established at selected spots for specific purpose of the British. Initially chosen as sanatorium and resting centres away from the tropical Indian plains, hillstations eventually turned out to be important administrative seat for the colonial masters, thus giving rise to a new set of urban centres.

Keywords: Urban Landscape, Hill Stations, Sanatorium, Administrative Seat

Hill-stations as high altitude settlements were established by the British in India. Its beginning may be traced back to the early 19th century when a group of hill-tops from Terai to the borders of Ladak came under British protection as a result of the Anglo-Nepalese war of 1814-16. The treaty of Sagauli, 1816, gave the British a direct control over the Himalayan Districts of Kumaon and Garwal. Thus, from this time the English desire of having settlements on hill tops away from the heat and dust of the tropical plains was being gradually realised. The British contact with the Himalayas therefore, gave rise to a new set of urban centres in the hills catering to the British needs (Kharel. S, 2006).

What began as initiative to move to the hills for rest and enjoyment, was slowly transformed into a major imperial-capitalist enterprise by the middle of the 19th century. At that time many of the popular hill stations were converted into provincial and imperial summer capitals; that is, the seat of the administrative authority during the summer months. In 1864, Sir John Lawrence took the first step by taking his council for the first time to Simla. He then proceeded to convert what had become an annual habit into an institution. He obtained the consent of the Home Government to the permanent location of the summer head quarters of the Government of India at Simla for a period of six months, from April to September or October. This provided a new rationale for the move to the hills. Hill stations became multi-functional urban locales (Pradhan, Q., 2007).

The extensive Himalayan frontier of India became dotted with hill-stations. Beginning with Simla, Mussorie and Almora followed a decade later by Darjeeling in the northeast. From the very beginning, these highland sites attracted visitors in search of rest and relaxation, served as forward positions in the strategic reconnaissance of neighbouring states and as launching pads for commercial probes into Central Asia. A few of these them served as administrative seat for the colonial authority.

Mahabaleshwar was founded within a decade of the defeat in 1818 of the Peshwas which concluded the war against the Marathas. The establishment of Cherrapunji was made possible by the acquisition of Assam in 1824. In the south, the relationship between the conquest of territory and establishment of sanatorium was less direct. It took nearly thirty years after the defeat of Tipu Sultan in 1799 for the British to explore and settle southern India's highest mountains, the Nilgiris (Ramachandran, R, 1989).

The first hill-stations were established as early as 1815 and by 1870 there were over 80 hill-stations in four different areas in India serving the four major metropolitan cities of Calcutta, Delhi, Bombay and Madras. These areas were (a) Simla-Mussoorie-Nainital near Delhi, (b) Darjeeling-Shillong near Calcutta, (c) Mahabaleshwar in the Western Ghats near Bombay and (d) the Nilgiri-Kodaikanal area in Tamil Nadu (Ramachandran, R, 1989). However, the first resort that comes to mind when the Himalayas are mentioned is Simla where the hill-station concept was born and nurtured. As early as 1830, a Frenchman Monsieur Jacquemout, described Simla as “the resort of the rich, the idle, and the invalid” (Westlake, G.D, 1993). Following the rapid development and quick popularity of Simla other resorts soon appeared in the Himalayan foothill.

The hill-stations of British India shared similar characteristics but, they differed greatly in size, function and clientele. Nora Mitchell has proposed the following five categories: (a) the official multifunctional hill-stations, (b) the private multifunctional hill-station, (c) the single purpose hill-station, (d) the minor hill-station and (e) the satellite hill-station. Among the stations that fall in the first category are Simla, Darjeeling, Nainital, and Octacamund. They were government headquarters as well as social, recreational, and educational centres for the British. Kodaikanal, Matheran, and Mussoorie were examples of stations in the second category. They served much the same array of social functions as the first group but did not possess any official purpose. The three remaining categories are a good deal more difficult to distinguish from one another. Many of these stations could be described with equal justice as minor, single-purpose, and satellites of larger stations. Most stations of these categories were cantonments for British troops. Some were enclaves of missionaries, planters, pensioners, railway workers, and so on. Dharmkot for instance, was dominated by Presbyterian missionaries, Lonavala by employees of the Bombay railway system and Madhupur by retired civil servants (Mitchell, N, 1972).

The second half of the 19th century was the age of consolidation for hill-stations. Far fewer new stations were founded in this period but, existing stations became larger and more important to the British in India and their development became a matter of state policy. There emerged in hill-resorts Swiss-Gothic type of residential buildings, hotels, restaurants, market-places including facilities, the mall, the garden and the public schools offering British system of education. It was around this period that the hill-stations also acquired political importance. The great turning point, however, was the 1857 revolt which deepened British anxieties about their security on the plains and heightened their appreciation of the safety of the hills. As a result, civil and military authorities began to shift their headquarters to hill-stations wherever feasible. Simla obtained official recognition as the summer capital of the Raj in 1864, when the Secretary of State for India allowed the Imperial Council to accompany the Viceroy on his annual migration to the hills. By the early 1870s, most of the provincial governments had obtained sanction to establish seasonal headquarters in hill-stations. The political importance of the official stations was underscored by the inauguration of large and costly public-building projects. Simla’s physical appearance was transformed in the 1880s by the construction of the grandiose viceregal lodge and an array of other government buildings. Governors’ or lieutenant governors’ mansions were established in Darjeeling in 1879, Octacamund in 1880, Mahabaleshwar in 1886 and Nainital in 1896. A profusion of clock towers, bandstands, fountains, and statues evidenced a heightened civic pride and prosperity even among the smaller hill-stations. As railways extended feeder lines into remote areas, journeys to the hills became increasingly easy and inexpensive (Kennedy, D, 1996).

The growing importance of many hill-stations led to a number of them adopting corporate identities and becoming municipalities. Naini Tal was the first to leave the starting gate in the Mayorial stakes as early

as 1845, with Mussoorie and Darjeeling the minor place-getters in 1850 and Simla a surprising fourth in 1891. Devolution of authority came to Ooty, Almora, Coonor, Dalhousie, Hazaribagh and Ranchi in 1860s, Lonavala and Kurseong in 1870s and Kodaikanal in 1899 (Westlake, G.D, 1993).

The hill-stations located at elevations of 1,500 to 3,000 metres above sea level attempted to replicate the ambiance of the English countryside for which the English in India longed nostalgically. It had been always true that tropical diseases and health hazards caused by them had been the single important pre-occupation of the British to induce them to set up stations at the hills for recuperation of the diseased. But, it had other underpinnings which has been underlined by Dane Kennedy in his work, ‘The Hill Stations of British India, 1996 as thus, “the hill regions of India correspond to the topography of the highland of Welsh and Scotland from which British aesthetic sensitivity towards landscape could be said to have originated. The natural ambiance of an undulating green meadow abandoned to a state of soundlessness and infrequently visited by a shepherd with his flock of sheep had framed the British imagination. Indian hills had appealed to them because they had more green and loneliness than even those landscapes with which the British had been familiar. Gradually, they had augmented courage to reduce a part of it to human proportion”. The other important aspect which Kennedy points out is regarding British ‘feeling of exclusiveness’. This feeling arose because of their racial prejudice against the Indians and their pride of being the rulers (Kennedy,D,1996).

While establishing the administrative headquarters in the Indian plains, the British sought to preserve their exclusiveness by being sequestered in a settlement contraption called ‘civil lines’ not being frequented by Indians. However, In spite of the cordon sanitaire which they had woven around in ‘civil line’ settlements, it was only the hill stations which fulfilled their dream of being at home away from home. The hill- stations could be very British in all details that were required by the British pride and prejudice. Thus, while determining the settlement policy three objectives were always kept in view: (i) the hill stations would provide the ambiance for exclusive living for the white denizens on the topmost regions of the ridges with exclusive down town facility, (ii) the availability of the domestics who would be settled at a safer distance at the foot of the ridges, and (iii) health and education facilities of the white soldiers and children respectively. The urgency to have these facilities realised led to the growth of a new kind of hill architecture that was a blend of the Swiss villas and the new-classical architecture (Kharel.S,2006)

The annual shift of political authority to the hills necessarily meant the creation of the paraphernalia attached to the sovereign power. The construction of physical structures befitting the ‘state grandee’ on his march to the hills implied a large scale modification of environment and geography of the hill side. This transformation was in direct conflict with the idea that strongly appealed to the early travellers. The delight in the wild and the quaint, the unexpected and the sublime could no longer be sustained in the urbanised hill station. The life and the activities of the indigenous communities in their colourful apparel, practicing their traditional lifestyle regulated by the pastoral and agricultural cycle, which added to the scenic appeal, was gradually overshadowed by the European presence (Pradhan.Q, 2007).

The spatial patterns of urban growth in the imperial capitals were shaped in different ways by the colonial presence. The steady growth of state power led to spatial expansion of the hill stations. Numerous functionaries brought their families and retainers to the hills. The Indian princes also found it beneficial to live close to the seat of authority. Ancillary educational and religious institutions were established. As people were drawn to the hill stations, the market for crafts and services grew. Channels

of communication with the rest of the country were established- first the cart roads and later the rail and telegraph lines. These changes in turn constricted British settlements in the hills (Pradhan.Q, 2007). Thus, in the 19th century, the image of Indian hills was developed through a contrast with the plains. In opposition to the densely populated, long settled plains, the Indian hills appeared to the British as terra incognita, trouble free, serene, sparsely populated, isolated and remote. The plains were hot and humid, tropical spaces where Englishmen could not live and work in the summer. In the hills there was a temperate landscape, “and England in the tropics”. Military strategists found such places to be ideal refuges for the English civilians and invalids in a subjugated country. Hills were constructed as empty landscapes waiting to be appropriated by the settlers, unimpeded and uncontested (Pradhan.Q in Studies in History, 2007).As the hill-stations grew they assumed importance as centres of power from where the English would issue and execute orders with an air of omnipotence (Kennedy. D,1996).

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