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British Encounters with the Indian Summer through Women's Travel Narratives and Memoirs (1750-1900)

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Abstract

Arriving from a temperate climatic zone, many British perceived the Indian summer as physically oppressive and medically dangerous. Their writings reveal recurring descriptions of heat, exhaustion, illness, and discomfort, alongside detailed observations of the strategies employed to survive tropical conditions. This paper examines British encounters with the Indian summer through travel narratives, memoirs, diaries, and personal correspondence, with particular emphasis on accounts written by British women. First, the paper inquires how British travelers represented the Indian summer and how climatic experiences informed colonial perceptions of India as both exotic and hostile. Second, it analyzes the material and labor infrastructures that sustained colonial comfort, including punkahs, punkah-wallahs, indigenous techniques of ice production, and domestic service networks. Third, it examines contemporary medical concerns regarding heat-related illnesses, cholera, malaria, dysentery, and other diseases associated with tropical environments. The paper argues that British adaptation to the Indian summer depended upon complex networks of Indian labor, indigenous knowledge, and cooling technologies, revealing climate as a crucial factor in the making of colonial society.

Keywords: Colonial India, Environmental History, Women's Travel Writing, Climate and Empire, Colonial Domesticity, Cooling Technologies, Punkah Wallahs.

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Introduction

Within the history of the British Empire, the Indian climate occupied a particularly significant position. For many British travelers arriving from Britain's temperate environment, the Indian summer represented an overwhelming physical and psychological encounter. Heat, humidity, monsoon rains, dust storms, tropical diseases, and unfamiliar seasonal rhythms became recurring subjects in travel narratives, memoirs, diaries, and private correspondence. The Indian summer was repeatedly described as exhausting, unhealthy, unpredictable, and fundamentally different from European climatic experience. Indian summer actively shaped everyday colonial life. Climatic conditions influenced patterns of travel, domestic architecture, medical practice, administrative routines, seasonal migration, and relations between Europeans and Indians. British observers consistently associated the hot season with physical weakness, fever, cholera, malaria, dysentery, insomnia, and psychological depression. Their descriptions demonstrate that environmental experience occupied a central place in the making of colonial knowledge about India. European comfort depended upon an extensive network of Indian servants, artisans, transport workers, and laborers who maintained tents, operated punkahs, produced ice, carried palanquins, supplied water, repaired roads damaged by monsoon rains, and enabled colonial households to function during periods of extreme heat. Consequently, climatic adaptation was never an individual achievement but a collective process rooted in indigenous knowledge and colonial labor relations.

Unlike official administrative reports, military correspondence, or scientific surveys, women's memoirs frequently recorded the intimate routines of domestic life. Their writings devote considerable attention to sleeping arrangements, household architecture, clothing, illness, food, servants, childcare, journeys through the countryside, and everyday encounters with changing weather. Emily Eden's *Up the Country*, for example, repeatedly describes oppressive heat, recurring fever, monsoon rains, uncomfortable camp life, and the relief offered by Himalayan hill stations, while simultaneously documenting the dependence of British households upon Indian domestic labour.¹ Similar observations recur throughout the wider corpus of British travel narratives.

Historiography and Research Methodology

Travel narratives constitute one of the richest yet historically under-utilized sources for understanding colonial environmental experience; personal travel writing offers access to dimensions of colonial

life rarely preserved elsewhere. As Michael H. Fisher observes, historical scholarship has frequently neglected travel accounts despite their substantial contribution to understanding colonial encounters.²

Travellers observed unfamiliar societies, interpreted environmental conditions, and communicated these experiences to readers who themselves had never visited those places. Published travel narratives therefore shaped wider public understandings of colonial landscapes and peoples. Fisher argues that travel narratives circulated first-hand observations while simultaneously presenting the individual perspectives, literary conventions, and historical circumstances of their authors.³

At the same time, travel narratives require critical reading. They cannot be interpreted as objective records of Indian society. Instead, they frequently reveal more about European perceptions than about the realities they claimed to describe. Fisher cautions that such sources primarily illuminate contemporary European cultural constructions and should not automatically be accepted as accurate representations of Asian societies.⁴ Climatic observations contained within these memoirs undoubtedly emerged from genuine bodily encounters with heat, disease, and seasonal change. Yet these experiences were also interpreted through European assumptions regarding tropical environments, medical knowledge, race, domesticity, and empire. Heat, illness, monsoon rains, hill stations, and cooling technologies were not simply meteorological phenomena; they became central components of British understandings of India itself. This study attempts to demonstrate that the Indian summer was fundamental to the everyday experience and cultural imagination of British India.

Constructing the Indian Summer through Colonial Imagination

For most British travelers arriving in India during the eighteenth century, climate constituted the earliest and most persistent encounter with the subcontinent. Consequently, travel narratives consistently presented the Indian summer at the centre of colonial experience. British perceptions of the Indian summer were far from uniform. While many travellers regarded the climate as oppressive and dangerous, others argued that its reputation had been exaggerated. These contrasting assessments demonstrate that colonial understandings of climate were shaped not simply by environmental conditions but by differences in experience, geography, duration of residence, occupation, and personal adaptation. Rather than speaking of a single British perception of the Indian summer, it is therefore more accurate to identify a spectrum of responses that evolved through prolonged engagement with

tropical environments.

One of the earliest and most detailed accounts appears in the letters of Jemima Kindersley, who viewed the Indian hot season as a cycle of increasing environmental intensity. She observed that although storms temporarily cooled the earth, they were invariably followed by even greater heat until the monsoon finally arrived. The delay of the rains was not simply an inconvenience but a matter of life and death, for prolonged hot weather was associated with unusually high mortality among Europeans.⁵ Kindersley further mentions widespread illness to what contemporaries called “Pucker fever,” reflecting the eighteenth-century medical belief that excessive heat weakened digestion and rendered the human body especially vulnerable to disease. Pucker fever was a term commonly used by eighteenth-century European travellers and colonial officials in India to describe rapidly fatal epidemic diseases, especially cholera, which could cause death within a few hours. Contemporary physicians associated it with the highest degree of “putridity.” The expression is generally believed to be an anglicized form of the Hindi word *pakka* (or *pucka*), meaning “complete,” “absolute,” or “severe,” reflecting the perceived intensity and fatal nature of the illness. Because overland journeys were commonly undertaken during the dry months, travelers frequently moved at night and rested throughout the hottest hours of the day. Along major roads, avenues of trees and masonry tanks had been constructed to provide shade and water for travelers, illustrating that adaptation to the Indian summer long predated British rule and relied upon environmental practices developed within South Asia itself.⁶ This reminds us that British travelers entered an existing landscape of climatic adaptation rather than creating one from scratch. The relationship between architecture and climate appears equally prominently in Kindersley’s account. Describing Allahabad Fort, Kindersley observed that its thick stone walls initially delayed the sun’s penetration, but once heated they retained warmth so effectively that “it is equally hot by night as by day,” until “every stone contains the heat of a fire,” rendering the entire complex “as hot and close as an oven.”⁷ Thick masonry, narrow passages, and enclosed courtyards prevented air circulation so that buildings intended for defence became almost uninhabitable during the hottest months. At the same time, residents attempted to counter these conditions by remaining indoors during the afternoon, sleeping on terraces after sunset, and exploiting the comparatively cooler hours of morning and evening.⁸

Many decades later, Fanny Parkes recorded remarkably similar observations despite travelling through different regions and under different political circumstances. Her journal repeatedly portrays the Indian summer as an environment demanding continuous negotiation. Writing from Allahabad, she

famously declared that the city “may boast of being the oven of India,” noting indoor temperatures of ninety-three degrees even when houses were equipped with *tatties* and *pankhas*.⁹ Yet Parkes' significance lies not only in her descriptions of heat but also in her detailed explanation of the technologies through which Europeans sought to survive it. She regarded ice as “our greatest luxury,” described the psychological lethargy produced by extreme temperatures, and explained how wet *khas-khas* screens could cool incoming air whenever even a slight breeze appeared.¹⁰ Parkes also complicates the conventional distinction between luxury and necessity. In Britain, ice, spacious verandahs, and elaborate ventilation systems might have been regarded as markers of comfort. In India, however, she insisted that such devices had become essential for health and survival. She observed that “where the climate is so oppressive,” practices considered luxurious in Europe assumed the character of necessities, while even routine movement required wheeled transport because walking became impossible during the daytime.¹¹ Her observations show that life inside British households in colonial India was shaped as much by the climate as by social customs. Families had to organize their daily routines and homes according to the demands of the weather.

The later experiences of Emily Eden present the environmental contrast between the plains and the Himalayan foothills. Throughout *Up the Country*, Eden repeatedly depicts the plains as spaces of exhausting heat and recurring fever, whereas Simla and Mussoorie appear as environments of recovery, fresh air, and comparative comfort. Her longing to reach the hills was not merely aesthetic but physiological, reflecting the widespread colonial belief that altitude offered protection against the debilitating effects of tropical heat.¹² The seasonal migration of officials to hill stations thus represented an environmental strategy as much as an administrative practice.

Importantly, however, not all observers accepted the idea that India was inherently unhealthy. One nineteenth-century traveler argued explicitly that the climate of India had been “much maligned,” maintaining that Europeans who regulated their habits, avoided unnecessary exposure to the midday sun, and practiced moderation in diet could enjoy health comparable to that found in many parts of Europe. From this perspective, illness resulted less from climate itself than from inappropriate behavior imported from colder countries. Climate was not universally regarded as an inescapable enemy; for some writers, successful adaptation depended upon learning to live according to local environmental conditions.

Taken together, these narratives reveal that the Indian summer shaped patterns of travel, architectural

design, domestic organisation, bodily discipline, and even imperial geography through the emergence of hill stations and seasonal migration. At the same time, British perceptions remained internally diverse. Some travellers emphasised danger and disease; others stressed prudence, acclimatisation, and environmental adjustment.

Indigenous Knowledge, Domestic Technologies, and Colonial Survival

Prolonged residence in India demanded practical adaptation, forcing Europeans to modify their houses, clothing, travelling routines, diets, working hours, and domestic arrangements. Far from relying solely upon European technology, these adjustments depended upon indigenous knowledge accumulated over centuries of living in South Asia's diverse climatic zones. The history of colonial adaptation to climate, therefore, is also a history of environmental knowledge transfer and unequal labour relations.

One of the earliest observations of environmental adaptation appears in Jemima Kindersley's account of overland travel through northern India. She notes that journeys were generally undertaken during the hot season only at night, while travelers halted during the intense heat of the day. This was not simply a matter of convenience but a carefully evolved response to climatic realities. Long avenues of trees were planted specifically to provide shade, while masonry tanks enabled travelers to bathe, drink, and recover from the oppressive heat before continuing their journeys.¹³ Such observations indicate that British travelers entered landscapes where adaptation to heat had already been incorporated into infrastructure through indigenous planning rather than colonial innovation. The adaptation of domestic architecture formed another crucial strategy. Kindersley observed that thick masonry delayed the penetration of the sun's rays into buildings, although the same walls retained heat long after sunset. Consequently, houses remained unbearably hot during the night despite the relative coolness of the surrounding air. Residents therefore closed buildings during the afternoon to exclude hot air, while evenings were spent on terraces or rooftops where movement of air provided some relief.¹⁴ These descriptions illustrate that colonial households gradually adopted patterns of occupation already common in many parts of India, reorganising domestic life according to the thermal behaviour of local building materials.

Maria Graham recorded similar adaptations in Bengal, although under different environmental conditions. She noted that Calcutta itself was widely regarded as unhealthy during the hot season, prompt-

ing affluent Europeans to retreat temporarily to suburban garden houses where open spaces, vegetation, and freer air circulation produced comparatively cooler conditions. Daily routines likewise shifted to coincide with the cooler hours before sunrise and after sunset because the middle of the day rendered sustained labour almost impossible.¹⁵

Among all the travel narratives in this collection, however, Fanny Parkes provides the most sophisticated account of environmental adaptation. Rather than merely describing discomfort, she carefully explains the technological systems developed to produce artificial coolness inside colonial houses. Preparing for the hot winds, Parkes described how verandahs were constructed, *pankhas* suspended from ceilings, and an elaborate machine known as the *thermantidote* installed to force cooled air into domestic interiors.¹⁶ Her technical description of the *thermantidote*, its wooden frame, iron axle, rotating fans, projecting funnel, and method of operation, demonstrates an unusual interest in the mechanics of climatic adaptation. Water continually dripped over *khas-khas* (vetiver) screens, through which air passed before entering the house, producing evaporative cooling that substantially reduced indoor temperatures.¹⁷ Parkes repeatedly emphasised that such technologies transformed heat from an unavoidable natural condition into a manageable domestic environment. Yet she also recognized their limitations. During periods of extreme weather, indoor temperatures still exceeded ninety degrees despite the combined operation of *tatties* and *pankhas*, while Allahabad remained, in her memorable phrase, “the oven of India”.¹⁸ Adaptation mitigated rather than eliminated climatic discomfort. Ice occupied a similarly important position within these adaptive strategies. Parkes records that ice harvested during the cold season and preserved in specially constructed pits became one of the most valued commodities of the hot months. When the ice pits were opened each summer, subscribers received carefully rationed supplies, which she described as “perfectly invaluable” when temperatures approached ninety-three degrees. She declared simply that “ice is our greatest luxury”.¹⁹ The significance of ice extended beyond comfort. Within colonial medical thinking, cooled drinks, preserved food, and reduced indoor temperatures were increasingly associated with maintaining health in tropical conditions. What might have appeared an extravagant luxury in Britain acquired practical importance within the Indian environment.

The availability of cool interiors, however, depended upon continuous human labour. Parkes' detailed inventory of household personnel reveals the hidden workforce sustaining colonial comfort. *Thermantidotes* required men to rotate their heavy fans manually. *Khas-khas* screens demanded a constant supply of water carried by *bhishtis*, while additional coolies remained employed throughout the hot

season solely to keep the screens continuously wet. Punkahs, likewise, depended upon specialized pullers working for long hours, often throughout the night. During particularly hot weather, Parkes observed, households employed twelve or fourteen extra labourers simply to operate cooling equipment.²⁰ These descriptions fundamentally challenge any assumption that colonial adaptation rested upon technology alone. Every cooling device required sustained human effort, and that effort was overwhelmingly provided by Indian workers. The dependence upon indigenous labour extended beyond domestic cooling. Contemporary observers repeatedly remarked that large households were not merely symbols of colonial prestige but practical responses to climatic conditions. Parkes argued that “the heat of the climate” itself obliged Europeans to maintain numerous servants, whose specialised tasks ranged from water carrying and ventilation to food preparation and transport.²¹ Climate-generated labor requirements were unknown in Britain, creating a colonial household organized around the maintenance of bodily comfort under tropical conditions.

Modern scholarship has encouraged historians to interpret these observations differently from the travelers themselves. Ketaki Kushari Dyson argues that British observers frequently mistook environmentally conditioned behaviour for idleness. While many contemporaries complained that Indian servants were “lazy” and “addicted to do nothing,” Dyson contends that “the Indian attitude to physical exercise was an adaptation to the climate,”²² and that Europeans who failed to adjust to tropical conditions often harmed themselves through “over-exertion and over-eating.” She further notes that the “climatic, economic, and socio-political causes of ‘indolence’” were largely overlooked by colonial observers.²³ The organization of domestic service reflected climatic, economic, and social realities rather than mere cultural preference. Dyson further notes that experienced travelers gradually learned to respect the judgement of palanquin bearers and other transport workers, recognizing that local knowledge of climate frequently surpassed their own.²⁴ Successful residence in India required learning from those whose everyday lives had long been organised around the demands of the tropical environment. British authority rested upon claims of scientific and technological superiority, yet everyday survival depended upon practices developed within South Asia long before the establishment of empire. The Indian summer could not simply be conquered through European innovation. Instead, it required Europeans to accommodate themselves to existing environmental knowledge while simultaneously relying upon extensive networks of Indian labour.

Indian Summer, Disease, and the Colonial Body

Travel narratives consistently transformed climatic observations into physiological experiences, describing heat in terms of exhaustion, fever, digestive disorders, insomnia, headaches, and mental fatigue. Fever, cholera, dysentery, malaria, and heatstroke were frequently explained through environmental conditions, creating what may be described as a medical geography of colonial India, in which particular regions acquired reputations as inherently healthy or unhealthy. These perceptions profoundly influenced patterns of travel, administrative mobility, military deployment, and seasonal migration throughout the nineteenth century.

Among the earliest travel writers in this collection, Jemima Kindersley repeatedly associated the progress of the hot season with declining health among Europeans. Her discussion of the annual "North-Westers" illustrates the close relationship she perceived between weather and mortality. Although these violent storms temporarily moderated the heat, she believed that the interval before the arrival of the monsoon remained particularly dangerous because delayed rains produced an alarming increase in sudden deaths among the English population.²⁵ Significantly, Kindersley attributed much of this mortality to what contemporaries called "Pucker fever," explaining that excessive heat relaxed the stomach, interrupted digestion, and eventually produced severe illness or death. Her explanation reflects the medical assumptions of the eighteenth century, when tropical diseases were commonly understood through theories linking atmospheric conditions and digestive balance rather than microbial infection. Kindersley's account also reveals that British women were not regarded as immune from climatic dangers. Rejecting the contemporary assumption that English ladies escaped the worst effects of the Indian climate, she argued that many suffered from chronic nervous weakness, slow fevers, biliary disorders, and the gradual physical deterioration associated with continuous perspiration and tropical heat.²⁶ Such observations complicate traditional narratives that focus primarily upon soldiers and civil servants. Women's travel narratives shows that climatic illness permeated domestic life, affecting the entire colonial household rather than merely those engaged in outdoor labour.

The bodily consequences of extreme heat appear even more vividly in Emily Eden's memoir. While travelling through northern India, Eden recalled attacks of severe fever accompanied by intense bodily pain, remarking that she had never imagined "one head and one set of bones could hold so much pain." More revealing still is her observation that "*every inch of the plains in India has its fever in it,*" a phrase that transformed disease from an individual medical condition into a geographical characteristic of the landscape itself.²⁷ Rather than speaking simply of illness, she referred to the "*Delhi*

fever,” the “*Agra fever*,” and the dreaded “*Hansi fever*,” indicating how British residents mapped disease onto particular localities.²⁸ The geography of northern India was simultaneously imagined as a geography of health and sickness. Eden repeatedly presents camp life as physically dangerous, describing fever in tents as “the most compendious definition of intense misery.” Long administrative tours exposed officials and their families to prolonged outdoor conditions, making illness an almost expected consequence of travel.²⁹ Yet the solution was not understood simply as remaining indoors; plans were abandoned for hill stations whenever administrative responsibilities permitted. Climate thus shaped not only health but the geography of colonial governance itself.

The writings of Fanny Parkes repeated references to oppressive temperatures, lethargy, and mental fatigue suggest that climatic experience extended well beyond measurable medical conditions. During the hot season she confessed that “a novel and a sofa is all one is equal to,” while elsewhere she remarked that her thoughts moved “heavily and stupidly” under the influence of intolerable heat.³⁰ Heat affected concentration, emotional state, intellectual activity, and ordinary social interaction. Parkes also connected environmental conditions with patterns of mortality. She observed that deaths among British soldiers were frequently attributed to exposure to the sun and excessive consumption of alcohol during hot weather.³¹ Rather than attributing mortality exclusively to tropical conditions, Parkes acknowledged that European habits themselves contributed to illness. Similar reasoning appears elsewhere in her discussion of diet, where lighter wines gradually replaced heavier alcoholic drinks during the hot months because they were considered more appropriate for the climate. Such passages suggest that adaptation increasingly involved modifying European lifestyles rather than merely enduring tropical weather.

Indeed, one of the most striking features of the travel narratives is the absence of consensus regarding the causes of illness. While many writers portrayed the Indian climate as inherently dangerous, others challenged this assumption directly. One nineteenth-century observer insisted that India had acquired an undeserved reputation for unhealthiness, arguing that those who regulated their habits, avoided unnecessary exposure to the midday sun, and exercised moderation in diet could enjoy health comparable to that found in Europe. According to this, many diseases commonly attributed to climate actually resulted from imprudence and the persistence of habits suited only to colder countries.

British understandings of tropical medicine evolved considerably over time. Earlier travellers frequently interpreted disease through climatic determinism, treating heat itself as the principal cause

of illness. Later observers increasingly emphasized adaptation, appropriate clothing, altered diets, regulated exposure to sunlight, and modified daily routines as essential components of health. Such arguments did not deny the challenges posed by the Indian summer, but they relocated responsibility from nature alone to the interaction between climate and human behaviour. Indira Ghose argues that colonial travel writing reveals less about the “real” India than about the India constructed within the colonial imagination, while also acknowledging that some travellers recognised the importance of adapting routine and diet to tropical conditions rather than simply condemning the climate itself.³² Likewise, Ketaki Kushari Dyson suggests that many behaviours interpreted by Europeans as evidence of Indian indolence were in fact rational physiological adaptations to extreme heat, adaptations that newly arrived Europeans often failed to appreciate.³³ Climatic illness cannot be understood solely through nineteenth-century medical categories. Travel narratives reveal as much about colonial assumptions concerning race, environment, and bodily discipline as they do about disease itself.

Labour, Domesticity, and the Environmental Infrastructure of Empire

Every mechanism designed to mitigate tropical heat required the continuous labour of Indian servants, artisans, transport workers, and water carriers. Travel narratives repeatedly reveal that colonial domestic comfort rested upon an extensive environmental infrastructure maintained almost entirely by indigenous labour. Pankahs did not move automatically, *khas-khas* screens required constant watering, thermantidotes demanded teams of operators, water had to be transported daily, horses and palanquins required attendants, and long journeys depended upon the knowledge and endurance of Indian carriers. The environmental history of British India was therefore inseparable from the history of labour. Climate not only shaped colonial domestic life but also generated a vast workforce whose efforts sustained the everyday functioning of empire.

Among the richest descriptions of this labour infrastructure is Fanny Parkes' account of household life during the hot season. While previous travellers had mentioned cooling devices only in passing, Parkes carefully documented both their construction and operation. Preparing for the arrival of the hot winds, her household installed pankhas throughout the residence, constructed verandahs, and erected a thermantidote capable of forcing cooled air into interior rooms.³⁴ Her narrative makes clear that the effectiveness of these devices depended not upon mechanical automation but upon human labour. The thermantidote functioned only because men manually rotated its iron axle, while continuously wetted *khas-khas* screens cooled incoming air through evaporation.³⁵ Technology, in other words, merely

reorganized labor rather than replacing it. Parkes' meticulous inventory of household employees illustrates the remarkable scale of this dependence. She records separate bearers responsible for pulling *pankhas*, *bhishtis* employed exclusively to supply water, additional coolies whose sole duty was to keep *tatties* continuously wet, and further temporary labourers engaged throughout the hot winds whenever thermantidotes operated day and night. During periods of extreme heat, twelve or fourteen additional coolies might be employed simply to sustain a single cooling system.³⁶ Unlike modern air-conditioning, nineteenth-century cooling technologies remained inseparable from continuous human effort. British memoirs often described large numbers of servants as evidence of Indian social customs or inexpensive labour. Parkes certainly repeated contemporary assumptions regarding caste and occupational specialisation, observing that individual servants refused tasks assigned to other occupational groups.³⁷ Yet her own evidence simultaneously points toward another explanation. The climate itself created new forms of domestic labour unknown in Britain. Water had to be carried constantly; cooling equipment required continuous supervision; insects demanded perpetual attention; clothing and bedding required frequent washing because of perspiration and dust; and household routines shifted around the availability of cooler air. The environmental demands of the Indian summer expanded the scale and complexity of domestic service beyond European experience.

Jemima Kindersley also described the practical ways in which Europeans adapted to the oppressive Indian summer. Besides avoiding outdoor activities during the hottest hours, she notes that the presence of servants with hand fans became essential for daily comfort. As she observes, it was "impossible to sleep in the day-time, or even to dine in comfort without having servants with fans," highlighting how manual cooling devices formed an indispensable part of everyday colonial life during the hot season.³⁸ The importance of water emerges repeatedly throughout the travel narratives. Cooling technologies depended fundamentally upon abundant supplies of water delivered daily by *bhishtis*, whose labour formed one of the least visible yet most indispensable components of colonial life. Wet *khas-khas* screens, evaporative cooling, bathing, drinking, cooking, and the maintenance of gardens all required continuous access to water during the hottest months. Parkes' descriptions reveal that the colonial household was therefore sustained not simply by servants in general but by highly specialised forms of environmental labour.³⁹

The physical demands placed upon transport workers become particularly visible in the observations collected by Ketaki Kushari Dyson. Dyson notes that many British travellers eventually recognized the remarkable endurance of palanquin bearers, whose physically demanding work was performed

under the burning summer sun. Experienced travellers learned that attempts to force these men to ignore their own judgement regarding weather, terrain, or fatigue frequently ended disastrously. Rather than interpreting such caution as laziness, some authors came to appreciate it as practical environmental expertise developed through long familiarity with local conditions.⁴⁰ Many British observers interpreted reduced physical activity during the hottest hours of the day as evidence of laziness or inefficiency. Dyson argues, however, that such behaviour represented a rational adaptation to extreme climatic conditions. Europeans who attempted to maintain patterns of physical exertion appropriate to northern Europe frequently damaged their own health through overwork and excessive consumption of food and alcohol. What appeared to newcomers as inactivity was often a carefully evolved strategy for surviving tropical heat.⁴¹ Environmental adaptation rather than cultural deficiency explains many of the practices that British writers initially misunderstood. Dyson observes that labour within Indian households was divided among numerous individuals so that no single worker carried an unbearable physical burden. Tasks were distributed according to occupational specialization, creating networks of mutual obligation that simultaneously reduced individual exposure to exhausting work.⁴² British employers often regarded this arrangement as unnecessarily complicated. Travellers repeatedly noted the efforts of boatmen towing vessels against river currents, road builders working under intense heat, gardeners maintaining shaded compounds, and elephant drivers, camel handlers, and horse keepers responsible for transporting people and supplies across difficult terrain. Dyson remarks that the journals consistently remembered “the courage of palanquin-bearers in the burning summer sun” alongside the strenuous labour of boatmen engaged in river transport.⁴³ Such observations remind us that colonial movement depended upon thousands of workers whose environmental knowledge and physical endurance rarely entered official imperial narratives.

Fanny Parkes described ice as one of the greatest necessities of the hot season, carefully explaining how it was harvested, preserved, and distributed months after winter had ended.⁴⁴ Behind these brief remarks lay an extensive logistical network involving labourers who harvested, transported, stored, and rationed ice across great distances. Similarly, the apparent elegance of cool verandahs, shaded drawing rooms, and well-ventilated bungalows concealed continuous labour devoted to watering gardens, repairing blinds, operating cooling devices, and maintaining buildings exposed to dust, heat, and monsoon rains. Colonial comfort was produced daily through human work. British rule frequently celebrated its technological achievements, presenting colonial infrastructure as evidence of European scientific superiority. Yet the travel accounts themselves demonstrate that technological devices remained ineffective without Indian labour. Thermantidotes required operators, punkahs required pullers, *tatties* required water carriers, and journeys required experienced guides and transport

workers. Environmental control revealed the practical dependence of Europeans upon the very society they claimed to govern.

Women's Travel Writing and the Domestic Experience of Climate

The Indian summer was not experienced uniformly by all Europeans. While military officers, civil servants, and explorers often encountered climate through campaigns, administrative tours, or scientific observation, British women experienced it primarily through domestic life. Their travel narratives, therefore, reveal colonial environmental history that remain largely absent from official records. Rather than concentrating exclusively on meteorological data or medical statistics, women recorded how heat shaped sleeping arrangements, childcare, household management, clothing, food, architecture, emotional well-being, and everyday social relations. Consequently, British women's memoirs constitute indispensable sources for reconstructing the environmental history of colonial India.

One of the most distinctive features of women's travel writing is its attention to ordinary routines. Whereas official reports generally mentioned the Indian summer only when it disrupted administration or military operations, women repeatedly described how every aspect of domestic life was reorganised around seasonal change. Maria Graham, for example, noted that the oppressive midday heat altered the rhythm of everyday existence. Business and recreation were postponed until the cooler hours before sunrise and after sunset, while houses situated outside Calcutta became seasonal refuges where European families escaped the unhealthy atmosphere of the city during the hottest months.⁴⁵

The domestic focus becomes even more pronounced in the writings of Fanny Parkes. Parkes devoted extraordinary attention to the practical management of household comfort. She recorded preparations for the arrival of the hot winds, the installation of *pankhas*, the construction of verandahs, the operation of thermantidotes, the preservation of ice, and the continual adjustment of interior spaces to changing weather.⁴⁶ Her journal demonstrates that the Indian summer was not simply endured; it demanded constant domestic planning. Climate entered the drawing room, the bedroom, the nursery, and the dining table, requiring continual intervention by those responsible for managing colonial households. Venetian blinds were lowered to exclude the glare of the afternoon sun, blue linen screens reduced reflected light, *pankhas* swung continuously above drawing rooms, and sofas became places of enforced inactivity during the hottest hours of the day. Even mosquitoes appeared to surrender tem-

porarily to the oppressive heat while household members sought refuge indoors, waiting for evening thunderstorms to restore movement and conversation.⁴⁷

Similarly, Emily Eden's correspondence repeatedly records the emotional consequences of prolonged heat. Her letters reveal boredom, frustration, physical exhaustion, interrupted sleep, and an almost continual anticipation of cooler weather or the journey to the Himalayan hills. Unlike official accounts, which often reduced climate to a logistical problem, Eden's narrative illustrates its psychological issues. Heat shaped mood as much as bodily health. Long days confined to tents or bungalows, recurring illness among companions, and the monotony of the plains generated feelings of isolation that frequently accompanied descriptions of the weather.⁴⁸ The experiences recorded by Jemima Kindersley further show that women interpreted climate through domestic responsibilities as well as personal health. She remarks that prolonged exposure to the tropical climate gradually altered complexion, weakened nerves, and diminished the vitality of many European women, observations that reveal how bodily appearance itself became part of colonial environmental consciousness.⁴⁹

Like Jemima Kindersley, **Marianne Postans** also showed that the Indian climate determined the rhythm of everyday life. In *Western India in 1838*, she explains that the intense heat of the day made outdoor activity difficult, while the evening offered a welcome relief. Describing life in Bombay, she writes that after the "heat and lassitude endured throughout the day," people looked forward to spending time in their bungalows, where the "fresh sea breeze" made them "delightful retreats."⁵⁰ She further notes that temporary residences were designed to protect inhabitants from the "mid-day glare," showing how both architecture and daily routines were adapted to the tropical climate.⁵¹ Postans's observations make it clear that the environment shaped not only physical comfort but also the timing of work, recreation, and social interaction in colonial India.

Indira Ghose argues that discussions of British children reveal one of the deepest anxieties within women's travel writing. Colonial ideology encouraged European families to send children back to Britain at an early age because prolonged residence in India was believed to expose them to the morally and physically debilitating effects of the tropical climate. One of the central emotional tragedies of British domestic life in India was that the preservation of children's health frequently required prolonged separation from their parents.⁵²

At the same time, women's narratives reveal considerable diversity in attitudes towards India. Wil-

liam Dalrymple, comparing Emily Eden and Fanny Parkes, argues that the two women embodied markedly different responses to colonial society. While Eden often maintained greater emotional distance and remained more firmly within the conventions of imperial life, Parkes gradually became deeply attached to India, increasingly adopting local customs and displaying an enthusiasm for Indian society that distinguished her from many contemporaries.⁵³ These contrasting perspectives influenced not only their representations of Indian people but also their interpretations of climate. Parkes increasingly regarded adaptation as both possible and desirable, whereas Eden more frequently portrayed the environment as something to be endured until escape to the hills became possible. Responses of British women varied according to personality, length of residence, geographical location, social position, and willingness to engage with Indian society.

Ketaki Kushari Dyson argues that Anglo-Indian journals should be read not simply as historical sources but as literary texts. While acknowledging that they “naturally contain much information,” she explains that she approaches them “not as sources of information or as examples of certain intellectual trends but as books.”⁵⁴ She further urges scholars to attend to the authors’ “response to tropical nature,” “seasonal change,” “nostalgia,” “depression,” and the influence of Indian languages and idioms, thereby emphasizing the literary and experiential dimensions of women’s travel writing.⁵⁵ Their importance lies not only in the information they preserve but also in the distinctive perspective through which environmental experience was interpreted. Their memoirs preserve a history of domestic adaptation and emotional resilience that fundamentally broadens our understanding of colonial environmental history.

Hill Stations, Seasonal Mobility, and the Environmental Geography of Empire

Among the most significant responses to tropical conditions was the development of hill stations, which emerged during the nineteenth century as seasonal refuges for British officials, soldiers, missionaries, and their families. The travel narratives examined here reveal that hill stations were first and foremost environmental adaptations. They represented attempts to escape the debilitating heat of the plains, recover physical health, and reproduce climatic conditions that Europeans associated with home.

The attraction of elevated landscapes appears repeatedly throughout British travel writing. After weeks

of exhausting travel across the plains of northern India, Eden repeatedly described the first sight of the Himalayas with almost emotional relief. The mountains represented more than picturesque scenery; they promised cooler air, recovery from illness, and temporary liberation from the oppressive climate that had dominated life in the plains. Describing her first view of the Himalayas, she remarked that “nothing could be more beautiful than the first view of the range, and no wonder one hates plains,”⁵⁶ while elsewhere she confessed that she was “certain” she would “grow strong again in a week at Simla,” but that “ever being well in the plains”⁵⁷ was “an evident impossibility.” Climatic relief restored appetite, improved sleep, and reduced the continual anxiety associated with fever and excessive heat. Clouds drifting through pine forests, cool evenings, and flowing streams created an environment fundamentally different from the dusty plains that dominated so much of northern India. She repeatedly praised the mountain climate, observing that “it is always cool, and people should make much of that blessing,” while describing the Himalayas as so beautiful that it was “no wonder one hates plains.”⁵⁸

Yet Eden's narrative also demonstrates that the hills were not free from environmental challenges. New arrivals often underestimated the strength of mountain sunlight, assuming that lower temperatures eliminated the need for protective clothing or umbrellas. Eden observed that members of her travelling party fell ill after exposing themselves too freely to the mountain sun, noting that they had “knocked themselves up by fancying that, because they are in the hills, they may go out in the sun without an umbrella.”⁵⁹ Administrative work did not cease during the hot season, yet climatic conditions made prolonged residence in many parts of northern India physically exhausting. Travel narratives repeatedly describe journeys beginning before sunrise, official business postponed until cooler hours, and long interruptions caused by excessive heat or the onset of the monsoon.⁶⁰ Climate regulated not only private life but also the organization of colonial administration.

Hill stations should not be understood merely as European retreats from nature. Their existence depended upon extensive Indian labour. Roads climbing steep mountain slopes required constant maintenance, while houses, churches, hotels, military barracks, and administrative offices were constructed and serviced by Indian artisans and labourers. Supplies, furniture, food, correspondence, and official records were transported by porters, pack animals, and palanquin bearers over difficult terrain. Although British memoirs often celebrated the tranquillity of mountain life, they rarely acknowledged the immense logistical effort necessary to sustain these settlements. The environmental advantages of the hills therefore rested upon the same labour systems that supported colonial households in the plains. Ketaki Kushari Dyson argues that experienced travellers gradually recognised the expertise of

Indian transport workers, particularly palanquin bearers, whose judgement was grounded in practical knowledge of terrain, climate, and the physical demands of travel. As she observes, “Many travellers discovered for themselves that it was dangerous to try to bully palanquin-bearers into doing anything against their wishes and judgement.”⁶¹ She further notes that these workers were “honest, spirited, cheerful” and accustomed to the “physically arduous work” of long-distance travel. Their experience demonstrates that colonial mobility depended not simply upon British authority but upon indigenous environmental knowledge and practical expertise.⁶²

The symbolic significance of mountain landscapes also deserves attention. For many British observers, the hills evoked memories of Europe. Cooler temperatures, evergreen forests, fireplaces during winter evenings, and opportunities for walking or riding resembled aspects of British domestic life largely absent from the tropical plains. This resemblance encouraged attempts to recreate familiar cultural environments through churches, clubs, schools, gardens, and domestic architecture. Hill stations therefore functioned as spaces where Europeans attempted to reconstruct a sense of home within an unfamiliar environment.

Seasonal migration itself acknowledged that colonial society could not permanently reproduce European patterns of life across the tropical plains. Instead, British authority became geographically flexible, relocating substantial sections of its administrative and social life according to climatic rhythms. Eden’s anticipation of reaching the hills, Parkes’ search for healthier stations, and Graham’s descriptions of cooler suburban retreats reveal that environmental mobility was experienced as relief, recovery, and renewal. Collectively, these narratives suggest that hill stations should be understood as environmental institutions rather than merely political or recreational ones. Their emergence reflected the inability of British bodies to remain indefinitely within the climatic conditions of the tropical plains. They reorganised administrative geography, altered patterns of residence, and encouraged new forms of seasonal mobility that became characteristic of colonial rule.

Conclusion

This study has examined British encounters with the Indian summer between 1800 and 1947 through travel narratives, memoirs, letters, and diaries, with particular attention to the writings of British women. The paper has argued that the Indian summer functioned as an active historical force that

shaped colonial mobility, domestic life, medical knowledge and labour relations. The analysis present that British perceptions of the Indian summer were neither uniform nor static. Early travellers such as Jemima Kindersley frequently interpreted the hot season through the language of danger and mortality, emphasising oppressive heat, delayed monsoons, dust storms, and recurrent fever. Emily Eden's observations further illustrate the plains into spaces associated with exhaustion and illness while presenting the Himalayan hills as environments of recovery and relief. Fanny Parkes, by contrast, devoted greater attention to the practical processes through which Europeans learned to inhabit the tropical environment, documenting indigenous cooling technologies, household adaptations, and the labour systems that sustained colonial domesticity.

A second major finding concerns the relationship between environmental adaptation and colonial power. Climatic adaptation required altered daily routines, new architectural forms, modified diets, seasonal migration, and extensive use of indigenous cooling technologies. More importantly, these adaptive strategies rested upon the labour of Indian servants, *bhishtis*, *punkah*-pullers, palanquin bearers, gardeners, artisans, and transport workers whose efforts maintained the environmental conditions necessary for colonial life. The apparent comfort of bungalows, hill stations, and government camps therefore concealed an elaborate labour infrastructure without which imperial domesticity would have been impossible. While imperial ideology celebrated European technological superiority, everyday survival depended upon Indian environmental knowledge and Indian labour.

The study also demonstrates that British women made a distinctive contribution to the environmental history of colonial India. Unlike official reports or military memoirs, women's travel narratives recorded the intimate consequences of climate for domestic life. Their descriptions of sleeping arrangements, childcare, household management, clothing, food, servants, architecture, emotional well-being, and seasonal routines preserve dimensions of environmental experience that rarely appear in administrative archives. These writings reveal that the Indian summer entered colonial households through countless ordinary practices, making climate a constant presence in domestic rather than merely official life. Far from representing peripheral observations, such accounts provide some of the richest evidence available for reconstructing the lived experience of empire.

Another important contribution of this study lies in its emphasis upon the regional diversity of the Indian climate. The travel narratives repeatedly distinguish between the humid atmosphere of Bengal, the hot winds of the Upper Provinces, the scorching plains of Allahabad, the coastal environments

of western India, and the comparatively cooler climates of Mahabaleshwar, Simla, and other hill stations. “The Indian summer” therefore did not constitute a single environmental reality experienced uniformly across the subcontinent. Instead, British travellers encountered multiple climatic regimes, each producing distinctive patterns of adaptation, mobility, and medical understanding. Recognising this diversity allows environmental history to move beyond generalised descriptions of tropical heat and recover the geographical complexity of colonial experience. The Indian summer influenced where officials lived, when they travelled, how houses were built, how diseases were understood, how labour was organised, and how India itself was imagined within British culture. Seen from this perspective, British travel narratives reveal a more complex relationship between empire and environment than is often assumed. They record not the triumph of Europeans over an unfamiliar climate but a continuous process of adaptation, dependence, and accommodation. The Indian summer repeatedly compelled British society to adjust its institutions, domestic life, and patterns of mobility to the ecological realities of the subcontinent.

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