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Inventing the Hill Stations

Colonialism and the Politics of Representing Landscapes

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Hills are largely neglected in the studies of societal transformation under colonialism. The presentation will attempt to overcome this lacuna. In studying the mountains, we need to draw on researches on landscape aesthetics, histories and anthropologies of space, and on studies of sensibilities - both Europeans and Indians. The paper focuses on the interplay between the European imagination of landscape and the local conceptions within the wider context of the colonial situation, exploring the different visions of a Brahmanic and a European traveller. A variety of sources - archival, oral, pictorial and field interviews - have been used.

Imperial re-ordering is a process through which the previous histories of the hills disappear. The spatial reordering of the hill landscapes reveals a politics of landscape. Each hill station was re-invented as the carrier of a new meaning: Simla, a capital; Darjeeling, a strategic frontier; Ootacamund, a hill town in the South; and Mount Abu, a station in Rajasthan. The technique of landscape painting that makes a distinction between the inside and the outside, between foreground reality and background potential, and defines the viewer as an objective outsider, had critical implications for the way the hills were ordered. It made easier the effort to constitute the hill stations by erasing the traces of the past. The description of hill places as *terra incognita*, devoid of human beings, legitimated the European entry into this space. The evolutionary sequence - from savagery to civilisation - explains in unilinear teleological terms the presence of the Europeans in the hills.

My argument is that despite the British attempt to cleanse the past from the foreground of the hill stations, legends and folklore of the hill people giving primacy to the sacerdotal perspective in the very naming of the hill station sites belies the claim of hill stations being European discoveries. The paper will look at the different ways in which the Europeans - officials and travellers - looked at the hill sites, the way local inhabitants made sense of the same spaces, and the way the hill landscape was transformed and moulded over time. The making of the hill station - as a center of power, as a leisure resort, and as space Europeans could emotionally identify with - meant a dramatic transformation of the landscape. This paper will seek to track this transformation.

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