

## **Kodaikanal: The Origin and Development of a British Hill Station in India – A Historical Study**

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Kodaikanal, also known as Kodai, is a beautiful hill station at an altitude of about 2,133 m high on the southern ridge of Palani hills-in Western Ghats. Wooded hills, pleasant walks, picturesque waterfalls and magnificent lake make Kodaikanal one of the most beautiful hill stations in India.<sup>1</sup> The area of Kodaikanal is 21.45 sq. km. and its population size is 27,461, while Kodaikanal receives annual average rainfall of 165 cm. But it can be visited throughout the year. Heavy rainfall occurs during October to December.<sup>2</sup> One of the world's oldest solar observatories is situated in Kodaikanal, built in 1899.<sup>3</sup> The pride of Kodaikanal is the Kurinji Flower, which blossoms once in 12 years. The hill-plantain fruits and plums are known for their freshness and taste.<sup>4</sup>

Kodaikanal is known for its rich flora. Of the big trees, cypress, eucalyptus and acacia are the dominant varieties. Pear trees are numerous and the fruits are of high quality. Competing with the fruit trees are the flowering ones - mainly rhododendron and magnolia. Large dahlias of different hues are the main attraction of Bryant Park, situated close to the Kodai Lake. Water lilies in the park's pond are another pleasing sight. The town abounds in a kind of beautiful yellow wild flowers. Meadows and grasslands cover the hillsides. Gigantic Eucalyptus trees and shola forests flourish in the valleys. Mighty rocks and cascading streams rise up from the valleys. There are many high waterfalls and ubiquitous gardens and flower beds in bloom.

The Tamil language word 'Kodaikanal', refers to "a sanatorium at the top of Kodaikanal, the southern ridge of the Palani hills more than 7,000 ft. high".<sup>5</sup> It is not known who first used this name or what they intended it to mean; however, in the Tamil language there are at least five meanings. The word is formed from the two separate Tamil words Kodai and kanal. kanal means a wood on a hill-slope, a dense forest or a closed forest.<sup>6</sup> Another Tamil meaning for Kodi is Valli, the honey collecting daughter of the chief of the Veddars mountain tribe. In ancient times the chief and his wife prayed to the Mountain God for a girl-child. Their prayers were answered when the chief found a new-born girl child during a hunting expedition. As she was found among creeper plants, they named the child Valli and she grew up as princess of the tribe Kurinji and became the consort of lord Murugan. The romantic

traditions of Murugan in Sangam literature are thus claimed to be associated with the name Kodaikanal. By integrating these meanings, Kodaikanal is that place at the end of Valli's forest which is a gift in the summer.<sup>7</sup>

There is archaeological evidence of human habitation in this area before the current era (BCE) and earthen pots and other artifacts which have been found here prove that the earliest residents of Kodaikanal were the Palaiyar (Pazhaiyar, "old ones") tribal people.<sup>8</sup> Some local relics and artifacts of the Palaiyar can be seen in the Shenbaganur Museum.<sup>9</sup> The earliest written references to Kodaikanal and the Palani Hills are found in Tamil Sangam literature of the early Christian era.<sup>10</sup> The classical Tamil poetic work *Kuruntokai*, the second book of the anthology *Ettuthokai*, contains poems dealing with matters of love and separation.<sup>11</sup> It evokes the geographic *thinai* of the mountainous region of Kurinji. It is the scene of lovers' union at midnight, a forest rich with lakes, waterfalls, teak, bamboo and sandalwood. In this region millet grows and wild bees are a source of honey.<sup>12</sup>

The name of the region, Kurinji, derives from the name of the famous flower Kurinji found only in the lofty hills of Tamil country.<sup>13</sup> The once in ten or twelve years blossom of the Kurinji is an event of jubilation and purity symbolizing the frenzy of a sudden love shared, in concert with the unleashed forces of nature: the amorous dance of peacocks, their echoing cries, the splash of waterfalls, the roar of savage beasts. The lovers hold each other tighter still and forget the dangers of the mountain path.<sup>14</sup>

Agricultural settlers of the Palani Hills, mainly Mannadiyar ("king's servants") caste, were allotted these hill lands about the 14<sup>th</sup> century by the Madurai Nayak Dynasty, according to some local people, though others claim that their ancestors came later as refugees from the Palani foothills who escaped from the invasions of Tipu Sultan.<sup>15</sup>

In 1821, the first westerner to visit Kodaikanal, a British Lieutenant, B. S. Ward, climbed up from his headquarters in the Kunnayan village of Vellagavi to Kodaikanal to survey the area on the hilly ranges of Palani. His report of a healthy climate in beautiful hills with accessibility from Periyakulam encouraged the early settlers. B. S. Ward surveyed it in 1821, it was only in 1845 that its suitability for a sanatorium was recognized and houses began to be built.<sup>16</sup>

In 1834, Mr. J.C. Wroughten, then Sub-Collector of Madura<sup>17</sup> and Mr. C. R. Cotton, a member of the Madras Presidency – Board of Revenue, climbed up the hills from Devadanapatti and built a small bungalow at the head of Adukkam pass near Shenbaganur.<sup>18</sup>

In 1836, the noted botanist Dr. Robert Wight, a Fellow of the Linnean Society of London, visited Kodaikanal and recorded his observations in the 1937 Madras Journal of Literature and Science. He collected over 100 plant specimens in 15 days, which were useful to later botanists.<sup>19</sup>

The first people to build houses were the American missionaries of Madurai.<sup>20</sup> In 1838 so many of them had been compelled to take sick leave and go to Jafna, their centre at that time, that the mission actually proposed to purchase a special vessel to carry the invalids and the convalescents backwards and forwards. This idea was eventually abandoned in favour of the suggestion that a sanatorium should be

established on the Sirumalais, that range being chosen on account of its propinquity to Madurai. Two bungalows were built there, but their occupants suffered so much from fever that in 1845 the palnis were examined as an alternative sight and two bungalows begun to be constructed at Kodaikanal, it were 'Sunny Side' and 'Shelton'. In 1852, Father Louis Saint Cyr visited Kodaikanal and returned to the plains after finding only four bungalows: 'Baynes', 'Parker', 'Clark' and 'Parday'.<sup>21</sup>

In 1852, Major J. M. Partridge of the Bombay Army built himself a house in Kodai and became the first person to actually settle there. Others soon followed like Fonclair and the coffee planter, Judge Elliot. It was not until Blackburne, the Collector of Madurai, built a home there that the development of Kodai gathered pace.<sup>22</sup>

Others followed them, though slowly, and by 1853 there were seven houses. Their number rose to 10 in 1861. The chief difficulty was that of access. The only practicable route from the palnis was a steep bridle-path starting from the foot of the hills five miles away from Periyakulam and passing through the village of Champakanur. Visitors had to walk or ride up this, path and all luggage, supplies and necessaries had to be carried up the same route by bearers. Kodaikanal was chosen, not because it was the best site at the palnis, but because the new arrivals wanted to settle close to the top of the only practicable path way winch then existed.<sup>23</sup> In 1853, a group of American and British built Kodai's first church building, the Anglican Church of St. Peter.<sup>24</sup>

In 1860, The Governor of Madras Presidency, Sir Charles Trevelyan visited Kodaikanal and stayed in Roseneath Cottage, which is still occupied.<sup>25</sup> In May 1860, Father Louis Saint Cyr returned with father Rettary and several Frenchmen, Belgians and Europeans, stayed in Baynes bungalow and by September 29 had bought that place to use as a rest house for the members of Christ Church. The bungalow was renamed La-providence in honor a lady with that name who gave Rs.20,000 for reconstruction of the bungalow. La Salette Church was finished and dedicated in 1866.<sup>26</sup>

In 1861, Major Douglas Hamilton recorded 114 species of birds in Kodaikanal and discovered two new ones-the Laughing Thrush and the Kodaikanal White-bellied Shortwing.<sup>27</sup> In 1862, David Coit Scudder arrived in Kodaikanal. He was an American missionary who had been influenced in boyhood to come to India by Rev. Dr. John Scudder, Sr. and was in charge of the large and important station of Periyakulam. He had endeared himself to the Christians of the large village congregations of that station. An enthusiastic young American, upon arrival at Kodai, his emotions overcame him when, as he recalled: "I . . . seized our United States flag, shouted out 'Long may it wave !' . . . at the English collector . . . and did other uncouth things".<sup>28</sup>

On November, 19, 1862, David Scudder drowned in the Vaigai River between Andipatti and Periyakulam, 20 months after arriving in Tamil Nadu. Interment was in the old Anglican Churchyard, at Kodaikanal. The inscription on his headstone is still clearly legible. It reads: "D.C.S. Missionary of the A.B.C.F.M. in Southern India. Born in Boston, U.S.A. Oct. 27, 1835 Landed at Madras June 26, 1861 Drowned in the Vaigai River Nov. 19, 1862".<sup>29</sup>

The houses are built mostly round the sides of an irregular basin roughly a mile

and a half long and a mile wide situated on the very edge of the precipitous southern side of the Palnis. From the top of the southern rim of this, the plains are seen immediately below. Its northern side is high and steep; on the west it is bounded by a high ridge; but on the east the land falls rapidly away to the lower-Palnis and discloses fine views of that range and of the steep square-topped peak of Perumal hill rising head and shoulders above all his fellows. On the inner slope of the southern rim of the basin is a beautiful hanging wood which is called the Kodai-kanal or forest of creepers which gives its name to the place. The bottom of the basin was originally a swamp with a small stream wandering through it.<sup>30</sup>

Kodaikanal Lake is an artificial, roughly star-shaped 60 acres lake built in 1863 at the suggestion and largely at the expense of Sir Vere Levinge who was then the Collector of Madurai, this was formed into a lake by banking up the stream.<sup>31</sup> Down into this picturesque sheet of water run from the sides of the basin, several beautiful wooded spurs, on which stand some of the best houses in the place. These spurs cause the lake to assume a shape something like that of a star-fish; and thus, though nowhere much above half a mile across in a straight line, it is about three miles round measured along the level road on its margin which follows its many indentations.<sup>32</sup> Now the lake is recognized as Kodaikanal's most popular geographic landmark and tourist attraction.<sup>33</sup>

In 1867, Major J. M. Partridge of Bombay Army imported Australian Eucalyptus and Wattle trees to Kodaikanal.<sup>34</sup>

In 1871, the new Governor of Madras, Lord Napier visited. His bungalow was named Napier Villa. These early settlements and visits by important people established Kodai's legitimacy among the Western residents of Tamil Nadu as an accepted alternative to Ootacamund as a summer retreat.<sup>35</sup>

Coaker's Walk constructed by Lt. Coaker in 1872, is a one kilometre (3,300 ft) paved pedestrian path running along the edge of steep slopes on the southern side of Kodai. The walk, winding around Mount Nebo, starts in front of the Van Allen hospital, running parallel to the Van Allen Hospital Road and joins the main road beside St. Peter's Church, providing a stunning panoramic view of the plains. On a clear day one can view as far as Dolphin's Nose in the south, the valley of the Pambar River in the southeast, Periyakulam town and even the city of Madurai.<sup>36</sup>

In 1879, seventy-five Europeans came to Kodai for the season. That year Murrays Guide described Kodaikanal as a settlement "of only 10-15 small ugly houses". Later many American and British families visited and decided to remain in the temperate hill station.<sup>37</sup>

In 1883, Kodaikanal had 615 permanent residents. It also became a regular summer retreat for many American Missionaries and European diplomats who came here primarily to escape the sweltering summer of the plains. Among them, William Waterbury Scudder was a missionary who joined the Arcott Mission in 1852, retired in 1894, and was buried at Kodaikanal in 1900.<sup>38</sup>

In 1895, the American Madurai Mission built the Union Church building. In 1909, when the Guide to Kodaikanal was published by E.M.M.L., there were 151 houses, "most of them anything but small and ugly" and a post office, churches, clubs, schools and shops.<sup>39</sup>

Kodaikanal Solar Observatory, 6 kilometres from the bus-stand on Observatory Road, at 2,343 metres is the highest location near Kodai. The first observations were commenced here in 1901. Former Director John Evershed, discovered the phenomenon of radial motion in sunspots, now known as the Evershed effect. The Kodaikanal Terrestrial Telescope can view a grand panorama including: Sothupparai Dam, Vaigai Dam, Periyakulam and Varaha river. This Indian Institute of Astrophysics facility has a comprehensive Astronomical Science museum with organized public tours, access to the astronomy library, and scheduled night-time telescopic sky viewing. It is open daily to the public during peak season, and a few hours each Friday the rest of the year.<sup>40</sup>

Bryant Park located just east of the Kodaikanal Lake is a wonderfully maintained 20.5 acres botanical garden. The park was planned and built in 1908 by a forest officer from Madurai, H.D. Bryant, and named after him. With 325 species of trees, shrubs and cactuses, the park is a rainbow of stunning flowers during the peak season. A large section is dedicated to nearly 740 varieties of roses. The park organizes horticultural exhibits and flower shows every summer, to coincide with the peak season. Entrance fee to the park is nominal and it is open all year.<sup>41</sup>

In April 1915, Dr. Van Allen raised funds to construct the first unit of the hospital at the entrance of Coaker's walk. It was named after him. Facilities got updated from time to time and now it has an X-ray machine, well equipped pathological lab, and an operation theatre with blood transfusion facilities.<sup>42</sup>

Round about Kodaikanal are several popular beauty spots. There are four waterfalls within easy reach, namely, the 'Silver Cascade' on Law's ghat formed by the Parapar stream into which runs the rivulet issuing from the lake; the 'Glen Falls' on a branch of the Parappar alongside the path northwards to Vilpatli; the 'Faif Falls' on the Pambar to the south-west of the station and the 'Bear Shola Falls'.<sup>43</sup> The Pillar Rocks are three huge masses of a granite about 400 feet high which stand on the edge of the same side of the plateau three miles further on.<sup>44</sup> Between and below them are several caves and chasms and from the top of them is obtained a superb view of the Aggamalai, the precipitous sides of the Cumbum valley and the plains below.<sup>45</sup> Fort Hamilton (named after Major Douglas Hamilton the author of the Sketches of the Palni Hills), 9 1/2 miles away on the southern side of the plateau, is situated near great lake which seems to have existed in former times.<sup>46</sup>

When the first settlers arrived, there were naturally no roads, but, as the number of settlers increased, several roads were constructed. The Lake Road which goes round the lake following its many indentations has already been mentioned. Above this are two principal lines of communication, one about half way up the slopes and called the Middle Lake Road and the other still higher up the slopes and known as the Upper Lake Road. These three roads are connected by many cross roads. There are four main routes out of the station. To the south-west a road goes towards the Pillar Rocks; to the west a road runs to Pumbarai, twelve miles away; to the north another road leads to Vilpatti, a village perched among impossible precipices not far from a fine waterfall, and to the east a road winds down to the plains by way of Neutral Saddle at the foot of Perumal Hill. This road joins the road running from Kodaikanal Road Railway station to Kambam Valley near a place called Ganguvaripatti. This road

formerly stopped at the Neutral Saddle. It was extended to the plains in 1914 and has subsequently been improved considerably. The length of tillers road on the hills is 30 miles and its distance from the foot of the hills to Kodaikanal Road Railway station is 20 miles. It is now the chief route along which travellers and goods from the plains go to Kodaikanal. Before the advent of the motor car and the motor bus, visitors used to travel from the railway station in bullock carts to Krishnamma Nayakan Tope at the foot of the ghat 5 miles distance from Periyakulam. This part of the journey was not free from dangers as the road passed through villages inhabited by thieving Kallars. The journey up the hills was made in sedan chairs or on ponies. The journey was made at night in order to avoid the scorching sun. Now the journey takes only three or four hours by motor car or bus.<sup>47</sup>

With the advent of the motor car and the bus, the station has developed rapidly into one of the most popular summer resorts. Clubs, hotels, golf clubs, rowing boats and other amenities are now available for visitors during the season.

In point of view of climate, Kodaikanal is considered by many of its admirers to rival Ootacamund. The rainfall is greater than that of Ootacamund, but most of it is received during the north-east monsoon when the visitors are absent instead of with the south-west current of June, July and August as at Ootacamund. The mean humidity and mean daily temperature are lower at Kodaikanal than in its rival and cold in the wet months is less bleak and searching. It has got also the advantage of a fine view of the plains.<sup>48</sup>

## Notes and References

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