

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Kodaikanal: The past retreat. Today's resort. The future - reserve?

Kodaikanal, Tamil Nadu, India
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Dear Peter,

The inter-city bus slowly grinds its way up narrow, hairpin turns. The breeze blowing through the window is moist and cold. I pull up my embroidered wool shawl, wrapping it tightly around my shoulders up to my neck. A thick fog looms overhead. Buses and lorries sound their horns to announce their approach around the upcoming bends. Uphill traffic gets the right-of-way on these mountainous roads leading from Madurai's arid plains up to Kodaikanal, a hill station in the Palni Hills. Rain begins to fall. All of my luggage is tied, unprotected, on top of the bus.

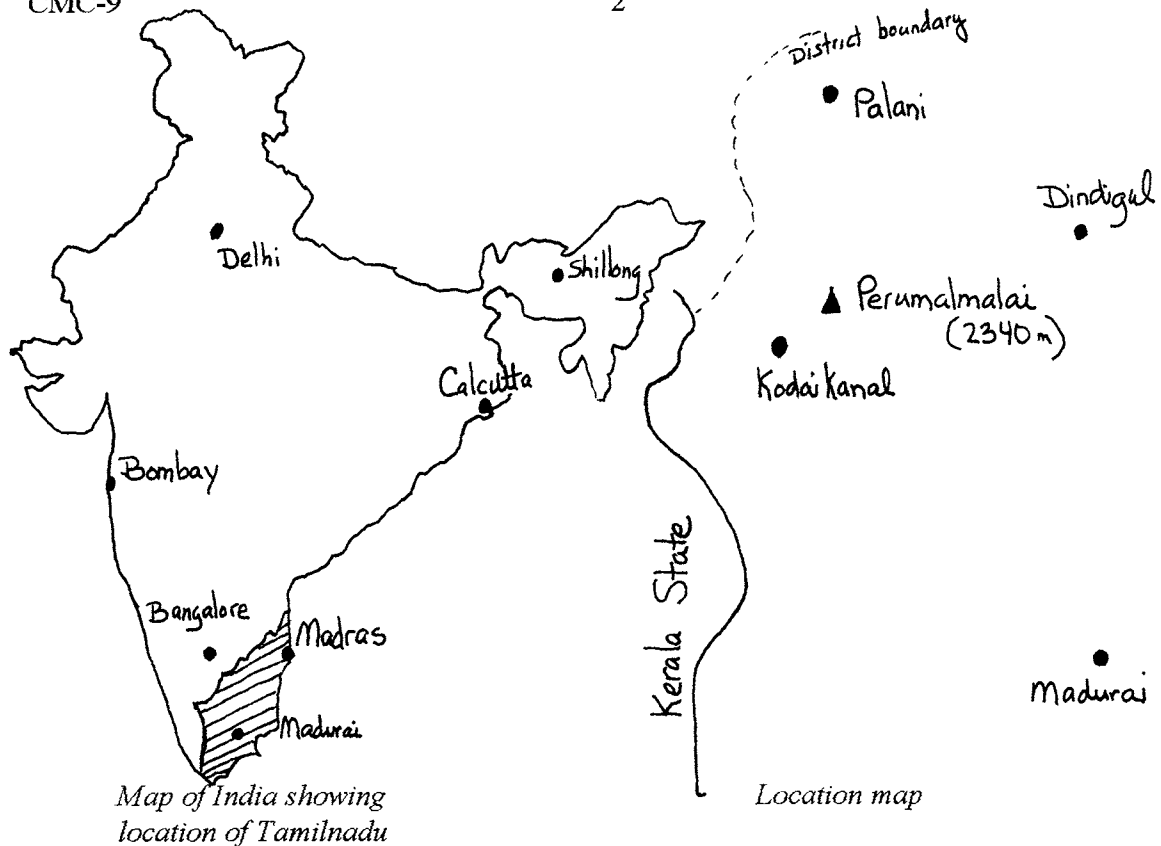
In 1988-1989, I spent nine months on a study-abroad program in Madurai. Madurai, a South Indian city, with a population of over one million is, more precisely, an aggregation of villages. Upon leaving the town proper, a rat's maze of roads and alleys, all routes lead to agriculture: paddy fields, sugarcane plantations, and multistory tree gardens. Madurai, hot, dry, and dusty, boasts temples, turmeric-covered faces, and thalis (known as "meals", these lunch-time feasts, served on a banana leaf, are a South Indian tradition). Kodaikanal boasts the delights of a different historical and cultural tradition - an identity that appeals to the occasionally homesick twenty-year-old. I have a soft spot in my heart for Kodaikanal.

During my days as a student in Madurai, Kodaikanal, or Kodai, was a popular retreat for my fellow students and me during school holidays. A four-hour bus ride from Madurai, the former British hill station, was a place where we would go when we could not stomach eating any more rice, were frustrated with tying our saris, and could no longer endure the wide-eyed stares of Tamilian men. With the ascent from the plains, it was, and still is, as though one ascends into another world. Peanut butter, cheese, apple pie, socks, flannel shirts, and steaming-hot buckets of bath water are a few of my favorite memories of Kodai weekends.

During foreign rule in India, Kodaikanal was a retreat for administrative and military officers and their families, during the summer months when the heat becomes so oppressive that breathing is exhaustive. One of India's many hill stations, Kodaikanal never attained the popularity of geographically-similar locations like Simla, Mussoorie, or Darjeeling in North India, or Ooty, also located in Tamil Nadu, but holds similar charm: waterfalls, rolling hills, and thick woods.

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Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young adults to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. Endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.



Often referred to as the "princess of hill stations", Kodai is never too hot or never too cold. During this time of the year, the temperature ranges between 10 and 17 degrees Celsius. Frost is common during January and February. In the summer months, the mercury rarely tops 20 degrees Celsius. At an elevation of approximately 2100 meters, the European-like climate provides the perfect medium for recreating manicured gardens overflowing with familiarity; roses, azaleas, and rhododendrons. Summer evenings have a chili in the air. All bungalows are equipped with stone fireplaces. Trails, used by permanent residents to collect firewood and honey, double as equestrian ways.

Lieutenant Ward, a Briton surveying the Palni Hills, traveled through Kodaikanal in the early 1800's. He settled himself in the foothills south of the Kodai plateau. His acquaintances looking for, "salubrious air devoid of malarial vapors, lofty enough to escape the scourge of typhus and other parasites", as well as a hospitable playground for their children irritable in the scathing heat, slowly moved to and settled in the Kodaikanal area [1]. American missionaries in Madurai began to seek solace in Kodai beginning in 1845. The bungalows erected by their faithful, Sunnyside and Shelton, still stand.

A hill station is remote. The air and water are clean. The presence of large tracts of forest, seclude bungalows from one another, providing a peace and quiet demanded and expected by the privileged who visit such places. There is still a hint of truth in each of these statements. Kodai remains a hill station, although it is no longer remote. The air and water are relatively clean. Diesel fumes are a particular problem during "the season": April through June. Noise pollution, arriving in Kodai with the arrival of the automobile in India, gets worse every year threatening the peace

and quiet. Bungalows, with names heralding a lost era, such as Woodside, Rosebank, Ardendale North, Plymouth, Winsford, and Wedgewood, have sculptured hedges, rose and wildflower gardens, and occasionally, water fountains or white ceramic statues. Ex-patriot workers, wealthy Indians and retirees, and Indian corporations own these private compounds. They are the privileged. But many others, foreigners and nationals alike, want a weekend in this once hill-station retreat that is now a time-sharing resort. Kodaikanal is not as remote as it used to be.

In Kodai's earlier days, the exodus from the plains began in March when temperatures quickly begin to approach and surpass 35 degrees Celsius. Retreaters arrived by walking (There are 21 historically-used paths from the plains to Kodaikanal), by hiring coolies to carry a "chair", a canvas hammock suspended between two wooden poles and supported by four men, or by way of a "transit", a straw-padded, covered, bullock-drawn cart. Two weeks was considered the minimum amount of time necessary to successfully complete the move to Kodai as, "heavy baggage should always be sent ahead...and quite ten days should be allowed during the busy season as the Tamil, both of the educated and labouring class, is a slow-moving creature" [1]. Porters and coolies, with heavy head-loads, chanted to ward off elephants and bison, and if you can believe it, tigers and panther as well.



Transported to Kodai by coolies in the 1800's [1]

In 1875, the British began building a road through the hills. While the date of completion is unknown, the road was opened to public traffic in 1916. Easier public access threatened the community's tranquility. The Kodai Municipality forbid the use of cars within the settlement. Today, a retreat to Kodai may last only a day, as travel agents in Madurai, Palani, and Coimbatore, offer day-long, sight-seeing packages. Drive up to Kodai, drive around the lake, drive to any one of a number of cascades for a souvenir snapshot, drive to one of the magnificent rock formations, drive back to your hotel. If only the same zoning existed today, to tone down the effects of combustion and congestion.

Like a visit to any popular vacation spot, there are certain things that "one is supposed to do" on a Kodai holiday: take a boat ride on the lake, and have his or her picture taken upon one of the many horses available for trots around the lake. The lake, near the center of town, was created out of a swamp by Sir Vere Levinge, the retired tax collector from Madurai. Levinge, with his own funds, had the swamp, "where boys shot snipe, shepherds watched their flocks, and sambar and even tiger came down for a drink in its streams", bunded and flooded [1]. This 25 hectare ecological alteration (or catastrophe) took place in 1863. Sharp entrepreneurs were ready. The Kodaikanal Boat Club, which still rents boats today, was born. One Mr. Tapp, opened a cafe called the Tea House, from where a bowl of strawberries and cream or a plate of hot scones could be ordered and delivered to your boat. Today, the lake serves as a permanent water source for the town of Palani, 65 kms away, and as an emergency water reserve for Kodaikanal and downstream villages. It also serves as a midnight drive-in bath for lorries transporting goods up from the plains. A greasy, oily residue is evident the following morning.

If one happens to pick up any historical fiction about the British Raj era, undoubtedly, there will be mention of hill-station teas, horse races, bridge clubs, and picnic outings. Kodaikanal is like any one of these places. The splendor of the "good ole days" continues in the architecture, the churches, the street names, and the legacy of pastry and baked goods. But, a great deal of change is taking place. Development is occurring quickly. Some residents say too quickly and without foresight. Real estate prices are escalating. City planning and government services are not keeping pace.

There is the problem of over-development, which has destroyed Kodai's sister-city Ooty, another Tamil Nadu hill station located to its north. Not only real estate mongers are at fault. While Delhi funds restoration projects around Kodai through the National Wastelands Development Project; Madras is attempting to destroy forests around the township. A recent state-proposal to build a housing colony for 131 landless people in a five acre plot of government-owned Reserve Forest was rejected after objections by the Hill Area Conservation Authority (HACA) and the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PHCC). The State Revenue Department which was to implement the project plans to find a new site. The five acre site will be used for planting, propagating, and conserving native medicinal plants under a project, that again, is sponsored by the State - in this particular case, the Environment Ministry [2].

Another state-sponsored building proposal is also being opposed by Kodai environmentalists and many of the town's approximately 28,000 citizens. The Tamil Nadu government has acquired 300 acres of land in Mannavanur, 35 kilometers away from Kodai, for the building of a satellite township. The proposal, as the one mentioned above, is well-intentioned. The collector of Dindigul-Anna district, Ramesram Mishra, who is responsible for some administrative activities in Kodaikanal said, "We strongly feel that the Kodai township has reached a saturation point and the available infrastructure like water supply, sewerage disposal etc., have been stretched to a maximum...It is high time we prescribed a limit to all development within Kodai town. All of us know what has happened to Ooty." The irony in this decision is that Ms. J. Jayalalitha, the Chief Minister herself, (equivalent to our state governor), announced in May 1993 that a wildlife sanctuary will be developed at Mannavanur. Extensive forest cover will be destroyed with the building of the colony and a 35 km stretch of road leading to it. The Aesthetics and Architectural Advisory Committee (AAA) has been shown the site to determine what types of structures should

be constructed. If the proposal is approved, the design and planning of the colony will rest with AAA. The decision is still somewhere in limbo [3].

Tourism thrives in Kodai. A recent article claims that Kodai is the most popular and the most expensive summer resort in India. Visitors complain that the parking fees near the Silver Cascades, a waterfall on the road leading to Kodai, is too expensive. Depending on the time of the year, parking fees range between Rs. 25 and Rs. 50 (\$0.65 and \$1.65). Hotel prices are comparable to, or exceed those, in Delhi. A Kodai weekend is becoming out of reach for the middle class Indian family. An official from the Chamber of Commerce and Industries has urged the government to sanction the building of additional hotels in Kodai that are more affordable [4]. Developers need no urging to build hotels. Building "affordable" hotels is an entirely different matter. The services hotels provide are based on ex-patriot workers, foreign tourists, and the business elite from Madras, Bangalore, and Bombay. These consumers set the prices and the standards.

The Master Plan for Kodaikanal states that no new building shall be more than two stories or 10 meters high, and that this "height shall be reckoned from the natural ground level of the sight." [5, 6]. Developers must receive permission from the Municipality to construct floors above this limit. The limit stands for a few reasons: the fragility of the hillsides, the integrity of the scenic mountain views, continuity with the landscape, and integrity of space - people are hemmed-in by towering concrete structures in most Indian cities. Kodai should be different. Hotel directors are a shrewd bunch. During the past year, several developers have found themselves building defenses in Madras High Court, not building cottages in Kodaikanal. One case, in particular, demonstrates the challenges that environmentalists are facing.

In March, a hotel and its director were each fined Rs. 1000 (\$32.00) for the construction of additional floors in a new hotel, in direct violation of the municipality's master plan. The director also received 30 days of simple imprisonment. The hotel's contractor had not received an exemption from the present building codes to exceed beyond the first floor limit. Permission was granted for the construction of two ground floors in the basement and one first floor. The architectural plans for the Pleasant Stay Hotel create a seven-story structure. The contractor was following the plans. Local citizens became aware of this after the skeletal structure for the first five floors was complete. The director contested that the hotel construction is not in violation of the codes because the first five floors are in the basement ("underground"), the sixth floor is actually the ground floor, and the seventh floor is actually the first floor. The judge in the case, Justice Mr. J. Kanakarji, did not quite interpret things this way, and ordered a halt to Pleasant Stay's construction [7]. The Madras High Court decision stated that, "...the construction of five basement floors are nothing short of cock and bull story, if I can use the expression to convey the correct meaning" [8].

To appeal the decision, the hotel director approached the AAA to prove that his new hotel would not damage the integrity of Kodai's landscape. This expert committee on harmony and balance had a different interpretation of the director's landscape aesthetic. The injunction stayed.

The case took an unexpected twist, when this past December, the Tamil Nadu government, through a recent amendment to one of the 1920's acts of the Tamil Nadu District Municipalities,

ordered an exemption to Pleasant Stay from the March injunction [9]. Aside from undermining the authority of the Madras High Court, the government order overruled the decision of AAA [10]. This judgment is a blow to all Indians interested in preserving the cultural heritage of their neighborhoods or places of worship. AAA rulings keep quaint areas quaint, and scenic vistas scenic. As one Kodai resident lamented, "These hoteliers have all the right connections in Madras" [5].

In 1994, another hotel developer was charged with violating an interim injunction. The maximum fine of Rs 2000 (\$65.00) was ordered with an additional 15 days of simple imprisonment. In both of these cases, executive committee members from PHCC filed the writs.

One need not question the motives of hoteliers - the demand exists. But, one might want to question the holidayer who is willing to spend more than Rs. 700.00 (\$23.00) a night for a room in a hotel with five floors in the ground. Is a Kodai weekend worth it?

The Palni Hills Conservation Council is not the only citizens' action group resisting unwanted change, and hoping to make everyone's residency, no matter how long here, a pleasant stay. The Consumer Protection Council (CPC) fights for civic rights of both the visitor and the town's residents. The main task facing the council is the formation of a VIP committee: During the season, a substantial number of VIPs from the plains, and the neighboring states of Karnataka and Andhra Pradesh, come to Kodai to beat the summer heat. Local police and civic authorities buckle under their influence and cater specifically to the needs of these few individuals. This special attention opens up a vacuum in law enforcement and administration, especially in the lake and bazaar area. Laws against littering and 'no honking' which are at best, sporadically enforced, are not enforced at all [5].

The police are not following their assignments. While residents complain about this, they do not necessarily see the police force at fault. Improving the conditions of the summer police force is also on CPC's agenda. Showing more concern for these temporary residents would benefit not only the police squad, but also the tourists and permanent residents. The extra police stationed in Kodai for durations of one month during the summer, come from the plains. These men are transferred away from their families and are not given proper accommodations. In a true sense, these outsiders, who come to provide their services to the community, are not shown adequate respect by the community. Being from outside, the police have no "stake" in the area. The Consumer Protection Council wants to find a way to make the members of the seasonal police force feel part of the community to combat the apathy in law enforcement.

A slogan on a restaurant reads, "Keep Kodaikanal beautiful, stay away from it." Approximately, 25,000 people visit Kodaikanal on a weekend-day "in season". One resident mentioned to me that there is a carrying capacity to the local environment here. It was an argument similar to that of the Law of Diminishing Returns - with every additional tourist taxi, condominium complex, and hotel; Kodaikanal and the surrounding hills lose a little of their charm and the character that makes this a special place to visit, and an enchanting place to live.

If Kodaikanal is a national and historical treasure, should its wonders not be available to all? Or is Kodaikanal only a treasure for the privileged, in which case, should they not have to pay or be

slightly inconvenienced by regulations to experience its wonders? This is the universal problem of allocating access to limited resources.

In the fall of 1994, the Palni Hills Conservation Council (PHCC), a non-governmental organization founded by a group Kodai residents concerned about increasing environmental degradation in the area, submitted a proposal to the Tamil Nadu State government suggesting that Kodaikanal and the surrounding Palni Hills be declared a wildlife sanctuary. The flora and fauna of Kodai and the surrounding hills have intrigued both amateur and professional naturalists alike for over one hundred years. Sufficient botanical, wildlife, and avifauna data exist for a persuasive and cogent argument justifying the region as a protected area, be it a national park, wildlife sanctuary, or biosphere reserve.

As I will discuss in my next newsletter, the work of PHCC extends beyond pollution control in Kodai lake and zoning in the town, but into the rural village through community forestry and nursery projects. The organization coordinates research on native flora, elephant corridors, and the habitat and behavior of the Palni's endangered grizzled giant squirrel (*Ratufa macroura*). As part of the protected area proposal, the PHCC executive committee wants to look deep into the interior of the Palni Hills, into the villages where three different tribal groups live, to ascertain and to describe: their dependency on natural resources, their lifestyles, how the proposed sanctuary might effect their livelihoods, and finally, how a sanctuary might improve their social and economic conditions.

For the next four months, I will base myself in Kodaikanal and work with PHCC to collect some of the missing information.

Best regards,



Cynthia

Sources

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