



## 'The languor of the hot weather': everyday perspectives on weather and climate in colonial Bombay, 1819–1828

George C.D. Adamson

School of Environment and Technology, University of Brighton, Lewes Road, Brighton BN2 4GJ, United Kingdom

### Abstract

This study provides an historical perspective on everyday experiences of weather and climate, through an analysis of the diaries of two colonial figures in Bombay, western India, in the 1820s: Mountstuart Elphinstone (the then Governor) and Lucretia West (the wife of the Chief Justice). The paper explores the ways in which climate impacted upon their daily routine and health, and discusses evidence for the influence of wider climatic narratives within their writings. Climate played a dominant and complex role within colonial discourse, providing both a barrier to colonisation, and a justification for European governance over populations that had become 'degenerate' through their exposure to tropical climates. Both of the diaries evidence this influence of climate within the colonists' daily lives, but demonstrate the differing responses to climate based on the two diarists' social positions. Mountstuart Elphinstone, in particular, had a strong sense of the impact of climate upon his health, in keeping with contemporary medical beliefs equating climate with physical wellbeing. The paper provides evidence of the evolution of acclimatisation discourse during the early nineteenth century, and suggests that European beliefs concerning tropical climates were changing simultaneously within both the medical establishment and the wider colonial community. The paper also explores the medical excursions that the diarists took to towns in the Western Ghats. It is apparent that their experiences of the climate in such towns were influenced by their prior expectations, a theme which resonates with discourses of climate in our own times.

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Anxieties over the dangers posed by tropical climates constituted a fundamental aspect of the colonial experience during the second wave of European colonisation in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Debates regarding the wisdom or otherwise of colonisation were couched within Hippocratic notions about the effects of climate upon health. These held that climate had a fundamental influence on health, both directly, and through the production of 'miasmatic airs' as a result of putrefaction of marshland or rotting vegetable matter.<sup>1</sup> Such ideas had dominated western medicine since the Classical era, but were resurgent during the Enlightenment, the period that coincided with significant colonial endeavours by the major European powers.<sup>2</sup> These conceptualisations of

the tropical climate as somehow inherently unhealthy continued into the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, well beyond the discovery of microbial diseases, which negated Hippocratic traditions in Europe.<sup>3</sup>

Climate provided both a significant barrier to European settlement within the tropics, and a justification for European expansion. Tropical colonies witnessed very high mortality, particularly in South and Southeast Asia and Africa.<sup>4</sup> Colonial land management practices such as afforestation, swamp clearing and the planting of European flora, acted as a validation for European presence within the tropical regions.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the insalubrious climates of the lower latitudes were thought to account for the 'degeneration' of

E-mail address: [g.adamson@brighton.ac.uk](mailto:g.adamson@brighton.ac.uk)

<sup>1</sup> M. Harrison, *Medicine in an Age of Commerce and Empire: Britain and its Tropical Colonies, 1600–1830*, New York, 2010, 64–67. For a full review of colonial beliefs and attitudes towards tropical diseases see the aforementioned, and: P. Curtin, *Death by Migration: Europe's Encounter with the Tropical World in the Nineteenth Century*, Cambridge, 1989; W. Anderson, Disease, race, and empire, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 70 (1996) 62–67; M. Harrison, 'The tender frame of Man': disease, climate, and racial difference in India and the West Indies, *Bulletin of the History of Medicine* 70 (1996) 68–93; M. Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions: Health, Race, Environment and British Imperialism in India 1600–1850*, Oxford, 1997.

<sup>2</sup> D. Arnold, *The Problems of Nature: Environment, Culture and European Expansion*, Oxford, 1996, 11.

<sup>3</sup> D. Kennedy, The perils of the midday sun: climatic anxieties in the colonial tropics, in: J.M. MacKenzie (Ed.), *Imperialism and the Natural World*, Manchester, 1990, 118–140.

<sup>4</sup> A. Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease*, Baltimore and London, 2003, 8.

<sup>5</sup> Bewell, *Romanticism and Colonial Disease* (note 4), 28. Detailed reviews of tropical afforestation projects are provided in R.H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1860*, Cambridge, 1996; R.H. Grove, *Ecology, Climate and Empire: Colonialism and Global Environmental History 1400–1940*, Cambridge, 1997; R.H. Grove, V. Damodaran and S. Sangwan (Eds.), *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Oxford, 1998.

their native populations. The introduction of a ruling race from the temperate northern regions was therefore considered of inherent benefit to the populations of the tropics, a view that was strengthened with the development of Utilitarian and Evangelical philosophies during the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>6</sup>

These conflicting narratives fed into the discourse of tropical acclimatisation: the possibility, and desirability, of European acclimatisation to the 'torrid zone'.<sup>7</sup> The discourse dealt with the twin issues of whether European constitutions were capable of adaptation, and whether this adaptation could occur without the 'degeneration' of the European race. Such questions were of vital importance to colonists, and were debated heavily among the colonial elite,<sup>8</sup> aided by the writings and essays of several key philosophers and anthropologists, and popular medical publications.<sup>9</sup>

The purpose of this paper is to analyse the cultural significance of such discourses, through an analysis of the personal writings of two colonists outside of the medical fraternity.<sup>10</sup> These are the Hon. Mountstuart Elphinstone and Lady Lucretia West. Both individuals were resident in Bombay during the 1820s; this was fundamental epoch in the development of colonial climatic narratives, occurring during a period when the role of the English East India Company was changing from a commercial enterprise to a major territorial government. This change in western India occurred following wars with the Maratha Empire during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century, culminating with the annexation of Maratha territories by the East India Company in 1817.<sup>11</sup> The study period for this paper begins two years after the 3rd Maratha War, and is therefore located firmly amidst the period of flux within the colonial experience in western India.

Historical studies into the cultural role of climate have been called for within recent literature. Contemporary scholars such as Mike Hulme have argued that the twentieth-century framing of climate as a purely scientific discipline is insufficient, and that climate should reclaim its cultural elements, that were prevalent within earlier framings.<sup>12</sup> Other writers such as Vladimir Jankovic

and Christina Barboza have also highlighted the importance of local and individual perceptions of climate, in placing climate within a broader cultural context.<sup>13</sup> This paper seeks to address both of these issues, by providing an analysis of everyday responses to the dominant climatic discourses during an earlier period in history. This is not presented as a direct analogy to the climatic concerns of the twenty-first century; such analogies are problematic, due to the significant social and cultural changes that have taken place since the period under study.<sup>14</sup> However, this analysis should add to our understanding of the many dimensions of climate through history, and the differing understandings of, and responses to climate within and between social groups. As has been written previously, the existing definition of 'climate' cannot be adequately understood without a thorough analysis of the ways in which perceptions of climate have changed over time.<sup>15</sup> Such a process has been described by Matthais Heymann as aiding an understanding of 'the complexity, contingency, and non-linearity of the historical processes that brought about the climate science, climate knowledge and the understanding of climate today'.<sup>16</sup>

### The development of acclimatisation discourses

The role of climate within colonial discourse was complex, and incorporated a variety of interlinking narratives regarding health, race, environment and the ethics of imperialism.<sup>17</sup> These debates were underpinned by arguments that equated the tropics with the concept of 'Otherness'. During the eighteenth century, the world was divided by the European colonial powers into two zones: the 'temperate' and the 'torrid'.<sup>18</sup> Although this division was based on the interaction between climate and health, the dichotomy went beyond the medical. The temperate northern (principally northern European) latitudes were considered salubrious to health, and produced races of men that were strong, industrious and intelligent. The climate of the southern latitudes was conversely dangerous to the health, and produced races that were 'lethargic', 'effeminate' and 'indolent'.<sup>19</sup> The mild European climate was also

<sup>6</sup> Harrison, 'The tender frame of Man' (note 1), 84.

<sup>7</sup> J.T. Kenny, Climate, race and imperial authority: the symbolic landscape of the British hill station in India, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 84 (1995) 694–714, 695.

<sup>8</sup> Detailed analyses of acclimatisation discourse have been undertaken by David Livingstone. A brief outline of the discourse is provided within this paper, however, for comprehensive discussions of the scope of the discipline see: D.N. Livingstone, Human acclimatization: perspectives on a contested field of inquiry in science, medicine and geography, *History of Science* 25 (1987) 359–395; D.N. Livingstone, The moral discourse of climate: historical considerations on race, place and virtue, *Journal of Historical Geography* 17 (1991) 413–434; D.N. Livingstone, Tropical climate and moral hygiene: the anatomy of a Victorian debate, *British Journal of the History of Science* 32 (1999) 93–110; D.N. Livingstone, Race, space and moral climatology: notes toward a genealogy, *Journal of Historical Geography* 28 (2002) 159–180.

<sup>9</sup> J. Johnson, *The Influence of Tropical Climates on European Constitutions*, 2nd Edition, London, 1818.

<sup>10</sup> Previous studies that have addressed this question include G.H. Endfield and D.J. Nash, Missionaries and morals: climatic discourse in nineteenth-century central southern Africa, *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 92 (2002) 727–742; G.H. Endfield and D.J. Nash, 'A good site for health': missionaries and the pathological geography of central southern Africa, *Singapore Journal of Tropical Geography* 28 (2007) 142–157.

<sup>11</sup> In 1800, British Territories in western India comprised of Bombay and a few small towns and forts. Subsequent wars with the Maratha empire brought extensive territorial gains in the form of southern Gujarat in 1803 and large tracts of the Western Deccan and Konkan in 1818. See K. Ballhatchet, *Social Policy and Social Change in Western India: 1817–1830*, Oxford, 1957.

<sup>12</sup> See: M. Hulme, The conquering of climate: discourses of fear and their dissolution, *Geographical Journal* 174 (2008) 5–16; M. Hulme, *Why We Disagree About Climate Change. Understanding Controversy, Inaction and Opportunity*, Cambridge, 2009; M. Heymann, The evolution of climatic ideas and knowledge, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 1 (2010) 581–597, 581.

<sup>13</sup> V. Jankovic and C. Barboza, *Weather, Local Knowledge and Everyday Life*, Rio de Janeiro, 2009. See also: J.P. Palutikof, M.D. Agnew and M.R. Hoar, Public perceptions of unusually warm weather in the UK: impacts, responses and adaptations, *Climate Research* 26 (2004) 43–59; M.T. Bravo, Voices from the sea ice: the reception of climate impact narratives, *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 256–278; R. Slocum, Polar bears and energy-efficient lightbulbs: strategies to bring climate change home, *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* 22 (2004) 413–438; C. Brace and H. Geoghegan, Human geographies of climate change: landscape, temporality, and lay knowledges, *Progress in Human Geography* 35 (2010) 284–302.

<sup>14</sup> W.B. Meyer, K.W. Butzer, T.E. Downing, B.L. Turner II, G. Wenzel and J. Westcoat, Reasoning by analogy, in: S. Rayner, E.L. Malone (Eds), *Human Choice and Climatic Change Volume 3: Tools for Policy Analysis*, Columbus, Ohio, 1998, 218–289.

<sup>15</sup> J.R. Fleming, Climate history, society, culture: an editorial essay, *Wiley Interdisciplinary Reviews: Climate Change* 1 (2010) 475–478; Heymann, The evolution of climatic ideas and knowledge (note 12). See also: S. Daniels and G. H. Endfield, Narratives of climate change: introduction, *Journal of Historical Geography* 35 (2009) 215–222.

<sup>16</sup> Heymann, The evolution of climatic ideas and knowledge (note 12), 581.

<sup>17</sup> Livingstone, Tropical climate and moral hygiene (note 8).

<sup>18</sup> Kenny, Climate, race and imperial authority (note 7), 695. Note that the term was superseded by 'tropical' during the nineteenth century.

<sup>19</sup> Harrison, *Climates and Constitutions* (note 1), 36, 69, 100.

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