

## Cherrapunji versus Darjeeling : The search for a Sanatorium for the Lower Provinces

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### I

It may be recalled that a paper was presented by me entitled 'The Cherrapunji Experiment (1829-1834)' at the Fourth Session of the Association. That was an attempt to give an account of the establishment of a sanatorium and a cantonment for European soldiers in the Khasi Hills. Reading through the article in print I realise that it not only needs some revision and addition in the light of material I had overlooked, more important perhaps is to develop that theme in examining more fully why the experiment failed and to see how far this was due to the establishment of a similar base at Darjeeling.

### II

The Cherrapunji experiment began in 1828. H. Walters in his journey across the 'Pandua Hills' in October 1828 found a tent and two good huts at Cherra and he noted that it was proposed to establish a sanatorium at that place for English soldiers and sick people from Calcutta.<sup>1</sup> C. A. Fenwick, Cherrapunji's first Superintendent personally wished to form a seminary, and to carry on agricultural and horticultural pursuits. Government allowed him to take a lease of such portions of the proposed site as might not be required for public purposes. It was clearly pointed out by Government that should the experiment be a disappointment, it should be made over to private hands, on the condition of the individual who took it, repaying all the money expended upon it.<sup>2</sup> Scott took a personal interest in the project and spared no effort to see that the plan should work. The first batch of invalids came to Cherrapunji in October 1830 and in preparation for this government proposed to retain all the buildings as the property of Government. The invalids were to be accompanied by a contingent of troops from the Sylhet Light Infantry and Scott was required to explain to the Siem of Cherra that troops were not to be permanently stationed

within his territory.<sup>3</sup> The troops that did go into the hills though were European troops, and it was Scott's recommendation that made the change possible. The troops and convalescents were sent for the double purpose of overawing the recalcitrant Khasis who were by then in arms against the British, and of ascertaining the effects of the climate upon the constitution of Europeans.<sup>4</sup> George Swinton at Calcutta also saw the need to station European soldiers beyond the Company's Sylhet frontier. He wrote :

*I ultimately look to an effective detachment being placed there (Cherrapunji) or at Sylhet, which would keep the Cossya Hill people in awe, or enable us effectually to subdue all opposition to our authority, and there establish an easy and important communication between Sylhet and Assam.*<sup>5</sup>

Scott looked forward to the Khasi, Nilgiri and Simla Hills as sites for establishing colonies in which a race of hardy Europeans might be reared, capable of defending the British interests and territories in India. His biographer, A. White, thought that the colonies were speculated upon "in view of the possibility of our maritime supremacy being endangered thereby cutting off our supplies of recruits ; although doubtless other contingencies entered into his calculation".<sup>6</sup> Scott had submitted a detailed suggestion for the cantonment of 300 to 400 European soldiers in the Khasi Hills which in time could grow to 10,000 men. He suggested to Government to make a money advance to establish the colony, which could be paid back in four years from the profits of dairy and agriculture business in the hills.<sup>7</sup> The plan, as Scott had framed it, seemed to William Bentinck "wild and unpracticable, but I have no doubt that Europeans will be induced to settle in those hills, if further trial confirms the belief entertained of their healthiness".<sup>8</sup> The Governor-General had heard that the Russian military colonies had been a complete failure. He was nevertheless hopeful that the Khasi Hills would make an excellent station for a European regiment as the hills were close to water carriage and with the steamship troops might be quickly transported to the point where they might be required.<sup>9</sup> Nothing came of these plans. Only a small detachment of European troops was stationed at Cherrapunji. A party of artillerymen had come with the first batch of invalids. Early in 1832 a detachment of His Majesty's Thirtieth Regiment replaced the artillerymen.<sup>10</sup> When this was done Swinton could write to Captain R. Benson, Bentinck's Military Secretary, that the establishment of a cantonment of European

troops as "the dear babe, partly of my own creation...which I have suckled and cherished since the hour of its birth."<sup>11</sup>

Whatever advantages Cherrapunji had still did not make it an ideal location of a sanatorium and cantonment. Both Scott and Lieutenant Fisher of the Quarter-Master General's Department, and afterwards Cachar's first Superintendent looked for a more central location, Scott preferring Myllem and Fisher giving reports of Nongkrem and Nogundee.<sup>12</sup> Bentinck had on his own effort begun the search for the location of a sanatorium in a different direction. The unsettled state in the Khasi Hills during 1829-1881 deferred Europeans from visiting Cherrapunji. As things returned to quiet Major T. Watson, Cherrapunji's third Superintendent called the attention of Government and the public to Cherrapunji. Bentinck was at first strongly opposed to the project of an establishment in the Khasi Hills preferring a location in Sikkim which had recently come into contact with the British.<sup>13</sup>

### III

British interest in Sikkim really dates back to the first visit of two company officials to what is today Darjeeling. In 1828 Captain Lloyd in company with J. W. Grant, the Commercial Resident at Malda, journeyed into the hills of Sikkim, then still a *terra incognita* to the British, as far as Rinchinpong. Darjeeling was formerly a village under a Kazi but had been deserted and the country round it was sparsely populated. After a second visit to 'the old Goorka station of Dorjeling' in February 1829 Lloyd was struck with it being well adapted for the purpose of a sanatorium. He strongly urged the importance of securing the place, and, in particular, pointed out its advantages as a centre of trade, and as a position of great strategical importance commanding entrance into Nepal and Bhutan. Grant too impressed on Bentinck the numerous advantages promised by the establishment of a Sanatorium at Darjeeling and strongly advocated its occupation on strategic grounds.<sup>14</sup>

Bentinck promptly deputed Captain Herbert, the Deputy Surveyor-General in company with Grant, to examine the country. The reports of these two persons showed the feasibility of establishing a sanatorium at Darjeeling, and the Court of Directors approved the project on the ground that it might prove a valuable depot for the temporary reception of European recruits and even a permanent Cantonment for a European regiment.<sup>15</sup> The Governor-General suggested that Smith, the judge and magistrate of

Rangpur may be directed to communicate to the Raja of Sikkim the Company's wish to establish a sanatorium at Darjeeling and if the Raja was willing to give his consent, to ascertain the terms upon which the arrangement would be most satisfactory.<sup>16</sup> For some reasons still to be examined, Smith did not make the negotiations but Lloyd, who was deputed to enquire into the causes of the disturbances of 1834-1835. It is reported that some Lepcha in Nepal had in that year made an inroad into the Sikkim Terai. The Nepalese Lepchas were made to return to Nepal and the negotiations was followed by the deed of an unconditional grant dated 1 February 1835 giving the East India Company "all the land south of the great Runjeet river, east of the Balasur, Kahail and Littee Runjeet rivers, and west of the Rungno and Mahanuddi rivers."<sup>17</sup> It is established that Government began to consider developing Darjeeling more than Cherrapunji much before the land was acquired. Lord Amherst wrote to Bentinck on Christmas Day 1830 that he was "much interested in the account you sent me of a sanatorium in the Sikkim raja's territory". Had he stayed on in India, Amherst said that he would have explored the country "with a view of founding an object of such immense importance to the lower provinces". And he continued :

*My thoughts would have been turned towards the country near Sylhet, but your discovery seems to be of far greater advantage in as much as you have found a much higher elevation with equal facility of access.*<sup>18</sup>

Meanwhile Cherrapunji continued to grow but not with the pace that had been there when Scott was alive. That Government was not much interested in continuing to develop Cherrapunji may be seen in two remarks of Swinton to Benson. While it was still being contemplated whether to send or not to send European troops to the Khasi Hills, Swinton wrote to Benson on 1 June 1831 that he would be delighted to see an European Regiment stationed in the Khasi Hills "and many will bless the day, though Scott and myself be forgotten as the most pursevering advocates for the measure. It is the fashion to laugh at us as enthusiasts and my enthusiasm is fast melting away".<sup>19</sup> Some days later he wrote to Benson again that "I get but little encouragement here to start anything new".<sup>20</sup> Scott's successors, Cracroft and Robertson held office for short periods and could do little to continue his plans. By the time Jenkins took office the Cherrapunji experiment had

failed, or more so was made to fail as Government's attention was drawn to Darjeeling. It was not so much the rain that Cherrapunji received that called for its abandonment as much as the peace that had been arrived at in the hills and the British firmly established in the Khasi Hills, Cachar and the Brahmaputra Valley. Consequently the European troops were withdrawn from Cherrapunji in November 1834, and with it went the convalescent depot. Local regular and irregular troops was found sufficient to maintain the tranquility of the frontier.<sup>21</sup>

Darjeeling had some advantages over Cherrapunji. The Cherrapunji sanatorium was located in a relatively small area with no likelihood of expansion. Darjeeling had a much larger area. Cherrapunji was in and surrounded by Khasi States, Darjeeling was simply added on to the British territories in North Bengal. Another advantage Darjeeling had was that the land was sparsely populated, so much so that the sanatorium there could only develop if there was a migration, as later there would be. The only advantages that Cherrapunji did have over the rival site was that it was situated high on a plateau and within very easy access to the plains. Any visitor to Darjeeling would agree that the ruggedness of the hills and the distance it is situated from the plains makes the journey exciting. Imagine therefore the problems of communication in the early days of British rule. Steamers could go all the year round to Kissengunge after which was a day's journey into the hills. Boats could ply to the foothills in Sylhet after which Cherrapunji was a few hours walk. What Darjeeling did possess was its location and this must have weighed heavily in its favour; Nepal was close to its west, to the north lay Sikkim and beyond Tibet, and to the east was Bhutan. At a time when the British were watching these Himalayan states, Darjeeling served a useful political and strategic purpose.

By early 1838, however, Darjeeling had been condemned as a sanatorium on various accounts. The same medical officer who had condemned the Khasi Hills for sanatory purposes had also given the *coup de grace* to the hope about Darjeeling. The *Friend of India* did not think it ought to be considered final in each case. Bengal still needed a sanatorium nearer than Mauritius or the Cape. It lamented "Every other Presidency, Bombay, Madras, and Agra, enjoys this benefit; we only are deprived of it". It went to write "If the experiment of Darjeeling prove a failure, we hope the attention of Government will be again turned to the Cossya Hills". It noted that though Cherrapunji might not be the most

eligible spot for a sanatorium during every season of the year "there are spots at no great distance from it, where climate, even in the most unfavourable season of the year, is said to resemble paradise".<sup>22</sup>

Government finally decided to adopt Darjeeling as a station in early 1838.<sup>23</sup> A road was soon constructed to the plains, a line of bungalows was constructed in the new road, applications were received by Government at Calcutta for land in the new settlement and a hotel was constructed at Darjeeling, which was opened on 31 March 1840 "when a party of twelve sat down to dinner". A local corp of Sappers and Miners was raised and above all this presided Colonel Lloyd as the station's first Agent. Provisions were carried to the station and artificers of every description were engaged at Patna, Rungpur, Berhampur and Calcutta and a thousand Dangars (well diggers) were expected to reach the place by early November 1840. This is indicative that Darjeeling was given much attention in the hope that the sanatorium would be ready before the next hot season.<sup>24</sup>

Such concern was never given to Cherrapunji. The place continued to have some importance with the transfer of the headquarters of the Sylhet Light Infantry and the Khasi Hills Political Agency located at Cherrapunji. European traders and settlers were attracted to the place but it could never compete with Darjeeling or any other Himalayan hill station. Only much later would the Khasi Hills call for attention when Shillong was to be developed on similar grounds as when Cherrapunji and Darjeeling were proposed to enable persons to escape the heat and climate of the plains.

#### References

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3. Nottingham University, Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2791/VI, Swinton to Scott, 29 June 1830.
4. C. H. Phillips, *The Correspondence of Lord William Cavendish Bentinck*, Vol. I, No. 237, p. 500.
5. *Supra*, No. 2.
6. A. White, *A Memoir of the Late David Scott*, p. 51.
7. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2791/1, Scott to Swinton, 21 July 1830.

8. C. H. Phillips, *op. cit.*, No. 237, p. 500.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2781/XLIX b, Watson to Robertson, 26 May 1832.
11. *Ibid.*, PWJF 2781/XLVI, Swinton to Benson, 27 January 1832.
12. *Ibid.*, PWJF 2791/III, Fisher to Scott, 16 October 1830, Scott to Swinton, 20 October 1830.
13. "Chirrapunji", *Asiatic Journal*, New Series, Vol. XXI 1836, p. 18.
14. O'Malley, *Gazetteer of Darjeeling*, p. 20 ;  
H. Hosten, "The Centenary of Darjeeling", *Bengal Past and Present*, Vol. XXXIX, Part II, Serial No. 78, April-June 1930, pp. 106-107.
15. O'Malley, *op. cit.*, pp. 20-21 ; H. Hosten, *op. cit.*, p. 107 ;  
C. H. Phillips, *op. cit.*, No. 211, Minute on hill stations, dated 17 June, 1830, pp. 456-453.
16. C. H. Phillips, *op. cit.*, p. 457.
17. O'Malley, *op. cit.*, p. 21 ; H. Hosten, *op. cit.*, p. 107. In 1841 the Raja was given Rs. 3,000/- as compensation for the land he had ceded to the East India Company. The grant was raised to Rs. 6,000/- in 1846.
18. C. H. Phillips, *op. cit.*, No. 273, p. 569.
19. Bentinck Papers, PWJF 2811/XXII, Swinton to Benson, 1 June 1831.
20. *Ibid.*, PWJF 2811/XXVII, Swinton to Benson, 14 July 1831.
21. West Bengal State Archives, *Bengal Political Proceedings*, 23 February 1835, Nos. 1 and 3 ; Foreign Political Consultations, 17 October 1836, No. 24.
22. 'Sanatorium for the Lower Provinces', *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. XXV, New Series, January-April, 1838, in H. Hosten, *op. cit.*, p. 111.
23. *Asiatic Intelligence - Calcutta*, April 1838, p. 209 in H. Hosten, *op. cit.*, p. 112.
24. References to what has been intencioned may be seen in detail in H. Hosten, *op. cit.*, pp. 113-122.