



MAJOR HILL STATIONS OF KARNATAKA: A HISTORICAL STUDY

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ABSTRACT

Karnataka's hill stations occupy a distinctive place in the historical geography of the Western Ghats and the Deccan uplands. Emerging variously as pre-colonial hill forts, princely summer retreats, and colonial sanatoria, stations such as Nandi Hills, Kemmangundi, Madikeri, and Chikmagalur reflect layered histories of political power, colonial administration, and evolving leisure culture. This article traces the historical development of Karnataka's principal hill stations from approximately 1800 to 2015, examining the transition from strategic and administrative outposts to centres of tourism and heritage. Drawing on the trajectory shared by many of these sites, the article argues that their history cannot be read purely as a colonial import; rather, it represents a continuum in which indigenous fort-building traditions, princely patronage under the Wodeyars of Mysore, and British hill-station policy together shaped the present cultural landscape. The study also considers the post-Independence period, when many former retreats were absorbed into state horticultural and tourism departments, raising questions of conservation, ecological pressure, and heritage management that remain relevant to regional planning today.

KEYWORDS: Karnataka, Hill Stations, Western Ghats, Colonial History, Wodeyar Dynasty, Heritage Tourism, Nandi Hills, Kemmangundi

INTRODUCTION

Hill stations form a distinctive category of settlement in the historiography of South Asia. Unlike towns that grew organically around trade, agriculture, or religious centres, most hill stations owe their initial development to a specific combination of altitude, climate, and political or administrative purpose. In Karnataka, this combination produced a set of settlements along the Western Ghats and the Baba Budan and Nandi hill ranges whose histories span nearly a millennium, from early medieval fortifications to twenty-first-century tourist destinations. A historical study of these locations for the period 1800 to 2015 is significant for two reasons. First, it corresponds broadly with the period for which continuous administrative and travel records exist, allowing the historian to trace change with reasonable precision. Second, it spans the transition from princely and colonial rule to a modern, democratically governed state, making the hill stations a useful lens through which to view broader shifts in regional governance, land use, and cultural memory.

Pre-Colonial and Early Foundations

Several of Karnataka's hill stations began not as retreats but as fortified strongholds. Nandi Hills, for instance, is associated with fortification activity dating back to the Ganga dynasty of the early medieval period, and later served the Chola and Vijayanagara polities as a point of strategic oversight over the surrounding plains. Its continued military relevance is evident in its subsequent use by Hyder Ali and Tipu Sultan in the eighteenth century, who strengthened its fortifications as part of a network of hill forts, sometimes described as the Navadurgas, guarding approaches to the Mysore kingdom's core territory. This layered pre-colonial history is important because it complicates any narrative that treats the hill station purely as a nineteenth-century colonial invention. In Karnataka's case, colonial and princely actors frequently inherited, repurposed, and rebuilt upon sites that already carried strategic and symbolic significance.



Princely Patronage: The Wodeyar Contribution

A distinguishing feature of Karnataka's hill-station history, compared with many other regions of British India, is the substantial role played by the Wodeyar rulers of Mysore. Kemmangundi, situated on the Baba Budan range in present-day Chikmagalur district, developed primarily as the summer retreat of Krishnaraja Wodeyar IV in the early twentieth century, after whom it came to be known locally as Sri Krishnarajendra Hill Station. Its ornamental gardens, guest houses, and horticultural plantings reflect princely aesthetic sensibilities rather than a purely colonial sanitarium model, and the site was later formally handed over to the state government, whose Horticultural Department has maintained it since. This pattern, of a hill retreat originating in royal patronage and subsequently transferring to public administration, recurs across several sites and marks an important point of divergence from hill stations established directly by the colonial government, such as those in the Nilgiris or the Himalayan foothills.

Colonial Engagement and the Sanitarium Function

British colonial interest in Karnataka's uplands followed a pattern familiar across British India: the search for locations offering relief from the heat and disease associated with the plains, particularly for troops, officials, and their families. Nandi Hills, already fortified and strategically positioned within a day's journey of Bangalore cantonment, was readily adapted by colonial officials as a seasonal retreat once Mysore came more closely within the ambit of British political oversight following Tipu Sultan's defeat in 1799. Similarly, the Kodagu region, annexed by the British in 1834, saw Madikeri, historically the seat of the Haleri rajas since the seventeenth century, gradually take on the character of a colonial hill town, with the addition of churches, bungalows, and administrative buildings layered onto the older fort and palace complex built under Mudduraja and his successors. In both cases, the colonial hill station was less a new creation than an adaptation of existing centres of indigenous political power.

Plantation Economy and Settlement Growth

The nineteenth and early twentieth centuries also saw the hill regions of Karnataka drawn into the wider plantation economy of southern India. Coffee cultivation, introduced and expanded across the slopes of Chikmagalur, Kodagu, and the Baba Budan hills during the colonial period, transformed both the demography and the built environment of these hill stations. European planters established estates, processing infrastructure, and residential bungalows, while local labour and administrative networks grew around this economy. Chikmagalur in particular developed as a market and administrative centre for the surrounding coffee estates, a function that persisted well after Independence and continues to shape the town's economy and identity into the present.

Other Girdhamas: Mullayanagiri, Bababudangiri, Agumbe, and Kudremukh

Beyond the well-documented cases of Nandi Hills, Kemmangundi, and Madikeri, several other elevations acquired historical importance during the period under study. Mullayanagiri, part of the same Baba Budan range as Kemmangundi, is Karnataka's highest peak and takes its name from the sage Mulappa, whose shrine still stands near the summit; its history is thus one of continuous pastoral and pilgrim use rather than colonial or princely construction, even as twentieth-century road-building gradually made it accessible to a wider public. Bababudangiri itself, associated by local tradition with the seventeenth-century Sufi saint Baba Budan and the diffusion of coffee cultivation into South India, presents an unusual instance of a single hill hosting both a Muslim dargah and a Hindu temple dedicated to Dattatreya, a coexistence that became, in the later twentieth century, the subject of periodic communal tension and consequent government regulation of access and worship. Agumbe, in the Shivamogga district, developed a different kind of reputation altogether: renowned for its exceptionally heavy monsoon rainfall and celebrated sunset views over the Malnad hills, it emerged during the twentieth century as a site associated first with itinerant traders and later with naturalists and film-makers, most notably as a filming location and research base connected with herpetological study of the King Cobra in the post-Independence decades. Kudremukh, meaning "horse-face" after the shape of its peak, followed yet another trajectory, moving from a largely unexploited forest tract into a site of industrial iron-ore mining from the 1970s



under the Kudremukh Iron Ore Company Limited, before mining operations were curtailed by judicial and environmental intervention in the early 2000s and the area was reconstituted as a national park, illustrating in microcosm the tension between extractive development and conservation that runs through the region's more recent history.

Post-Independence Transition and the Rise of Tourism

The decades following 1947, and especially after the reorganisation of Mysore State into present-day Karnataka in 1956, brought a further transformation. Many hill stations that had functioned as private retreats for princely or colonial elites were absorbed into state institutions: horticultural departments, forest departments, and later tourism corporations took over maintenance and public access. Nandi Hills, once restricted to fort garrisons and colonial officials, became one of the most visited weekend destinations near Bangalore, its transformation closely tied to the city's growth as a major urban and technological centre from the 1980s onward. Kemmangundi, Kudremukh, and the Agumbe-Kodachadri belt similarly moved from limited elite access toward broader, though still regulated, public tourism, supported by improved road connectivity and, from the 1990s, a growing domestic middle-class interest in eco-tourism and weekend travel.

Ecological and Conservation Concerns

The expansion of tourism after the 1980s introduced new pressures on these hill environments. Increased vehicular traffic, unregulated construction, and visitor volume at sites such as Nandi Hills and Madikeri raised concerns among conservationists and local administrators regarding soil erosion, water scarcity, and damage to fragile Western Ghats ecosystems, several of which fall within designated wildlife sanctuaries such as Bhadra, adjoining Kemmangundi. By the early twenty-first century, state tourism and forest authorities had begun introducing visitor caps, entry regulations, and eco-tourism guidelines at several sites, reflecting a broader shift in policy discourse from unrestricted development toward sustainable heritage management, a shift that mirrors debates occurring at hill stations across India during the same period.

Discussion: A Comparative Perspective

Set alongside the broader historiography of hill stations in colonial India, which has tended to concentrate on archetypal British creations such as Simla, Darjeeling, and Ootacamund, Karnataka's girdhamas present an instructive contrast. Whereas the classic colonial hill station was typically established on land with little prior settlement, chosen primarily for its climatic and topographical suitability and then populated almost entirely through European administrative and military decision-making, most of Karnataka's principal hill sites already possessed a substantial pre-colonial history of fortification, pilgrimage, or local rule before British or Wodeyar intervention. This meant that colonial and princely development in Karnataka more often took the form of adaptation and accretion than of creation *ex nihilo*. The Wodeyar dynasty's direct role in developing sites such as Kemmangundi, moreover, has few close parallels among the major hill stations of British India, where princely involvement, when it occurred at all, was generally confined to smaller retreats within individual princely states rather than sites of regional or provincial significance. This comparative distinctiveness suggests that any general theory of the Indian hill station needs to accommodate a plurality of origins, ranging from purely colonial sanatoria to composite sites shaped jointly by indigenous, princely, and colonial actors, of which Karnataka offers some of the clearest examples.

The post-Independence period reinforces this pattern of layered continuity rather than rupture. Rather than being abandoned or radically repurposed after 1947, most of the hill stations examined here were absorbed into the administrative apparatus of the new Indian state with relatively little disruption to their physical fabric: colonial bungalows became forest rest houses, princely guest houses became state-run tourist lodges, and plantation infrastructure was gradually brought under cooperative and, later, corporate ownership while remaining substantially in private hands. It is only in the final decades of the period under review, from roughly the 1990s onward, that a genuinely new dynamic emerges, driven by mass private vehicle ownership, the growth of Bengaluru as an information-technology hub with a large weekend-travelling middle class, and a national and



global discourse of ecological conservation centred on the Western Ghats. These forces together account for the intensification of both tourist pressure and conservation regulation that characterises the girdhamas of Karnataka in the early twenty-first century.

Conclusion

The history of Karnataka's major hill stations between 1800 and 2015 reveals a layered process of continuity and adaptation rather than a single colonial origin story. Pre-colonial fortifications, princely summer retreats under the Wodeyar dynasty, colonial sanatoria and plantation towns, and finally post-Independence tourism landscapes have each left their mark on sites such as Nandi Hills, Kemmangundi, Madikeri, and Chikmagalur. Understanding this layered history is valuable not only for regional historiography but also for contemporary heritage and environmental policy, since present-day conservation decisions at these sites inevitably engage with structures, institutions, and land-use patterns inherited from each of these earlier phases. Further archival research into estate records, princely correspondence, and colonial gazetteers would help refine the chronology and deepen understanding of the social history of the communities that inhabited and served these hill stations across the two centuries under study.

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