

‘White Todas’. The Politics of Race and Class amongst European Settlers on the Nilgiri Hills c1860 – 1900

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The Nilgiri Hills lie in the North-Western corner of what is now Tamil Nadu, and was formerly part of the Madras Presidency. Before 1799 the Hills had formed a rather detached part of Tippoo Sultan’s Mysore. Although they do appear to have paid revenue, their various tribes lived in comparative isolation, broken only in 1819 when the first European bungalow was constructed on the lower slopes near Kotagiri by the Collector of the Coimbatore District. From the 1820s onwards the Hills, and particularly Ootacamund, the chief sanatorium, became a popular resort for invalid Europeans, revelling in the ‘half-English’ weather of the plateau, 6,000 feet above sea level. From the 1850s they became a fashionable, as well as a health resort, and by 1870 Ooty was acting as the summer capital of the Madras Presidency, the seat of government for four to six months of the year. Despite this, with an average population density of no more than 127 per square mile in 1901, less than any other District in Madras¹, and a main town, Ootacamund (Ooty) of only 18,500 inhabitants, the Nilgiris were of minor economic and demographic significance, and have accordingly attracted little attention from historians since the publication of Sir Frederick Price’s voluminous history in 1908². With or without the familiar diminutive, Ooty is always belittled by the associations of the term ‘Hill Station’. In Imperial and Nationalist mythology this implies a place apart, Kipling’s ‘abode of the little tin gods’, divorced from the everyday concerns of the ‘real’ India on the Plains³. Pamela Kanwar’s *Imperial Simla* is the only detailed study which exists of this peculiar urban form, and it shows clearly that Hill Stations were no different from other Indian towns in depending on Indian capital and enterprise for their maintenance and development⁴. Despite this, Kipling’s grass-widows and dashing young subalterns¹ still hold centre-stage in the popular perception of the Hill Station, obscuring not only the Indians who made this brittle existence possible, but the substantial numbers of Europeans who came to the hills not to play, but to work. Together with the Presidency towns, but for somewhat different reasons, Hill Stations were home to

¹ W. Francis *The Nilgiris* (Madras District Gazetteers) 1908 p123

² Sir Frederick Price *Ootacamund, a History* (Madras) 1908. One exception is a short article by the anthropologist Paul Hockings: *Society in the Company, Crown and Congress eras* in P. Hockings (Ed.) *Blue Mountains. The Ethnography and Biogeography of a South Indian region*. (Delhi) 1989.

³ D. Kennedy *The Magic Mountains* (Delhi) 1991 and T. Metcalf *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge) 1997 pp181-5 both contain descriptions of the mythologies the British (and Indians) constructed around Hill Stations, but very little about their economy or society

⁴ Pamela Kanwar *Imperial Simla* (Delhi) 1990 & Alexander Morrison *Creating a South Indian Hill Station: Ootacamund and the Nilgiri Hills 1818 – 1837* (Unpublished undergraduate thesis, Oxford University) 2000

some of the larger ‘unofficial’ European communities in British India: businessmen, planters, missionaries and other settlers outside civil and military employ.

I

By 1901 there were 169,677 Europeans in India, and although estimates vary, it seems clear that at least a third, or roughly 55,000 – 60,000, were ‘box-wallahs’, engaged in commercial enterprise, and not employed in any official or military capacity by the Government of India². Whether compared to India’s population as a whole, or to levels of white settlement in the non-tropical areas of the Empire, these numbers are insignificant. This was partly for climatic reasons, and because of the general scarcity of unoccupied land in most parts of India, but it was also the result of deliberate policy. Official indifference or hostility to permanent European settlement had a long pedigree. In 1801 the Company was warning Parliament

That an unrestrained ingress of Englishmen into the interior of the country would be productive of the most baneful effects upon the comfort of the inhabitants and the peace of society, and would be fatally injurious to the British name and interests.³

All Europeans had to obtain a licence from the Company to enter India, and until 1833 were forbidden to own land. Between 1814 and 1832 only 1,324 licences were issued⁴, and the Court of Directors was particularly anxious to exclude those described as ‘Commercial Speculators’.

The Court have always looked with considerable jealousy to applications from this description of persons, because a general compliance with them would afford a wide opening for the indiscriminate resort of Europeans to India, contrary to the principles upon which the administration of that country has hitherto been conducted.⁵

Although pressure in Parliament after the passing of the 1832 Reform Act led to the abolition of the licensing system and other restrictions on the freedom of Europeans and Eurasians (much against the will of the Directors), this attitude of official disdain towards the ‘commercial speculator’ persisted, epitomised in the very term ‘box-wallah’⁶. There were proposals to create government-sponsored European colonies on the Hills, largely for purposes of recruitment to the

¹ The military variety

² H.H. Risley & E.A. Gait *Census of India 1901* Vol.1 Part 1 *Report* (Calcutta) 1903 pp393-4

³ Parliamentary Papers Vol. VIII 1831-2 Appendix V p257

⁴ E. Hirschmann *White Mutiny: The Ilbert Bill crisis in India and the Genesis of the Indian National Congress* (Delhi) 1980 pp5-6

⁵ *Ibid* p254

⁶ A reference to Indian travelling salesmen, who carried their goods around in boxes

Indian Army¹, but these came to nothing in the face of increasing pessimism about the adaptability of the European constitution to the Indian climate as the nineteenth century progressed.² The priority for government in the later nineteenth century was always that the Indian Army, the Empire's police force, be maintained at the lowest possible cost from Indian revenues. Anything that was likely to render India more complicated or expensive to govern, such as the presence of white settlers, was viewed with some ambiguity, despite the long-term economic benefits that might accrue. Numbers accordingly remained low, but (if British soldiers are left out of the equation) the 'unofficial British' still formed the bulk of India's European population.

They have, however, attracted remarkably little attention when compared with the ICS and Army Officers who formed Anglo-India's upper crust. Renford is the only historian to have attempted to give an overview of the non-official British throughout India, but on the whole he concentrates on Bengal, as does Hirschmann³. Calcutta's business community has been examined in some detail by Misra⁴ and Tomlinson⁵, but the Europeans of Madras, Bombay and Lahore, together with the scattered groups of planters and tradesmen in the Hills have largely been ignored, or else simply assumed to have shared most of the characteristics of those in Calcutta. Taking their cue from G.O. Trevelyan's devastating portrayal of the 'Anglo-Saxon Party' amongst Bengal planters and Calcutta businessmen⁶, historians have concluded that the politics and social relations of the British business classes, planters and tradesmen in India from about 1860 onwards were characterised by racial chauvinism, philistinism and a certain self-pitying rhetoric of the enterprising Briton as an endangered racial minority, hamstrung by a priggish and bourgeois Imperial state and beset on all sides by wily and dishonest Indians.

What needs to be acknowledged is that this hostility both to Indian society and to the Government of India could be self-defeating, and spelt complete political emasculation for the 'box-wallahs' where they were too small a group to make their voices heard alone. Whilst in Calcutta the European business community was large and prosperous, and, at least in the 19th century could

¹ See, for instance, R.Baikie *The Nilgubberies* (Calcutta) 1834 p39

² A process well charted in Mark Harrison *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India 1600-1850* (Delhi) 1999

³ R.K.Renford: *The Non-Official British in India to 1920* (Delhi) 1987, Hirschmann *White Mutiny*

⁴ Maria Misra *Business, Race and Politics in British India* (Oxford) 1999 pp210-11

⁵ B.R.Tomlinson *Colonial Firms and the Decline of Colonialism in Eastern India in Modern Asian Studies* 15:3 1981 pp455-86

⁶ G.O. Trevelyan *The Competition-Wallah* (London) 1864 pp328 - 367

afford to stand apart from wealthy Indians¹, this was seldom true elsewhere in India, and the Nilgiris are an excellent case in point.

II

The resident European Community on the Nilgiris was never much more than 1500 persons, from heterogeneous backgrounds. Some were agents of firms based in Madras and Bombay, a large number were pensioned army officers and civil servants who had chosen to try their luck at planting rather than return to Britain, and were attracted by the combination of a semi-European climate with cheaper Indian living conditions. There were discharged British 'other ranks' running enterprises as diverse as breweries and market gardens; French families from Pondicherry; French, German, Swiss and Portuguese missionaries and nuns; and descendants of the minor officials and army officers who had abandoned Company service to establish small businesses or engage in building speculation during the earliest years of the settlement's development in the 1820s and 30s, founding local dynasties. 111 Europeans were sufficiently indigent to qualify for famine relief in 1877, almost all of whom were pensioners and their families.² The leaders of the interest were the planters of Coffee, Tea and Cinchona, whose profession was considered more gentlemanly than the retail trade or the carrying business, and whose background was normally one of respectable public or military service.

The Nilgiris thus had a diverse commercial community on a smaller and more easily comprehensible scale than that of Madras or Bombay. Furthermore, they offer an unusual example of a European settler community in India, with a permanent stake in the land, attempting to make their home on the Subcontinent, in which they differed from the business classes of the Presidency Towns. As the Secretary, Mr. Schmidt put it in the Ootacamund Municipality's address to the Viceroy, Lord Lytton, when he visited Ooty in 1877:

In most other parts of India, as your Lordship is aware, the Englishman is simply a sojourner. He leaves his native land to fulfil an official or commercial career, and then returns to his home. On these Hills, however, we find Englishmen devoting their capital, their energies, and their lives to the permanent development of the resources of the country. They have made the Nilgiris their home.³

Unlike their counterparts in Australia or Southern Africa, in theory these settlers had virtually no more *de jure* political rights under the despotic Imperial state than the coolies who

¹ Misra *Business, Race & Politics* shows that after 1914 the Calcutta Managing Agencies saw their competitiveness increasingly undermined by their refusal to employ Indians

² *South of India Observer* Saturday 3rd November 1877 (hereafter *S.I.O.*)

³ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 12th September 1877

laboured in their plantations. The friction this produced, together with the issues surrounding the presence of Government in Ootacamund for half the year, echo the resentment unofficial Europeans elsewhere in British India felt towards the Government of India. Relations with influential Indian groups, and what might be called the politics of race are another matter. Although the Nilgiris were in the Madras Presidency, the Parsees and Gujarati Muslims most prominent in the local Indian elite were from Bombay, which is perhaps of some significance given the far greater influence of native capital there, and the somewhat easier relations which existed between Europeans and Indians¹. Racial attitudes amongst the 'White Todas' of Ooty were altogether more complex than amongst the Jute-wallahs and managing agencies of Calcutta.

The epithet 'Toda', refers to the most picturesque of the indigenous tribes of the Nilgiris, which has always attracted a disproportionate amount of attention from anthropologists. It was used somewhat jeeringly by Madras newspapers to imply that the Ootians were at best provincial, at worst lumpen semi-asiatics. Amongst the settlers themselves it was used as a badge of pride in their many disputes with the Government, implying that they were committed to the land, and 'understood' the Nilgiris, in a way that rootless officials ('strangers to the land where many of their fathers not only sojourned but died'²) could not.

Worst of all, is the conversion of hill stations to hot beds of officialdom. The atmosphere has become positively oppressive, and white Todas feel as if they were breathing that of their sable congeners in their stifling dwellings.³

Published sources describing society on the Nilgiris are, perhaps paradoxically, rather fuller for the early years of the Hill Station's establishment⁴, and to find a really vivid picture of the issues that exercised the minds of Ooty's residents in the second half of the 19th century one has to look elsewhere. A great deal of light is shed upon them by the letters and articles in the grandly titled *South of India Observer* or *Nilgiri News*, jointly Indian and British-owned⁵ for most of this period, but which circulated almost exclusively amongst the European Community, who were also the main contributors. The Oriental & India Office Collection at the British Library has intermittent holdings

¹ Renford *Non-Official British* pp106 – 9 The Bombay Chamber of Commerce was of joint European & Indian foundation and after 1880 had an Indian President and a majority of Indians on the Committee

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 29th June 1878

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 9th August 1890

⁴ See for instance Lt. Richard Burton *Goa and the Blue Mountains or six months of sick leave.* (London) 1851 and Col. Walter Campbell: *The Old Forest Ranger or Wild Sports of India on the Nilgerry Hills.* (London) 1842, *My Indian Journal*(1830-4). (Edinburgh) 1864

⁵ *S.I.O.* Saturday 2nd January 1880

of this rare local newspaper from 1877 to 1910¹. This source obviously has its limitations – in general it represents the views of Europeans, and amongst them those of the planting interest (with some exceptions) though these are far less consistent than might be expected. Much more could be written about the Indian business community in Ooty - the private papers of the Sait and Eduljee families might yield rich dividends, but their accessibility is problematic.

III

If apology were needed for once again bringing the subject of the waste lands of the Nilgherries before the public, it is to be found in its paramount importance and in the large and varied interests at stake in the soil. The uniform policy of obstructiveness and illiberality, which the Government of this Presidency has seen fit to adopt in its dealings with the European Settler on these Hills is alike unintelligible and discreditable.The germs of prosperity lie buried in the soil of India - but the people of the country are proved to be wanting in the essentials necessary to develop them. These facts are both known and deplored by our rulers, and yet they decline to permit European energy and capital to step in to do for the soil, what will never be done without them.²

The Waste Land rules drawn up for Hill Country in 1859 by Sir Charles Trevelyan³, liberal governor of Madras and champion of its Eurasian community were the Nilgiri planters' principal bugbear throughout the nineteenth century. In the Madras Presidency government waste land could normally be taken up for cultivation by a *ryot* or a European settler on a simple application to the Collector, and after agreement to pay an annual assessment that would be changed at regular intervals under the *ryotwari* system to take changes of use into account. On the Hills a special system applied whereby all waste land had to be sold at auction in order to secure the highest possible price. A prospective planter had to identify his land, lodge an application and pay for a survey that would determine its true extent. The auction, at which all were free to bid, was advertised in the Government gazette and the local press, and frequently resulted in someone other than the original applicant walking away with the land:

A planter can apply for and pay the costs of bringing to auction. He must still bid against the speculator if one comes forward. He must either outbid the speculator or go on making application after application, losing months of valuable time, until he succeeds in finding land for which no-one will bid – we know that it is chiefly luck that rules at sales of waste lands except at those sales in which planters bid one against another.⁴

¹ SM 83 South of India Observer (Microfilm) 1877 - 1890

SM 84 Nilgiri News (Microfilm) 1897 - 1902

SM 85 South of India Observer (Microfilm) 1902 – 1910 Oriental and India Office Collection, British Library (hereafter **OIOC**)

² *S. I. O. 'Planters' Sheet'* Wednesday 24th January 1877

³ Madras Board of Revenue G.O. No.1,053 5th August 1859 (hereafter B.O.R.) Madras Record Office (hereafter **MRO**)

⁴ *S.I.O Correspondence* 21st Wednesday February 1877

Such ‘speculators’ were often local Indian businessmen, and there were frequent accusations that the State was stifling European enterprise and turning a blind eye to abuse of the system by ‘the mild hindoo’¹. The general indifference, or indeed outright hostility of the Government of India to European settlement was compounded on the Hills by local considerations, which can be traced back to the very earliest years of European settlement on the Nilgiris. The Collector of Coimbatore, John Sullivan, who had built the first house at Ootacamund in 1820-1 and encouraged the sanatorium’s development, had also initiated a district tradition of discouraging permanent European settlers and protecting the ‘innocence’ of the Hill tribes from the rapacity of the market². The ‘picturesque’ Todas, who kept and worshipped buffaloes received the greatest degree of special treatment, as they were exempted from all but the lowest revenue demands, and a spurious³ idea that they were the original ‘lords of the soil’ on the Nilgiris was held to entitle them to the payment of a tribute, known as *goodoo*, by all those occupying land on the Hills. 7,000 acres of grazing land was reserved for them, amounting to about thirty acres for each adult male⁴. That this was thought by many to be both anomalous and irritating can be seen from the following letter to the Editor of the *South of India Observer*, which welcomed evidence that the tribe’s numbers were dwindling:

it will make more room in the hive when such drones are mercifully removed. They are an useless indolent race pampered beyond the more industrious Badaga residents on this elevation and whose only occupation consists in tending a half domesticated buffalo, and crying *enam*⁵ with an outstretched hand to every one they meet. Certain reserves are set apart for these idle wretches who bring no grist to the mill, while the more industrious are taxed to supply the deficiency they cause by their occupancy of rich land.⁶

It is not certain that all Europeans shared this correspondent’s sentiments, as the Editor sarcastically recommended that he take a course of anti-bilious pills. The much more numerous Badaga cultivators mentioned in this letter were allowed to take up lands on *puttab* until the 1880s, unlike Europeans and in defiance of the official rules. They were also granted extensive grazing rights over state land which, whether used or not, was not supposed to be alienated by Europeans or anyone else, something which not all settlers were willing to accept. Captain H.R. Morgan, then Conservator of Forests, referred in 1861 to

¹ *S.I.O. ‘Planters’ Sheet’* Wednesday 24th January 1877

² Morrison *Creating a South Indian Hill Station*, **MRO** Records of the Nilgiris District Vol.4182 31st Dec. 1829

³ There is still a good deal of controversy about this: see Gunnel Cederlof ‘Narratives of Rights: Codifying People and Land in the Early 19th Century Nilgiris’ in *Environment and History* Vol. VIII 2002 pp319 - 62

⁴ F.D. Maclean *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency* (Madras) 1885 Vol.II pp107-111

⁵ ‘Present’. Why the Todas should be represented as using the Hindi word is unclear, but Burton refers to this as well, see *Blue Mountains* p351

⁶ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 27th February 1878

...the great difficulty that exists of obtaining land on the Hills for the purposes of tea planting. At present nearly the whole of the Hills at an elevation of from 5-6,000 feet is held by the *Burghers* (sic) under the more than dubious title of what is called a grazing *puttab*. Let a settler make an application for land in the neighbourhood of a Burgher village, and the land, though it has not been cultivated for years, is immediately claimed by the Burgher village, and a preposterous sum demanded: if the demand be not acceded to, a complaint is lodged, and the land pronounced to be *Burgher* land.¹

It subsequently transpired that Morgan, who was, after all, a government servant himself, was arguing on behalf of his brother-in-law, a Mr. Rae, one of the first two settlers given a licence by the Collector in the late 1850s to begin experiments with tea planting, who had taken this as *carte blanche* to demarcate and occupy without permission piece of land near a Badaga village which had for many years been used by the tribe to graze their stock and provide fodder. The then Collector of Coimbatore, E.B. Thomas, did not take a sympathetic view of these proceedings, and wrote

If speculators like Mr. Rae select the most fertile valleys in the neighbourhood of populous *Burgher* villages, they cannot fairly suppose the *Burghers* (200 years cultivators of the Hills) have not had the common sense and observation also and long before to choose the same desirable localities.²

In 1880 Grigg remarked that the Badagas were cultivating far more land than the official amount of 29,912 acres upon which they paid revenue³. They were in fact rather successful capitalist agriculturalists, producing cash crops such as potatoes and barley, which they sold on the plains and in the latter case to the local breweries. Their success, though lauded by the government (which awarded cash prizes for the most successful Badaga crops and also received the highest revenue returns from land under potatoes⁴), seems to have rankled rather with many settlers, who claimed to have been forced onto marginal land at too high an altitude, with poor soil or without water.

The table below shows the distribution of land use on the Nilgiris in 1887, and reveals that the amount of land reserved for the tribes was comparatively small (although the figure for ‘occupied’ land almost certainly includes much land applied for and taken up by the Badagas over and above that reserved for them). It is insignificant in comparison with Government reserves of forest¹.

¹ B.O.R. 1861 No. 803 12th February

² B.O.R. 1861 No. 1,782 6th April

³ Grigg *Manual* p321

⁴ *Ibid* p327 The rate was Rs.7 per *bullab*

fig.1 Land Use on the Nilgiris 1887

Divisions	Area (Acres)	Occupied (Plantations)	Village Grazing	Reserved Forest	Village Forest	Unoccupied	Swamp & Minor Paramboke
Todanad	217,074.48	44,641.07	15,503.58	96,698.41	2,947.14	52,022.11	
Merkunad	63,726.87	32,244.01	2,575.69	18,200.82	1,093.37	6,264.55	
Kundahnad	64,944.31	7190.82	4,770.99	45,610.61	1,223.58	5,226.29	
Paranginad	88,079.90	41,506.37	8,164.50	24,814.76	2,898.48	7,365.43	
Total	433,825.56	127,582.37	31,014.76	185,324.60	8,162.52	70,878.38	10,863.03

Government placed severe restrictions on the occupation of forested land and the felling of timber, an extremely valuable resource both for building and firewood. Large areas of *sholah* (indigenous) woodland were reserved in order to prevent erosion and ensure that streams would not dry up, but settlers simply saw these as prime land from which they were unfairly excluded. The State also reserved the right to declare forest that was already privately occupied reserved land and bar its owner from cultivating it, which caused particular resentment. Despite these measures the Forestry Commission constantly complained that illegal felling was proceeding apace, not least owing to Captain (now Major) H.R. Morgan, Conservator of Forests throughout most of the 1860s. Having previously supported his brother-in-law, Rae's illegal occupation of Badaga land, in 1862 he can be found advocating that his brother, J.H. Morgan be given a licence to buy and fell almost the entire Deva Sholah, one of the largest patches of *sholah* left near Ooty, for the paltry sum of one rupee per cartload of wood. Although Morgan blandly asserted that this was purely so that the land could be planted with Cinchona, and that a 400 foot fringe left around the top of the Hill would be ample to ensure continued water supply, other witnesses reported that it was far too high (6,800 feet in elevation) for such cultivation. It was almost certainly an attempt by the two brothers to realise a fat profit on the timber and this was the line taken by E.B. Thomas, the Collector when he wrote to the Board of Revenue that 'if the axe be once admitted into (Deva Sholah), its destruction is sure...'². By the 1890s there was very little *sholah* woodland left on the Nilgiris, and Australian eucalyptus and wattle were planted in considerable quantities to supply the deficiency of firewood.

The waste-land rules received minor revisions in 1870 but remained in force throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century as a constant thorn in the side of the settler community on the Nilgiris. In 1872 Messrs. Herklots and Mullaly were complaining that, having made an application for land they 'were opposed at the sale by one or two natives of no position or wealth who bid

¹ figures from B.O.R 1887, Forest G.O. No.225 19th April 1887

² B.O.R. 1862 G.O. No.50 2nd April

against us and raised the price to what we purchased at', an extremely hefty Rs.2,250 for an estimated 300 acres. Their anger was compounded when the block turned out to have been so inaccurately surveyed that it only contained 140 acres. This was a common problem; in 1882 one Captain W.A. Campbell began a furious (not to say hysterical) correspondence with the Madras government that not only repeated the well-worn call for an end to the system of selling land at auction, but also accused the government officials, both local and Presidency, of venality, corruption and unfair competition.

...in defiance of government regulations on the subject most of the District officials have acquired land within their district for agricultural purposes.....every possible obstacle has been persistently thrown in the way of non-officials acquiring land, though from conversation with the (H.M.) Secretary of State for India, I have gathered that the Home government were under the impression that non-officials were encouraged to settle in the Nilgiris District....Officials have traded openly. One of the most favourite (sic) forms of trading among district officials has been discounting bills, and lending money at usurious rates.....formerly district officials were generally the only aggressors, but now that the Madras (Imperial) government officials are, in increasing numbers, riding rough shod over decency and orders and competing with me, I abandon all hope and retire, admitting that I can no longer continue to combat such odds.¹

When Campbell comes to name names one is perhaps not terribly surprised to find Major (now General) H.R. Morgan, formerly 'Deputy Conservator of Forests, who acquired very large tracts of land at Pykara, Neddicuttum and Tipperadoo for cultivation.² Mr. Maude, Inspector General of Gaols, and Mr. Davis, Manager of the Commissioner's office, who were both planting coffee were also mentioned, though Campbell was rather coy about naming any usurers. His ire was also aroused by the Ootacamund hunt, exclusive preserve of serving civil and military officers, their ladies and other summer visitors, which hunted jackals on the Nilgiri plateau within the vicinity of the station:

I am informed, though I can scarcely credit the report, that the Madras Government a year or two ago had ruled that many miles spare round Ootacamund should be kept uncultivated for the benefit of the Hunt which is supported chiefly by government officials. This confirms the impression that every possible pretext is availed of simply to exclude the unofficial element from Ootacamund and its neighbourhood.³

Although it seems unlikely that this was actually the case, Campbell's resentment against the official element, and their perceived conspiracy to keep out settlers is plain to see, and was in no way mitigated by the fact that he himself had served in the Indian army, in common with many other planters. Having refused the Madras Government's request to name officials whom he considered

¹ MRO Miscellaneous G.O. No.4462, 30th Dec 1882 *Regarding alleged malpractices in the Nilgiris District* Letter 25th March 1882

² Misc. G.O No.4462, 1882, Letter 5th April

³ Ibid

corrupt as well as incompetent, he seems to have given up his coffee plantations and returned to England, muttering darkly about friends in high places and the possibility of a Parliamentary Commission of Enquiry, which did not materialise. The Government ignored his accusations of criminal abuse of government positions by officials (somebody in government had subsequently extensively annotated this file with the word ‘untrue’ in indelible pencil). Campbell may have been slightly unbalanced, but these complaints and accusations are echoed extensively in the pages of the *South of India Observer*.

IV

The figures shown below, apart from giving some idea of the true extent of land sold and consequently cultivated commercially on the Nilgiris, also provide evidence of the uncertainty caused by the Waste Land rules.

fig. 2 Statement of Lands sold under the Waste Land Rules 1863 – 1879¹

Year	Number Of Lots	Total Area ascertained by Survey	Total Price realised	Average Price Per Acre
		(Acres)	(Rupees)	(Rupees)
1863 – 64	21	2,450	12,934	5.3
1864 – 65	22	2,233	10,992	4.9
1865 – 66	90	2,788	4,610	1.7
1866 – 67	37	832	1,536	1.9
1867 – 68	27	305	3,700	12.1
1868 – 69	2	4	523	130.8
1869 – 70	9	58	745	12.8
1870 – 71	26	246	658	2.7
1871 – 72	21	93	2,076	22.3
1872 – 73	13	291	1,273	4.4
1873 – 74	12	538	16,856	31.3
1874 – 75	16	1,631	2,028	1.24
1875 – 76	15	607	11,906	19.6
1876 – 77	18	1,505	7,206	4.79
1877 – 78	27	1,008	8,051	8
1878 – 79	12	777	19,941	25.7
Totals	368	15,373	104,590	6.8 (Avg.)

The wildly fluctuating land prices that were the direct consequence of sale by auction under the Waste Land rules made it extremely difficult to predict the amount of initial capital required to

start a plantation under these circumstances. Coffee planting (which rapidly overtook tea in importance) was at its highest level of prosperity in 1870, and thereafter declined. The increased sales visible in 1874-5 and 1876-8 proved to be unwise, as coffee prices continued to fall². In 1876 Grigg remarked that ‘it is impossible to deny that at present the large majority of existing estates are in a languishing condition, and that their proprietors have been brought to the verge of ruin’³.

Other businesses did not necessarily fare any better. In 1867 Mr. Honeywell, a ranker of the 2nd Light Infantry, established a brewery at Arvenghau near Coonoor, but this was hit hard in 1874 by increased government regulation and taxes and a fixed limit on the quantity which could be produced or sold, reduced from 90,000 to 50,000 gallons a year. In 1877 it closed altogether and Mr. Honeywell and his family left the Nilgiris for Australia, prompting an anxious editorial in the *South of India Observer* entitled ‘Exodus of Settlers from the Nilgherries’:

It concerns us to ask why these old residents are quitting the scene of their labours, and the associations of over a quarter of a century. Is the loss of so large a number of the industrial population of no account? Can the Hills spare them? Can the Government wash their hands and declare themselves guiltless? We fear not. Something is radically wrong, capital and industry is fast being driven from the Hills...⁴

‘An Australian in India’, Mr. H. Polwhele Godfrey, on a brief tour of the Nilgiris remarked that in’...the short time I was there I met two *successful* coffee-planters, who had made up their minds to go to the colonies and invest in station property. I told them they were doing the wisest thing they could do...’⁵ Inevitably, dissatisfaction with the status quo led to demands for political representation, which were not satisfied by the institution of a Municipality in Ootacamund town in 1866. Although the Municipality was dominated by Europeans, these were Government Officials or appointees, and its two elected members were usually Indians. It is interesting that in 1861, when a Municipality was being considered, a petition was presented against it by the wealthy Indians of Ooty, on the grounds that they would be represented by Europeans. This prompted E.B. Thomas, the Collector, to write

I think a Municipality would still be practicable on the Hills, even with the concurrence of the native community, provided (as is but just and advisable) they are fairly and fully represented, by a few of their own order (say, one of each caste or profession); and not by a few Europeans only, some of whom would have little sympathy with the native community, *on whom the existence, supplies and comfort of this station really depends.*(my italics)⁶

¹ Grigg *Manual* p360

² Francis *Nilgiris* p.172

³ Grigg *Manual* p358

⁴ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 18th July 1877

⁵ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 5th December 1877

⁶ B.O.R. No.369 12th November 1861

The Municipality thus emerged as a device to satisfy the political aspirations of wealthy Indians, rather than those of Europeans. This was an obvious potential source both of racial friction and of resentment against officialdom. The *South of India Observer* continued to ask why the Government of India would not place more trust in the planting community, making invidious comparisons with Australia, and complaining of the flight of European capital from the Hills.

Old residents are casting their eyes Australia-wards to seek that sympathising attention and encouragement from a Colonial Government denied to them under a bureaucratic regime....the Commissioner ought to be assisted by representative men chosen from among the planters...In other parts of the country, there would be weighty objections against the class preference such a plan as we here recommend would give colour to. The complex questions arising from mixed nationalities would preclude its adoption. But here on the Nilgherries such objections do not operate....If there is any class of men commonly coming under the generic term of colonist more fitted to take part in administrative work, it is planters. Often from the better middle classes at home, the planter is usually well-educated, and always emphatically a gentleman. In this respect the very opposite of the average needy immigrant...¹

It is clear that Indian Planters were not intended to be included in this statement - the expression 'class' is here a synonym for the modern idea of 'race'. Frustrated by this lack of representation, the Nilgiri Planters' Association (which did have some Indian members) joined with those of Travancore, Coorg and other areas in forming the United Planters' Association of South India (UPASI) in 1894. This was a relatively effective lobby group for the whole of South India, though it seems to have done little to redress grievances specific to the Nilgiris. Initially it had some Indian Planting Associations as members, but by 1899 all these had left, presumably because they were ignored². In South India, unlike in the North, Indian entrepreneurs were a very significant presence in planting, controlling almost half the total acreage of 245,000 by 1902³. This was probably because fewer estates were established on previously virgin or unbroken territory, and many were in areas which already had significant levels of Indian landownership, unlike Assam. Most Indian estates were very small however, and commercially were less significant than large European ones. Competition for land on the Nilgiris was undoubtedly exacerbated by increasing purchases made by Indians, some immigrants from the plains, but above all local businessmen using the profits from trade to invest in land, or seizing it as security for loans made to indigent European planters, as here in an 1877 advertisement

....the property known as the CHARLESTON ESTATE belonging to Mr. Charles Godfrey and advertised for sale under an attachment of decrees against him is under mortgage to Messrs. Abdul Cawder & Co., of

¹ *S.I.O.* Sunday 12th October 1878

² Renford *Non-Official British* pp89-92

³ *Planting Directory of South India* 1902

Ootacamund for securing the sum of Rupees nine thousand or thereabouts, and their claim will have to be answered by the purchasers of the said Charleston Estate property.¹

Most of these acquisitions were urban: by 1905 various branches of the Sait Family owned 123 of the 361 large private houses in Ooty, making them by far the largest urban landlords, and Indians collectively owned 40% of the total housing², often with Europeans as tenants. However Gool Mohamed Sait and Pestonjee Nusserwanjee, the heads of what were respectively the richest Gujarati and Parsee families in Ootacamund, also diversified into coffee-planting in the 1880s, where the capital they had accumulated in the retail trade enabled them to purchase some very large estates. It was probably them whom the following correspondent had in mind:

Just as the wily native has supplanted the Eurasian, and driven him from home and country by monopolising employments, so also is he endeavouring gradually to compete with the European in coffee-planting; and it is worthy a moment's thought whether he will or not in time displace his masters from all footing on these Hills. I am no alarmist; but I regret the short-sighted policy which gives such free scope of action to a class which can never, like the European and the Eurasian, truly serve the interests of our government.³

In fact Europeans were still in a substantial majority; in 1877 12% of estates were under Indian ownership⁴ and their collective acreage was less than 9% of the total: by 1896 this had only risen to 13% & 10%⁵. It was not until after the First World War that Indian owners began to challenge European planters in terms of area, but even then they failed to confirm this 'occasional correspondent's' prognosis, owning just 20% of the total acreage⁶. In any case the stories behind Indian acquisitions of land were sometimes a little more nuanced. Maj-Gen. Robert Baker, who attempted to manage the 300 acre Tudor Hall tea and cinchona estate near Ooty after his retirement from the Madras Army, was only saved from complete ruin at the hands of his European creditors by the timely purchase of the estate by an Indian businessman, as his wife recollected:

The Government had said they would not interfere with private enterprise, but they did not keep their word, and threw so much (Cinchona) on the market that the price went down from ten shillings a pound to two. They also cut down and sold timber, and tea was overdone. Consequently we found ourselves in difficulties, and had to mortgage the place. I was obliged to give up my ponies, and one day Robert went out down to see his lawyer, Mr. Cowdell, and sent me a note to say that if he could not furnish a certain sum of

¹ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 24th January 1877

² *The Visitors' Handbook of the Nilgiris, compiled from Reliable Sources* (Ooty) 1905 pp84-92 The Sait family maintain their dominant position in Ooty to this day.

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 21st February 1880

⁴ See Appendix & *Illustrated Guide to the Nilgiris, with descriptions of Ootacamund, Coonoor etc.* (Madras) 1877 pp47 – 60d The only extant copy of this guide that I am aware of is in the private library of Dr. Homi Eduljee of Martyn Abbots, Ootacamund

⁵ See Appendix & *The Planting Directory of South India* (Coonoor) 1896 pp 23 - 9

⁶ See Appendix & H. Waddington *The Planting Directory of Southern India* (Madras) 1924 pp54 - 69

money in a few hours he could be put in jail. Imagine my feelings. All I could do was to tie up the small amount of jewellery I had and send it down to him.....and tell him to let the mortgagee, a Mr. Rogers have the carriage and ponies.....We never again referred to this incident. The only thing to be done was to try and sell the place. General Clementson had a second mortgage on it, and (so I learned afterwards) had intended foreclosing, and told people his son Mark would take on the estate. But just in the nick of time we heard of a purchaser, a man called 'Sabaplitty Ayah'¹, and were able to pay off Old Clementson and to have a small sum left over.²

There is no doubt that it is Government and fellow European entrepreneurs who are the villains of the piece here.

Like Major-General Baker and Captain Campbell the majority of planters were retired military officers, or occasionally civil officials. This raises interesting questions as to how just how rigid the distinction between 'officials' and 'non-officials' actually was. The questionable role played by General H.R. Morgan in the 1860s comes to mind: his duties as a forestry officer certainly did not override his loyalties to members of his family. With retirement a good many men crossed the line, and whilst their former rank conferred prestige and self-confidence (not to say bloody-mindedness), as can be seen from Campbell's example, it did nothing to mitigate their hostility towards serving officers and the civil establishment. This might have been partly because these were, in the main, unsuccessful men – those without a private income whose pensions were presumably too meagre to admit of them buying rural property in Britain, and who instead opted to become landowners in India. Very few planters seem to have had any previous experience of working in agriculture, and many estates as a result failed simply through ignorance and incompetence, combined with the fact that Badaga and other Indian cultivators expected a very much lower and less costly standard of living than a European planter in his bungalow. Another problem complained of was high labour costs, as all labour in the Nilgiris had to be imported from the Plains, and the planters argued constantly that the labour rules drawn up by Trevelyan in 1859 were far too liberal (they had been designed for urban contracts). It was consequently almost impossible to retain coolies from one season to the next, and there were constant problems with defaulting labour contractors and absconding workers. Not until 1903 was the law altered to give employers greater control, but even then the situation never even remotely resembled the appalling abuse of Bihari tea-garden workers in Assam by their contractors and employers³.

¹ Sabapathi Iyah was the owner of the nearby 350 Acre Emerald Valley Tea and Cinchona Estate

² OIOC MSS EUR/ Photo Eur 403 p11

³ Renford *Non-Official British* p83

Planting on the Nilgiris never really took off under European ownership. Altogether only a small proportion of land was planted by 1908, approximately 26,000 acres under coffee, 8,000 under tea and 2,600 under Cinchona (down from 4,800 acres in 1884 – Cinchona planting was largely a government-run affair, overseen by trained employees, as its cultivation was quite a specialised task¹, and by 1908 the Nilgiris had been ousted from the world Cinchona market by Javanese competition)². At that time, because domestic consumption of tea and coffee in South India was low, Nilgiri coffee and tea were being produced for an extremely competitive and easily glutted world market, in which they were very minor players. As Francis remarked, if the coffee crop in Brazil and Java was good, it meant a disastrous year for the Nilgiri planters. ‘It is only...by rigid economy and constant care that coffee estates now pay, and the industry is in anything but a flourishing condition.’³ Coffee exports from the whole of South India fell from 35 million lbs in 1885 to 22 million in 1900⁴, and in 1900 there were only 10,164 acres under tea in the whole of the Madras Presidency. The small scale of South Indian tea planting (excluding Ceylon) can be clearly seen when it is contrasted with North India, where by 1900 there were 331,151 acres in Assam, followed by 132,478 acres in Bengal. Nevertheless complaints from the (highly successful) planting industry here; about waste-land rules, unfair Government competition and labour problems, were almost indistinguishable from those of its Southern counterpart⁵, suggesting that Nilgiri planters were more incompetent than anything else. It is clear that the economic problems planters faced were not solely the responsibility of the Indian Government, but what is significant for an understanding of their politics is that they normally blamed them on Government, whether local, Madras or Imperial.⁶

IV

The *S.I.O.*’s editorials and correspondence, as one might expect, repeatedly urged the benefits that would accrue to India as a whole (and Madras Presidency in particular) if the seats of government in India were moved to the Hills permanently. Similarly the influx of visitors attracted by the presence of Government was of great commercial and social benefit to the Hills, although, if

¹ The transplanting of Cinchona trees from Peru to the Nilgiris was originally overseen by Clements R. Markham, when he worked at the India Office, in 1860-1 see **OIOC** MSS EUR/ A82

² Francis *Nilgiris* pp177, 182, 186, 172

³ Francis *Nilgiris* p173

⁴ Renford *Non-Official British* p96

⁵ **OIOC** MSS EUR/ F205/15 *Indian Tea Association. Extracts from Annual Reports*. 1900 pp234, 65

⁶ See for instance H.A.K. Wright’s Journal **OIOC** MSS EUR/A123 28th July 1870

this article from the *Indian Daily News* (reprinted for the amusement of readers in the *S.I.O.* as an example of ‘how others see us’) is to be believed, this was not always appreciated:

Those persons who have lived for any time upon the Nilghiri Hills, in the South of India, may have been diverted more or less by the singular feud between the ‘residents’ and the ‘visitors’ that prevails in those parts.One wiseacre has it that the people born and bred upon the hills – who are stigmatised as ‘Todas’ by the others....regard the hills as their own private property, and that the baneful glances which they cast upon the dwellers in the plains are meant to cast the latter off the ground as trespassers. But this too is evidently delusive. As soon would a seaside lodging-house keeper refuse to take in the human harvest which the London Summer sends her, as the residents of the Hills the people who make the great event of their lives – ‘the season.’ What would the Hills be without the ‘season’ makers, otherwise the visitors? The residents look to the season as the Cornishmen do to the arrival of the pilchards, or the Esquimaux for the emigration of the reindeer. *That* is the season to grow rich, to marry and to give in marriage, to rise up and play lawn tennis and badminton, and do a hundred agreeable things. Then why this hate – wherefore the malignant frowns?¹

This article sets out clearly enough the advantages Ooty’s residents were popularly supposed to derive from its status as the Summer Capital of the Madras Presidency. The dislike of residents for visitors was often genuine, however, and derived from the usual Anglo-Indian obsession with social precedence. The most exclusive institutions such as the Ootacamund Club catered almost entirely for visitors, and all but a tiny elite of residents were excluded from the highlights of the ‘Season’, the glittering balls at Government House. The tensions caused by the fact that visitors were usually of a rather higher social status than residents were remarked upon in the editorial which expressed wonder at

how hostile a certain section of the local community is to any such new fangled notion as the permanent location here of alien leaders of society, to the detriment of ladies of *ton* on the spot. One of these celebrities was, the other day, more explicit than complimentary, when she informed a lady of the Ducal party how glad she would be when they were all gone away. ‘Then,’ said she, ‘I’ll be somebody, now I am nobody.’....²

The social benefits of ‘The Season’ were less often questioned in the *S.I.O.* than the commercial and monetary benefits that accrued to Ooty owing to the presence of Government for six to seven months of the year.

As far as these hills go, it is notorious that not much good has come to them by the Government being located here. It has been expected, season after season, that the influx of visitors would bring a rich harvest to the local trade, but up to the present time this has proved a delusion and a snare. The local tradesman in anticipation of an unusual demand laid in a heavy stock of goods, but with what result? Why, only to see them lie on hand, as Government brought its own stores in its train.³

¹ *S.I.O.* Saturday 24th July 1880

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 23rd November 1878

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 13th April 1878

This was probably somewhat disingenuous, and designed to deflect criticism from the Madras papers; there were certainly vociferous complaints about ‘the loss to trade’ if the government’s sojourn on the Hills was shorter than usual, as happened during the famine of 1876-8. It was admitted ‘A benefit from their stay has been conferred on local trade; but this is about all we have any reason to be thankful for.’¹ However, there do appear to have been some genuine sources of tension, mainly centring around the issue of local taxation. It was quite reasonably pointed out that virtually the entire tax burden was borne by local residents, whilst visitors, in particular the huge apparatus of the Madras Government, represented the greatest demand on the infrastructure of the Hill Station, straining the Ootacamund Municipality’s limited resources. The tax base for Ooty in the 1870s was extremely small.

fig. 3²

House tax	Rs.19,000
Profession tax	Rs.3,000
Vehicle tax	Rs.2,327
Cart tax	Rs.400
Total	Rs.24,727

According to one correspondent, writing to complain about the raising of the level of the house tax to 7½ % of income, this tax provided two thirds of total Municipal revenue but was levied on 256 houses, owned by 135 proprietors, or one seventy-fifth of the population of Ooty: this working out at Rs. 147 per head³. ‘**Toby**, or The Ootacamund Charivari’, a collection of rather lame jokes that appeared in the *S.I.O.* from time to time, ran a short Comic Opera on the subject of Municipal taxation, which contained the following immortal lines:

CHORUS OF RESIDENTS

*Spare us we pray,
We've got to pay
More than our share –
That's not quite fair;
Why should the tax
Upon our poor backs
So heavily press –
And on Visitors less?*

¹ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 27th November 1878

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 13th April 1878

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 16th March 1878

Visitors paid direct taxation only to the extent of Rs. 1,768 p.a. In 1880, when the Government of India passed an act further exempting all its buildings and military personnel from Municipal taxation, the Editorial fumed that ‘It does seem monstrous that all Military Officers and Government servants should come here for a long period in each year, drive and ride over the roads, and utilise, free of cost, all the sanitary establishments of the Municipality.’¹ It was in fact this piece of legislation which finally provoked the Municipality to confrontation with the military authorities in Ootacamund, in the person of the Commander-in-Chief of the Madras Army, Sir Neville Chamberlain, and his officers sojourning on the Hills. This rather cheeky assault was as much a contest between the civil and military branches as between official and non-official, as it was led by Mr. R.S. Benson, the Assistant Commissioner and *ex officio* Hon. Sec. of the Municipal Council, who must have ruffled a good many feathers at GHQ when he carried the debate into the local Press through the following letter:

Take the case of Colonel Shaw-Stewart, R.E., or Colonel Michael, C.S.I.; they have each purchased a house and a considerable area of land which latter is carefully cultivated and does or will yield a handsome profit. All honour to them as improving house owners; but ought they, with their large salaries, to be exempt from the house and land tax which is imposed on miserable market gardeners, whose sole possessions consist of a mud hut and half an acre of ground?Is there any reason why their carriages and horses, lap- dogs and fox – hounds should be exempt from taxation, while the pack-pony of the hawker and the house-dog of the bazaar man each contributes its quota to the public expenses of the town?²

Sir Neville did not deign to reply to this challenge, and merely instructed all his officers to refuse to pay if tax were demanded of them. The situation in Ooty, where the military went by choice, was quite different from that in Cantonment towns where they were posted, and for which the legislation had been designed.

...may not the non-military taxpayers reasonably expect ten officers who divide by way of salary, no less than three lakhs per annum of the public taxes to rise superior to a selfishness that would prompt them to let other people, who are not in nearly as good circumstances, bear the whole of the Municipal burden?³

The paper poured scorn on the Officers’ argument that it was beneath their dignity as soldiers of the Queen to pay tax, by pointing out that the Queen herself had paid tax on the Civil List since the day of her accession. The episode is interesting inasmuch as residents declared a common interest with ‘bazaar men’ and ‘hawkers’ against the might of the Government of India on this mundane but fraught issue, even if this was largely a rhetorical device. By the 1890s the total

¹ S.I.O. Saturday 26th July 1880

² S.I.O. Saturday 21st August 1880

³ S.I.O. Saturday 21st August 1880

amount of tax raised had more than trebled to Rs. 90,000, largely through the introduction of a tax on servants in 1884, which affected visitor and resident alike.

Lack of representation on the Municipal Council, and the dominance of local politics by officials and visitors rankled with the Unofficial Community until the end of the century. ‘Tonga’ Browne, a well-known and wealthy local entrepreneur who had built the Assembly Rooms and was the manager of the livery stables and the Carrying Company in Ooty, was a champion of the unofficial interest here. He was one of the rare elected Europeans on the Council, described in his obituary as one whose

voice was always raised in protest against the excessive taxes to which the ratepayers are subjected, by a confederacy of official and nominated councillors, who always had no more than a passing interest in the station and its affairs.¹

In 1902 this resentment crystallised around an attempt by the Collector and the other Government representatives on the Council to foist an outside appointee upon the Municipality as Chairman. Browne protested vociferously, but without success. The vote was eventually carried by Government with the assistance of the elected Indian members, as the *S.I.O.* sneered

Even the ‘rabble’ electorate of this station will be disappointed at the conduct of their representatives yesterday, at the special meeting to elect Mr. Hancock. Mr. Murdachellum was conveniently absent, and Mr. Fakeer Mahommed (Sait), who was loud in his declamations in all public places against the appointment of an expensive chairman...on this occasion threw in his vote with the Collector, although there was every use for his voting the other way.²

Mr. Murdachellum and Mr. Sait were berated not so much because they were Indian, but because they were seen to have wasted the mandate given them by their election by kow-towing to Government. In unofficial politics in Ooty no crime was more unforgivable than such collaboration. If local Government officials were resented because of their control over access to land and undue unelected influence in the Municipality, the Imperial Government was always the primary enemy. The commercial and social benefits which the prolonged sojourns of the Madras Government on the Hills brought with them were outweighed by the perceived (and no doubt very real) snobbishness of officials and their families, the increased burden of taxation, and above all official interference in local and Municipal Government and trade in Ooty. Amongst the many divisions of Ooty society, it thus seems more than plausible that those between official and non-official, between visitor and resident, between ‘pukka’ and ‘kutcha’ *sahibs*, were as important as that of race.

¹ *S.I.O.* Saturday 20th July 1902

² *S.I.O.* Tuesday 4th December 1900

V

It is hardly original to state that Anglo-Indians were as notable for snobbery as they were for racism¹, and it has long been clear that amongst the British in India expected and actual forms of social intercourse with Indians and Eurasians varied widely according to social class². However, the example of the Nilgiris does bear out parts of David Cannadine's *Ornamentalism* argument. In Ootacamund the Maharajahs of Mysore and Vizianagram, the Nizam of Hyderabad and the Gaekwar of Baroda were welcomed by 'smart' Hill Society, and by local residents with open arms, both for the social cachet their presence brought and the money and patronage lavished on Ooty's businesses. In 1885 the paper remarked approvingly of the past season that

Some notable native visitors occupied many houses that would otherwise have been tenantless during many weeks, and by their lavish expenditure gave an impetus to flagging trade. The Nizam proposes paying Ooty another visit, and many native noblemen, who have never visited these Hills, intend to follow his example. As Europeans seem to neglect the advantages of climate &c. at Ootacamund, the natives of India are awakening to a sense of enjoyment of the mountain breezes, and to appreciate a change of scenery and atmosphere.³

In 1890, indeed, the Maharajah of Vizianagram donated a squash racquet court to the Ootacamund Club, of which he was a member⁴, and it had also been proposed to ask him to fund a town hall⁵. Between them the above three princes and the Rajah of Parlakimidi donated a total of Rs. 8,000 to St. Bartholomew's Hospital between 1900 and 1904⁶. In Price's Chapter on the history of the Hospital at Ooty, Government funding and donations by Europeans are gradually supplanted in the 1880s and 1890s both by donations from Maharajahs and by money from prominent local Indian businessmen such as the ubiquitous Abdul Rhyman Fakeer Mahomed Sait. In 1883 Mr. M.R.Ry. Tiruvengadaswami Mudaliyar, described as 'A wealthy *Abkari*⁷ Contractor' paid for a new Lying-in Ward. In 1890 Sait matched the Government grant for the extension to St. Bartholomew's Hospital, which would otherwise have been lost⁸, and in 1900-01 donated a total of around Rs.7,500 to match further Government assistance⁹. The list of subscribers for the Ootacamund famine relief fund of 1877 shows half the donors to be Indian, and they by far the more generous, giving between

¹ Although David Cannadine appears to think so, see *Ornamentalism* (London) 2001

² See for instance K. Ballhatchet *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj* (London) 1980 esp. p97 onwards, or Clive Dewey *Anglo-Indian Attitudes: The Mind of the Indian Civil Service* (London) 1993

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 12th September 1885

⁴ *S.I.O.* Saturday 1st February 1890

⁵ *S.I.O.* Saturday 14th February 1885

⁶ Price *Ootacamund* pp107-9

⁷ The Government Liquor Monopoly

⁸ *S.I.O.* Friday 5th January 1900

⁹ Price *Ootacamund* p107

them Rs580 out of a total of Rs726¹. As early as 1861 it had been remarked by the Collector of Coimbatore that Indian residents of the hills

have for some years, given voluntarily to some local improvements, viz, the only scavenger tax and expenditure of Ootacamund (without any aid from Government) about 70 Rupees per mensem, is contributed for the last 30 years by the Ootacamund bazaar people²

They had also paid for two drinking fountains and a tank, and a similar system operated at Coonoor. The motives behind such generosity are muddled: a sense of civic pride, still very much in evidence in Ooty today, most certainly played a part, as did a desire to gain respectability (particularly in the case of the *Abkari* contractor) and prestige within the Indian mercantile and business elite of the station. It seems unlikely that it was aimed particularly at winning over European opinion outside the official classes, and, needless to say, it did not necessarily do so.

Feelings of distrust and insecurity between the Indian and British communities were highlighted in 1880 by an obscure incident that became known as the ‘Ootacamund Scare’. Alarmed by reports of riots by ferocious Pathans in Karachi, many Europeans persuaded themselves that Ootacamund’s Muslims were plotting to rise up as one and slit all their throats on the night of Tuesday 7th September . The Ootacamund Volunteer Rifle Corps (mostly planters) was mobilised and this

patriotic party of gentlemen paraded the streets shouting out ‘All’s Well,’ and succeeded in adding to the alarm of the ladies who, not hearing the words distinctly, mistook them for a war-cry in Hindustani....the men who were in the Assembly Rooms off duty, made hay while there was the chance, and as long as the supply of beer held out. So great was the noise that the Commandant, who was curled up under a piano on the stage, could stand it no longer, and told the gallant fellows that they had done their duty well so far, but that now it was their duty to sleep³

A group of ladies and gentlemen commandeered carriages and were observed at dusk making with all speed for the safety of the cantonment at Wellington, whilst the Duke of Buckingham and Chandos doubled the guard at Government House and kept them on the *qui-vive* all night. As the *Madras Mail* remarked

We have not yet heard whether it is ten or eleven Victoria Crosses that have been applied for by the Madras Government to reward the ‘conspicuous gallantry and presence of mind’ that were exhibited at Ootacamund during the scare of this week....We know not which to admire the more, the readiness of the Ootians to take alarm, or the anxiety of the Governor to concentrate the local forces around his own honoured person⁴

¹ *S.I.O* Wednesday 10th October 1877

² B.O.R. No.369 12th November 1861

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 11th September 1880

⁴ *S.I.O.* Saturday 11th September 1880

The Governor, together with the heroes of the Volunteer Corps, was left looking rather sheepish the following morning. The sheer absurdity of what had occurred seems to have awoken people to their real community of interest with the Muslims of Ooty. As the *S.I.O.*'s editorial put it

The Mahomedan community have been not a little surprised to find themselves the cause of the commotion. Some of their leading men have been voted disloyal – men who have settled here for years, have large property and considerable business on the Hills, to whom any such disturbance would prove ruinous, and a severance of the most intimate social ties – these men have been suspected of hostile intentions against their best constituents and chief supporters. They naturally feel aggrieved that their loyalty should have been suspected on what so far appears slender grounds. They seek an explanation of the attempt to malign them, and we think that they are certainly entitled to some reparation...¹

The reference to 'the most intimate social ties' is interesting, as is the strong awareness of common interests with Indians that this passage reveals.

Attitudes towards the new educated Indian Middle Class, as expressed in the newspaper, were also far from consistent, and for every article approving of the presence of Indians of 'the better classes' on the Hills, there was another attacking the 'Anglicised Hindu' in virulent terms, and expressing the greatest hostility to the appointment of Indians drawn from this group to civil service posts in the Nilgiris. In January 1877 an editorial decried the appointments of Mr. Pulicat Ratnavelu Chetti and Mr. Parupalli Pundarikashudu Gar to the Madras Civil Service². Articles such as this appeared with frequency in the *S.I.O.*

The educated Hindu is an anomaly. He is respected in his dhoti and his chudder, but despised in patent leather boots, knickerbocker stockings and linen cuffs and collars. He can be listened to, when expressing himself in his vernacular, with appreciation and attention, but is repulsive when speaking in English with a vile accent, interlarded with d – 's and vulgar oaths, which he has picked up from association with low and drunken foreigners, whom he strives his best to imitate.³

Even here, a class, and above all a cultural critique is inextricably entwined with that of race, and is arguably rather more important: one might perhaps infer that Indians who acquired their mannerisms from civilised rather than 'low and drunken' foreigners would receive more generous treatment. The approval extended to Maharajahs could also be extended to some Indian members of the ICS, vide 'We hear that Mr. Ramiengar, the Inspector General of Registration, contemplates visiting these Hills during next season...Mr. Ramiengar has, in this matter, set an example which other native gentlemen would do well to imitate.'⁴

¹ *S.I.O.* Saturday 11th September 1880

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 6th January 1877

³ *S.I.O.* Tuesday 13th November 1900

⁴ *S.I.O.* Wednesday 16th January 1878

Nowhere is this ambiguity in White Toda attitudes towards Indians more evident than in the series of articles that appeared on the controversial Ilbert Bill in 1883. In Ootacamund, as elsewhere, the progress of the Bill, which would have given Indian magistrates jurisdiction over Europeans, (although it should be noted that this was the fifth attempt by the Government of India to introduce such legislation)¹ caused ripples in the press that lasted for most of the year. The *South of India Observer's* line was, however, far from consistent, and wavered between the liberal and the reactionary during the months from March 1883 onwards as the crisis unfolded. Its initial stand was broadly favourable to Ilbert and Lord Ripon's intentions, though not to the manner in which they had been framed, and in fact carried the argument further in calling for representative institutions for all classes of Britons and Indians

There surely can be....no real truth in the idea, or sentiment....that Englishmen in the *mofussil*, or anywhere, at least in Southern India, our oldest possessions, are afraid that Native Covenanted civilians entrusted with the powers contemplated to be given to them by this bill, would make use of that power simply for the purpose of abusing it. On the contrary, it may be accepted as much more likely that magistrates selected from this class and given increased responsibilities would act with great caution, nay even with undue leniency towards Englishmen brought before them under criminal charges..... it is still much to be deplored that this unhappy bill has been introduced without more consideration, and careful attention to elicit, in the first instance, the views of the trading and other non-official classes of British-born subjects in India(reductions in the cost of the Civil and Military Establishment) can only be furthered by the gradual introduction of a complete and perfect representative system in India, whereby all classes, British-born and Native, may have fair play and no favour. Such a system will do more than anything else to bury out of sight that ugly *tomahawk* race and class prejudice, and eventually obliterate the present prevalent feeling of antipathy among British-born subjects to Native magistrates being entrusted with enhanced powers in criminal cases, and pave the way for even more advanced reforms, and so bring the expenditure within calculable estimates of possible revenue.....(these are the) true interests which educated and thoughtful Englishmen of every class and creed have so much at heart, and the advancement of which alone logically admits of our remaining any longer in India.²

The Nilgiri Planters' Association, however, had no qualms about brandishing the 'ugly *tomahawk*', despite counting six Indians amongst its members, and stated that the Bill would be 'especially disastrous and prejudicial to the Planting and Mining interests and communities, and that European British subjects *claim* the right of trial by their Peers'³. Over succeeding weeks the *S.I.O.*'s editorials became steadily more hard line, and swung to a greater extent behind the Calcutta Press. Nevertheless, coverage was never entirely one-sided. In March a letter from Mr. S. Sattianadhan was printed denouncing a speech made by Mr.R. Branson in Calcutta:

¹ Renford *Non-Official British* pp18 - 34

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 10th March 1883 *THE BRITISH LION*

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 17th March 1883

Sir, – to a majority of Natives, it is a matter of utter indifference whether they are given legal jurisdiction over Europeans or not, and it is a great pity that the opposers of Mr. Ilbert’s Bill should take for granted that natives wish for power over their British fellow-subjects, and on that assumption, unjustly attack the natives and pass the most uncharitable remarks on their character. The natives of India are deeply conscious of the moral gulf that separates the ‘conquerors and the conquered’, and are indeed grateful if any Englishman takes a sympathetic interest in them and points out their national defects, but they certainly object to the way in which Mr. Branson tries to picture the native characters, in colours false and exaggerated, to make it only a subject of ridicule. Bitter race antagonism has been the result of the speech of Mr. Branson and others of the same stamp, a thing which is much deplored both by natives as well as Europeans. *Madras and Bombay, however, are spared the pleasure of listening to such orations. The question is being considered in a fair and dignified spirit in our Presidency.* (my italics)¹

Its tone is somewhat sarcastic, but this letter makes an important point, one which is too often missed when studying the heart of the Ilbert controversy in Calcutta, which, precisely because of the large number of Europeans there, cannot be taken as representative of attitudes in the other Presidencies. Only one protest meeting was held in Madras, which quickly lapsed into apathy again. The Anglo-Indian Defence Association founded in the wake of the crisis, and generally seen as the repository of all that was reactionary and racist in the European Community, had only one member in the whole of the Madras Presidency – the odious Calcutta lawyer Mr Branson, who had moved to Madras City²: Ooty was entirely unrepresented.

VI

The picture which emerges from the sources is altogether more complex than the paradigm sketched out in the introduction above, suggesting that any assessment of relations between the Unofficial British, Indian businessmen, Eurasians and the Indian government needs to be differentiated in space as well as time. The overriding impulse detectable amongst European settlers on the Hills is hostility to the Imperial government and resentment at the lack of representation allowed to them under its ‘bureaucratic’ regime. Accusations of rootlessness and ignorance were also a common critique of officials: ‘He has lived a dozen years or so cheek by jowl with one of the oldest civilisations and one of the most interesting religions of the world, and knows as much about them as of the categories of Aristotle’³, as one letter put it. There are in fact few recorded examples of ‘White Todas’ having any great knowledge of local languages (though Tonga Browne could apparently swear equally fluently in Tamil and Canarese) and most of the works which appeared on

¹ *S.I.O.* Saturday 17th March 1883

² Renford *Non-Official British* pp222, 281. Most of the latter part of this work concentrates on the activities of the Anglo-Indian Defence Association

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday September 20th 1890

the hill tribes and local history and topography were in fact written by officials¹, but nonetheless this idea that residents ‘belonged’ to the Nilgiris was important. Whilst bristling at any suggestion that they were provincial or more ‘asiatic’ than their metropolitan cousins, the Nilgiri settlers also laid claim to a rootedness and a greater knowledge of and integration into the country than their official counterparts. Such contradictions will be familiar to those who have studied other settler societies: this could be seen as the expression of a robust ‘White Toda’ settler identity, but it was largely an attempt to offset an evident feeling of inferiority and lack of sophistication when confronted by officials and visitors fresh out from ‘Home’;(settlers’ children would also suffer the stigma of being ‘country-born’), and the ‘Todas’ themselves showed a sometimes pathetic eagerness to ape metropolitan fashions. In 1880 the Editorial of the *S.I.O.* was loud in its praise of a production of *H.M.S. Pinafore* at the Assembly Rooms, as it meant

That we poor exiles may know somewhat of which is going on in the Fatherland, and not feel ourselves so very much the country-cousin type in being half a century behind the London world and its sayings and doings. For a Londoner not to have seen *H.M.S. Pinafore*, would be tantamount to a Madrassite never having seen the surf...²

There is an element of self-mockery here, but all the same it shows just how far the Nilgiri Settlers had to go before they could create a satisfying local substitute for imported metropolitan culture.

Racial hostility towards Indians and Eurasians was normally present in some form, particularly opposition to the employment of Indians in the covenanted civil service, but it was not consistent and much of it seems to have been rhetorical. Attitudes to the Indian business community who shared most of the disabilities and concerns of European businessmen and planters and were potential allies against the Government were rather more ambiguous than some quotations might suggest. Kanwar notes that in Simla in 1861 the Deputy Commissioner put forward a proposal that all Indian traders who owned shops on the Mall should be forced out of occupation and the main bazaar on the Ridge demolished. A cholera epidemic and a fire in 1879 were the occasion for this to be carried out, turning the Mall into a purely British street. In the later nineteenth and early twentieth centuries the government attempted to enforce measures that would prevent Indian princes and wealthy businessmen from visiting Simla and buying land³. Although it

¹ See Price *Ootacamund*, James Brecks (First Commissioner of the Nilgiris) *An Account of the Primitive Tribes and Monuments of the Nilagiris* (London) 1871, Col. J.Ouchterlony *A Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Neilghery Mountains*. (Madras) 1847

² *S.I.O.* Saturday 29th May 1880

³ Kanwar *Imperial Simla* pp58, 141-2

seems to have been discussed (in Government, not unofficial circles) nothing like this ever did happen in Ooty, where Commercial Road, the equivalent of the Mall, was largely lined with Indian shops throughout the nineteenth century, most of the house property was in Indian hands, and the Maharajahs of Mysore and Vizianagram and the Gaekwar of Baroda were welcomed for their lavish spending.

That tensions existed between Indians and Europeans over land and as business competitors is undeniable: wealthy Indians had their own clubs and reading room, and, with the exception of the visiting Maharajahs, were never admitted to the Ooty Club. On the other hand, most European residents were equally ineligible for membership of this most exclusive institution, which was largely patronised by visitors. ‘Tonga’ Browne, whose dropping of ‘aitches’ was mercilessly mocked in the pages of the *S.I.O.*, was certainly never admitted within its the hallowed portals. Interracial marriage between Europeans and Indians in late 19th century Ooty, according to the register of St. Stephen’s Church, was unknown, as one might expect. However, ‘Tonga’ Browne’s daughter Florence married George Misquith, a Eurasian and grandson of one of the town’s oldest residents, the proprietor of the Music Rooms, who had come up to Ooty in the 1820s. Some commercial enterprises were managed by Europeans and Indians working together. In 1880 The Directors of the Neilgherry Press Company (which published the *S.I.O.* until 1902) were Mr. E. Hamlin, Mr. J.W.Minchin, Mr. Fazil Mahomed Sait, Mr. H.G. Sinclair & Mr. Pestonjee Nesserwanjee¹. When, in 1878, a group of local businessmen decided to set up a Carrying Company that would challenge ‘Tonga’ Browne’s monopoly, they included Cursetjee Pestonjee as Manager, Col. S.P. Scott as Chairman, and Edward Arathoon Esq., Fazil Mahomed Sait and Gool Mahomed Sait as Directors².

The European settler community was simply too small to hold aloof altogether from Indians and Eurasians, with whom its interests often coincided. In certain well-defined commercial and political spheres collaboration seems to have been considered acceptable. As early as 1877 six of the seventy-three members of the Nilgiri Planters’ Association were Indians, amongst them Pestonjee Nesserwanjee³, suggesting that when it came to putting pressure on the government to recognise Planters’ rights Europeans were prepared to ally with wealthy Indians with a stake in the industry. On the land question, despite the competition with Hill tribes and Indian Planters for this valuable

¹ *S.I.O.* Saturday 2nd January 1880

² *S.I.O.* Wednesday 19th June 1878

³ *S.I.O.* Saturday 3rd November 1877

resource, it is clear that most Europeans saw the Government as the real enemy, and the waste-land rules as the most pressing grievance. As one Correspondent wrote in 1877:

It is indifferent to the planter whether he be cut out by a native or a European, when the effect is the same, and it prejudices a native planter to be outbid by a native as much as to be outbid by a European; it is equally unfair to both....I would deprecate any classification of bidders into Europeans and Natives. It is quite unnecessary to use an argument which might seem to the prejudiced mind to be tinged by class interests or jealousies. I think the rules are equally unfair to both classes.....Unfortunately this question has hitherto been treated too much as a battle between the European Planters and the speculative native. But I decline to look upon it as a class question in any sense.¹

After 1866 when Ootacamund became a Municipality, Indians and Europeans alike were dissatisfied with the extremely limited representation this allowed, and its domination by Government officials and appointees. When, in 1878, there was a protest against increases in Municipal taxation

Misquith's Rooms were crowded by a large and influential body of rate-payers, European and Native. Amongst those present were General Morgan, General Russell, Major West, Capt. Rae, and Messrs. Minchin, Arathoon, Allon, Cowdell, Herford, Davis, Sidden, Browning, Pestonjee, Cursetjee, Bill, Newman, Misquith, Williams and others too numerous to name....the incidence of the taxation is unfair, inasmuch as five-sixths of the revenue is collected from the small resident population, while as the seat of Government and the Sanatorium of the Madras Presidency, the visitors are as largely interested in its upkeep²

The dominance of Europeans in such gatherings is undeniable, but so is the presence of Indians, Arathoon (an Armenian) and Misquith who was Eurasian. The strain which the presence of so many visitors placed on a Municipality to whose taxes they did not contribute was one of many grievances that cut across racial boundaries. The issues which exercised the minds of the Nilgiri settler community sometimes echoed their grander Calcutta counterparts, but more often their attitudes towards both Government and Indians were very specific to the Hills.

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¹ *S.I.O. Correspondence* Wednesday 18th July 1877

² *S.I.O* Saturday 13th April 1878

Appendix

Collated Statistics for Planting & Estate Ownership on the Nilgiri Plateau (Excluding the South-East Wynaad) for 1877, 1896 & 1924

1877¹

<u>Ownership</u>	Number	Percentage	Acreage	Percentage	Cultivated Acreage	Percentage
European	134	81.2%	24150	85.9 %	12284	84.7%
Native	21	12.7%	2416	8.6%	1270	8.8%
Government	9	5.5%	1358	4.8%	917	6.3%
Joint	1	0.6%	200	0.7%	25	0.2%
Total	165	100 %	28124	100 %	14496	100 %

<u>Management</u>	Number	Percentage	Acreage	Percentage	Cultivated Acreage	Percentage
European	141	85.5%	24747	88%	12772	88.1%
Native	21	12.7%	2866	10.2%	1654	11.4%
Official	3	1.8%	511	1.8%	70	0.5%
Total	165	100 %	28124	100 %	14496	100 %

<u>Crop</u>	Tea	Coffee	Cinchona	Mixed & Other	Totals
Number	30	91	7	37	165
Percentage	18.2%	55.2%	4.2%	22.4%	100%
Acreage	3721	18021	1677	4705	28124
Percentage	13.2%	64.1%	6%	16.7%	100%
Cultivated Acreage	2113	8672	972	2739	14496
Percentage	14.6%	59.8%	6.7%	18.9%	100%

Collated Statistics for Estate Ownership on the Nilgiri Plateau in 1896²

<u>Ownership</u>	Number	Percentage	Acreage	Percentage
European	110	83%	30469.25	86%
Native	18	14%	3961.5	11%
Government	3	3%	974	3%
Total	131	100%	35404.75	100%

Collated Statistics for Estate Ownership on the Nilgiri Plateau in 1924³

<u>Ownership</u>	Number	Percentage	Acreage	Percentage
European	86	61.9%	25145	75.2%
Native	51	36.7%	6742	20.2%
Government	2	1.4%	1566	4.7%
Total	139	100%	37374	100%

¹ *Illustrated Guide to the Nilgiris, with descriptions of Ootacamund, Coonoor etc.* (Madras) 1877 pp47 – 60d

² *The Planting Directory of South India* (Coonoor) 1896 pp23 - 9

³ H. Waddington *The Planting Directory of Southern India* (Madras) 1924 pp54 – 69