

The English God of Water: Memory of a colonial engineer in Andhra Pradesh

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Bachelor Thesis, GE3V18002

23.07.2020

Under the supervision of Kenan Van De Mieroop

7983 Words

38 Pages

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Summary

Strangely in the South Indian state of Andhra Pradesh the English engineer General Sir Arthur Cotton has become the object of religious worship. Over 3,000 statues of the engineer, whose irrigation works are credited with having ended famine and bringing prosperity to the area, dot the countryside. In this paper I look at the memory of Cotton by applying Pierre Nora's concept of the lieux de mémoire and Ann Rigney's idea of the convergence of lieux de mémoire to the statues. The statues have become a symbol of the Kamma caste and through this they have attained political significance as well. Cotton is constantly lauded for his efforts to save coastal Andhra and he functions as an ideal for current generations as well. This continuing reverence of Cotton has turned him into an important symbol of the farmers who profit most from his works, the members of the Kamma caste. While strange at first sight, Cotton's statues are part of a wider trend in Indian politics. Religious and political groups publicly display their power by erecting statues. The figures represented by the statues usually belong to the group whose influence they are supposed to make visible. However, the colonial context in which Cotton operated is not an important part of this memory. This has allowed him to almost become a local figure, he has become suitable as a representative of the caste and is also seen as such by others. It is somewhat ironic that such a staunch imperialist as Cotton would be revered in a postcolonial nation, however not only does his imperialism not play a role in popular remembrance, it is also not thematised in academic works which discuss Cotton's work.

1. Introduction

In the last years the handling of statues has become a contentious topic in Western countries, especially in the United States. Defenders of statues of controversial persons claim that removing them from public places would be akin to destroying or distorting memory. Those who want them removed do not see them as artefacts of history, but as symbols of oppression which celebrate the values of those they depict. Statues have been problematic for much longer in post-colonial countries; such as India. Drawing on the experience of India, James Daniel Elam advises his compatriots to let Confederate statues rot where they are standing. Such has happened to the statues of Queen Victoria and King George V at the Coronation Grounds in Delhi. It was there that the British Kings and Queens were declared Emperors and Empresses of India in lavish

ceremonies. When Elam visited in 2007 the grounds had turned to a dusty field, with broken and dirty statues. Most Delhiites have completely forgotten them.¹

If Elam had instead toured the Southern state of Andhra Pradesh (AP) he would have found a completely different picture. There, statues of an Englishman are commonplace, well maintained and shiny. Around 3000 statues of General Sir Arthur Cotton (1803-1899) are claimed to stand in the West Godavari, East Godavari and Krishna Districts at the coast of AP. It is there that Cotton was responsible for several irrigation projects during his time as an engineer in British India. These works are credited with having turned the once languishing area into one of the rice bowls of India.² Since then he has become a revered figure for the local communities: even divine for some. How is it possible that a British general is remembered so fondly in a former colony while he has been forgotten in his home country?

In this paper I will explore how the veneration of Arthur Cotton fits into modern India. I will show that Cotton's statues are part of a larger phenomenon in current Indian politics in which ethnic, religious or caste groups show their political power through the construction of statues of historical or religious persons which are related to and represent them. The most striking aspect of Cotton then remains that he was not a member of this group and could even be seen by anti-colonial critics to have oppressed them. In addition, I will discuss how Cotton has been judged in English language academia, where he is not overly present, and how Cotton himself perceived his work.

¹ J. Daniel Elam, 'As the US Debates Confederate Statues, a Powerful Lesson from Delhi – Let Them Rot', Text, Scroll.in (<https://scroll.in>), accessed 3 June 2020, <https://scroll.in/article/852791/in-delhi-statues-of-british-monarchs-have-been-trashed-left-to-rot-a-fitting-end-to-a-cruel-rule>.

² H. Damodaran, *India's New Capitalists: Caste, Business, and Industry in a Modern Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan UK, 2008), 92–94, <https://www.palgrave.com/gp/book/9780230205079>.

To study the commemoration of Cotton I will use concepts from the field of memory studies, specifically Pierre Nora's concept of the lieux de mémoire or sites of memory. With a lieu de mémoire Nora means "any significant entity, whether material or non-material in nature, which by dint of human will or the work of time has become a symbolic element of the memorial heritage of any community."³ These entities need not have been created with the purpose of commemoration, however they call up certain memories when seen by members of the community.

Nora considers memory and history to be in opposition. History is critical and aims to be universally valid. It tries to reconstruct the past, while memory is alive in the present. However this is not a genuine memory, as the object of memory lies outside the lifetime of those who remember. Memory belongs to a specific community and the memory of this community only includes those facts which it deems important, while excluding others.⁴

The most important insight into how Cotton is remembered will come from an analysis of his statues and the ceremonies surrounding his birthday. His many statues are the principal lieux de mémoire for his memory. Media attention surrounding the festivities produces more material which shapes the memory of Cotton, including attempts by political parties to shape the memory to their advantage.

As mentioned, Cotton is not much studied by academia. To gauge academic views of Cotton I will use the two modern books which pay relatively much

³ Pierre Nora, ed., *Realms of Memory: The Construction of the French Past, Volume 1 - Conflicts and Divisions* (Columbia University Press, 1996), xvii.

⁴ Pierre Nora, 'Between Memory and History: Les Lieux de Mémoire', *Representations*, no. 26 (1989): 8–9.

attention to him, *Irrigation in British India* by Ian Stone and *Late Victorian Holocausts* by Mike Davis. Crucial to the study of Cotton's long life and his ideas is the biography which his daughter published in 1900, one year after his death.⁵ The biography treats Cotton's work on irrigation systems and his advocacy for more of them as the main focus of his life. It contains many of his writings on the topic. Cotton's daughter, Lady Elizabeth Hope, shared her father's interests and throughout the book she expresses many of his views herself and makes some additions. It should not merely be seen as a biography, but also as an attempt to spread Cotton's views in British society, as it is a collection of his writings with comments by his daughter.

With this paper I want to achieve several things. I want to draw attention to the exceptionally positive memory of Cotton which has developed in Andhra Pradesh, but which has until now not been the subject of memory studies. Moreover, I want to modify the overly simplistic view of Arthur Cotton in academia, where Cotton is only identified with his irrigation schemes intended to prevent famine, but which does not take into account his other motivations for his life's work. Cotton is a most interesting figure, especially because of his unusual religious significance, which has in my opinion not received enough attention by scholarship.

⁵ Elizabeth Hope, *General Sir Arthur Cotton, R. E., K. C. S. I.* (London, Hodder & Stoughton, 1900), <http://archive.org/details/generalsirarthur01hope>.

2. The importance of statues in Modern India

Hue-Tam Ho Tai has criticised Nora's centring of the nation in his *Lieux de mémoire*. By assuming the existence of a French nation, which includes all the French citizens, with a shared memory, Nora makes invisible groups which remember differently from the mainstream. This goes especially for those who lived in the French colonies and for immigrants who moved to France, but it also affects national minorities: like French Jews and Protestants⁶. This makes the application of the *Lieux de mémoire* concept to postcolonial nations somewhat problematic, as they usually do not have as clear of a unified nation as France does. This is especially the case for India, a country which contains a staggering amount of different ethnicities, languages, religions and not to forget castes; all of whom have their own memory and therefore their own *Lieux de mémoire*.

The history of non-religious statues in India began with the British colonial government. Statues of British kings, administrators and generals were erected in town squares and other prominent places in Indian cities. The statues were intended to show British supremacy and rule over India by physically dominating its townscapes. Like the figures they depicted over 150 of these statues came to India from the UK⁷. When India gained independence in 1947, like other post-colonial countries, it was filled only with monuments to its old rulers but had none to its new revolutionary, nationalist heroes. Unlike other

⁶ Hue-Tam Ho Tai, 'Remembered Realms: Pierre Nora and French National Memory', *The American Historical Review* 106, no. 3 (2001): 912, <https://doi.org/10.2307/2692331>.

⁷ Paul M. McGarr, "'The Viceroys Are Disappearing from the Roundabouts in Delhi": British Symbols of Power in Post-Colonial India', *Modern Asian Studies* 49, no. 3 (May 2015): 789.

postcolonial states such as Indonesia, India was slow to replace its oppressors with its heroes.

Pressure to remove the statues only really started building towards 1957, which was both the decenary of Indian independence as well as the centenary of the Indian Mutiny, which is considered the First War of Indian Independence by Indian nationalists. The inaction towards the removal of British statues, especially in the capital of New Delhi, can be attributed to India's first Prime Minister Jawaharlal Nehru. Nehru was against removing British statues because he considered them to be an important part of Indian history.⁸ The unwillingness to quickly remove British statues was also motivated by his desire to retain good relations with the United Kingdom. Losing its colonies, the British government was afraid of its international prestige crumbling⁹. The fact that the statues symbolising British rule remained unmolested served as a reassurance that Britain had not lost all of its importance and standing in international politics.

But with 1957 coming closer Nehru came under attack from both the left and the right, by socialists and Hindu nationalists, to get rid of some statues. In India's most populated state, Uttar Pradesh, socialist and Hindu militants removed monuments to British generals who had fought the 'mutineers' in 1857. In their stead they built monuments to local heroes who had fought the British. Other states in Northern India soon followed suit.¹⁰ But even with statues being removed in Uttar Pradesh and some other Northern states, things moved slowly in New Delhi. The monumental statue of King George V on the main avenue of the capital was only removed in 1964, after Nehru's death.¹¹ It would only be in

⁸ Ibid., 800.

⁹ Ibid., 831.

¹⁰ Ibid., 811–12.

¹¹ Ibid., 821.

1970, 23 years after independence, that the city was rid of all its monuments to British rulers.¹²

Even slower was the removal of colonial statues in Southern India where British rule began earlier and where the memory of the bloody “War of Independence” was absent. This was also spurred on by the fact that many Southerners have been more concerned about an imposition of Northern culture and Hindi language than about foreign rule. British statues were a reminder of a time when Hindi power was kept in rein by the British and the English language.¹³

With the monarch and others removed and on their way to Coronation Park, new monuments for the capital were demanded. Statues of George V and of British governors at the heart of the country had symbolised the supremacy of Britain over India. What the young nation needed now was a symbol of independence and of national unity. In 1965 the government finally gave in to parliamentarians demands that a statue for the “father of the nation” Mohandas Gandhi be erected in the capital.¹⁴ While such a decision might seem uncontroversial, the preparations for this government-funded statue dragged on for decades.

Not only was money the issue but if Gandhi was to occupy the same pedestal on which George V had stood it was feared that this would send a false message about the new India, and about Gandhi and the nature of his struggle. The pedestal on which and the canopy under which George V had stood remained. The canopy was a centuries old symbol of royal power in India and

¹² Kelly D. Alley, ‘Gandhiji on the Central Vista: A Postcolonial Refiguring*’, *Modern Asian Studies* 31, no. 4 (October 1997): 975.

¹³ McGarr, “‘The Viceroy’s Are Disappearing from the Roundabouts in Delhi’”, 826–27.

¹⁴ Alley, ‘Gandhiji on the Central Vista’, 975.

some felt that because Gandhi's life was dedicated to a non-violent struggle to remove British power he should not come to replace that same power.¹⁵

However, as a member of the then ruling Congress party, Gandhi's statue in such a prominent place would reinforce the legitimacy of the Congress' rule and its connection with Indian independence, making it the interest of the Congress that he come to replace George V.

But while respected and admired the world over, Gandhi is more controversial in India. His nonviolence which earns him so much respect has also come under attack. Opposition parties proposed that, instead of Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose might be honoured at the spot.¹⁶ Contrary to Gandhi's non-violence, Bose led the Indian National Army with Japanese support during the Second World War and fought the British making him a hero for those nationalists who perceive Gandhi's resistance to be weak. In the end, neither Gandhi nor Bose came to occupy George V's spot. The pedestal and canopy are still empty, as a sign of the end of foreign rule and the coming of democracy¹⁷.

The slow removal of British statues and the even slower erection of a statue to Gandhi in New Delhi shows how complicated the politics surrounding national monuments can be in a country such as India. A national identity, such as that of France, is much less clearly existent. Especially in the postcolonial time it had to be actively constructed, questions such as whether Gandhi or Bose should

¹⁵ Ibid., 978.

¹⁶ Ibid., 977.

¹⁷ Sanjeev Ahluwalia, 'Symbolism of India Gate's Empty Canopy', *Times of India Blog* (blog), 3 January 2019, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/blogs/opinion-india/symbolism-of-india-gates-empty-canopy/>.

be honoured had to be answered before an attempt at showing unity could be made.

While the central government was inactive, many statues were built outside of the capital. In the 1970s the Dravida Munnetra Kazhagam party began to erect statues of its leaders all over the Southern state of Tamil Nadu, a move which is now common among parties all over India.¹⁸ Especially famous in this regard is the statue building of Mayawati. Mayawati is a Dalit, or untouchable one, group who stand outside of the caste system and occupy the lowest place in Indian society. When Mayawati became Chief Minister of Uttar Pradesh she began to build statues of Dalit icons: such as Dr B. R. Ambedkar (the Dalit who is credited as the “father of the Indian constitution” and an early leader of the Dalit movement), of Buddha, and eventually also of herself.¹⁹ The statues represent the emancipation and coming into power of Dalit through democratic elections after centuries of oppression. But they do not just show political power like so many other statues, they make visible a community which has hitherto been excluded from mainstream culture. This has made these statues the target of attacks, both rhetorical and physical because the mere existence of the statue seems like an attack on the position of high-caste Hindus.²⁰

Kajri Jain argues that the Dalit statues of the 90s can be seen as the beginning of a real statue building frenzy, not just by governments and politicians but also by businesspeople. Often these statues are of Hindu gods, showing the religious devotion of their builder and heightening their standing among the faithful. From the modest Dalit statues, size has grown into absolutely

¹⁸ McGarr, “The Viceroys Are Disappearing from the Roundabouts in Delhi”, 828.

¹⁹ Ibid., 829.

²⁰ Kashri Jain, ‘Reconfiguring India’s Nationalism, One Grand Statue at a Time’, *The Wire*, 31 October 2018, <https://thewire.in/politics/narendra-modi-statue-of-unity-sardar-patel>.

monumental dimensions nowadays. In fact, India now boasts the largest statue in the world. In 2018 Prime Minister Narendra Modi unveiled a 182-metre-tall statue of India's first deputy Prime Minister, Vallabhbhai Patel. The statue stands in Patel's home state of Gujarat and was commissioned by Modi in 2010 when he was still Chief Minister of Gujarat. Called the *Statue of Unity*, because of Patel's importance in forging fragmented colonial India into one state, Jain sees the statue as an attempt of Modi's Hindu-nationalist BJP party to "insert itself into the freedom movement and its legacy by appropriating Patel as a counterpoint to Nehru" as Patel fits the masculine style which Modi cultivates much better than the pacifistic Gandhi or the secular Nehru.²¹ Contrary to his rival Congress party Modi's BJP lacks the prestige of having led the independence struggle, it was only founded in 1980.

The still new *Statue of Unity* is about to be outdone by a more than 200 metres tall statue of Shivaji in the bay of Mumbai. The 17th century Hindu king is not only a hero in his home state of Maharashtra, but a Hindu nationalist icon for his fight against the Muslim Mughal empire. With their massive statues the Hindu nationalists don't only try to instil patriotism in the population, they want to make sure that that patriotism aligns with their view of a Hindu India, in which Hindu faith and heritage are the main category of identification. All the while regionalist parties also build their own monumental statues, celebrating their own heroes, strengthening regional identities in the face of the central government.

Since independence statues have been used by every political group in India. They are built to emphasise national unity or cultivate local identities, to uphold one vision of India over a different one. They can make visible marginalised

²¹ Ibid.

communities and show the power and influence of their builders. They can glorify a certain caste or show the generosity and devotion of their financier. The intents with which a statue is put up can be more important for its meaning than the person it represents, as is the case with the Congress politician Patel whose statue is designed to strengthen the position of the BJP vis a vis the Congress. Likewise, the decision to tear down or leave up colonial statues can carry different meanings.

3. Aparā Bhageeratha Arthur Cotton

Having seen which role statues play in Indian politics, the memorisation of Cotton will become understandable. Cotton is most popular among the Kamma caste of farmers, who own most of the land in the districts which he irrigated in coastal Andhra Pradesh.

The increased food security and land yield, owing to the irrigation, led to the commercialisation of agriculture in those districts. It enabled some Kammās to move out of agriculture and into businesses as diverse as construction, engineering and metallurgy. They also dominate the Telugu-language film industry, also known as Tollywood, and a Kamma conglomerate owns the world's largest film studio complex.²² Wealth also brought the Kammās political power. They dominate the Telugu Desam Party (TDP): a regional Telugu party. Since its foundation in 1982 the TDP has been one of the most successful parties in Andhra Pradesh and has ruled the state for 20 years since.²³

While the removal of British statues had less popular and political support in Southern India than in the North, Cotton's case is altogether different. Although he reached a high rank in the army, he did not achieve any military feats worthy of official celebration. Therefore, the colonial state erected no monuments in his honour. There were no colonial statues of him to remove. Even so AP now boasts more than 3000 statues of Cotton.

Upon its restoration in 1970 the Dowleswaram Barrage, a dam built by him on the Godavari river, was renamed as Sir Arthur Cotton Barrage. In 1988 the

²² Damodaran, *India's New Capitalists*, 100–105.

²³ *Ibid.*, 107.

Chief Minister of Andhra Pradesh, N. T. Rama Rao, the founder of the TDP, inaugurated the Sir Arthur Cotton Museum next to the dam. The museum was founded to “educate the people, how the great Engineer Sir Arthur Cotton during those olden days constructed the mighty anicut across Godavari river and converted the lands of East and West Godavari Districts as very fertile.”²⁴ It does so by exhibiting models of various dams in the area, as well as photographs taken during construction. In the garden area machines which were used to build and maintain the dam in the 19th century are preserved.

The garden of the museum also houses the most important Cotton statue. From afar the statue might seem like that of a victorious king or general, as it is a monumental, golden equestrian statue. However, upon coming closer it becomes obvious that the rider is not wearing a uniform, but a simple suit and tie. In his hand is not a sword or a marshal’s baton, but the telescope he used to survey the construction area. While Cotton is portrayed like a military hero, he is honoured for fighting nature and not any human foe. Cotton was a proud member of the military and also saw battle during his career, but his martial side is not memorialised.

The importance of this statue is its location not its design. There are many others that are almost identical to it. But the thousands of village statues are mainly important for the farmers who live close to them and use the statues for religious rituals throughout the year. The museum’s statue on the other hand is where Cotton is honoured publicly by politicians. On Cotton’s birthday, 15 May, a minister and sometimes even the Chief Minister of the state will visit the

²⁴ ‘Sir Arthur Cotton Museum | Welcome to East Godavari District Web Portal | India’, accessed 1 June 2020, <https://eastgodavari.ap.gov.in/tourist-place/sir-arthur-cotton-museum/>.

museum. He then climbs the stairs next to the statue to garland Cotton.²⁵ Newspaper and television coverage of the birthday celebrations are also centred on the festivities at the museum. But similar celebrations happen throughout the area; farmers garland village statues, offer sacrifices, and pray at the statue like they would for other Hindu deities. *The Hans India*, one of the largest English-language newspapers of Andhra Pradesh, claims that locals worship Cotton as a water god, because only through his work was their land made fertile.²⁶



Figure 1 Chief Minister N. Chandrababu Naidu garlands the statue of Arthur Cotton on 15 May 2015 Credit: Deccan Chronicle

²⁵ B. v s Bhaskar, 'Irrigation Projects: Naidu Blames Congress Govts. for Delay', *The Hindu*, 16 May 2015, sec. Andhra Pradesh, <https://www.thehindu.com/news/national/andhra-pradesh/irrigation-projects-naidu-blames-congress-govts-for-delay/article7212272.ece>.

²⁶ The Hans India, 'Glowing Tributes Paid to Sir Arthur Cotton', 16 May 2017, <https://www.thehansindia.com/posts/index/Andhra-Pradesh/2017-05-15/Glowing-tributes-paid-to-Sir-Arthur-Cotton/300249>.

The reverence for Cotton among the Kamma is important for the TDP. Publicly honouring him on his birthday allows the party to show its concern for the Kamma and to associate themselves with the figure of Arthur Cotton. On Cotton's 212th birthday in 2015 a post to celebrate it was put up on the TDP Facebook site.²⁷ The post calls Cotton "the most pleasant memory of the State's colonial past" and recognises his contribution to local irrigation as invaluable and unequalled. Although Cotton is unequalled, the post also announces that CBN or N. Chandrababu Naidu, the party's leader, "will emulate Sir Arthur Cotton and create a drought-free Andhra Pradesh". This is to be achieved through the Polavaram and Pattiseema projects, the latter of which has now been finished. They serve to divert water from the Godavari to the Krishna river, both of which contain works by Cotton. Cotton himself dreamed of a very ambitious river linking project, which would connect all of India.²⁸ However, this project gained no traction during his lifetime. The post also calls Cotton *Apara Bhageeratha* or reincarnation of Bhageeratha. Bhageeratha was a legendary king who is credited with having brought the river Ganges down to earth.²⁹ This name for Cotton emphasises the divine statues which he holds.

The Facebook post is accompanied by a picture. In the background a large dam from which water is gushing is visible. The foreground of the picture contains both a picture of a golden statue of Cotton as well as a photograph of CBN. The message is clear; both text and picture equate CBN with Arthur Cotton. The success of Cotton's dams is used to legitimise the building projects of the TDP

²⁷ Telugu Desam Party (TDP), 'Today Is Sir Arthur Thomas Cotton's Birthday!', Facebook, 15 May 2015, <https://www.facebook.com/TDP.Official/photos/a.204264039587195/1073515822662008?type=3>.

²⁸ Hope, *Sir Arthur Cotton*, 297.

²⁹ Kingshuk Nag, *Battleground Telangana : Chronicle Of An Agitation* (HarperCollins Publishers India, 2011), chap. 3.

and to emphasise their usefulness to farmers. Just like the ceremonies, the Facebook post serves to connect the memory of Cotton, and the wealth he has brought to Kamma farmers, to the TDP and to cast CBN in the role of a modern-day Cotton.

Cotton and especially his birthday are also present on television. Next to news coverage of his birthday celebrations, this television presence also includes documentaries about Cotton and his projects; with titles such as “Greatness of Sir Arthur Cotton”³⁰ or “General Sir Arthur Cotton Hard Work”. 10TV, a Telugu news channel owned cooperatively by teachers, agricultural workers and affiliated with the Communist Party of India (Marxist),³¹ showed a program called “In The Memories of Sir Arthur Cotton” on 21 April 2013.³² It even includes an interview with the grandson of Arthur Cotton, Richard Cotton, in England. He laments that he cannot travel to India because of his own advanced age, but he wishes all viewers a happy Ugadi (the Telugu New Year, which was on 11 April in 2013) celebration nonetheless. He pleads for the continuation of the work which was begun by Arthur Cotton over 150 years ago. He is glad of the good relationship between the United Kingdom, the Cotton family and the Telugu community of Andhra Pradesh and hopes that it will become even better in the future. In 2009 Robert Cotton, great-grandson of Arthur Cotton and himself a civil

³⁰ NTV Telugu, *Greatness of Sir Arthur Cotton | Father of Godavari Dam | Godavari Pushkaralu Special*, YouTube video, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=aDicGQ2N0kk>. All of the programmes mentioned come from television channels which stream and upload all of their broadcasted content on youtube as well.

³¹ Telugu360, ‘Delayed Salaries Trouble 10 TV Staff’, *Telugu360.Com*, 9 June 2016, <https://www.telugu360.com/delayed-salaries-trouble-10-tv-staff/>.

³² 10TV News Telugu, *In The Memories Of Sir Arthur Cotton*, YouTube video, 2013, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=jjFKmSLK2P8&t=318s>.

engineer was even invited for a tour of the state and its irrigation systems as a state guest.³³

The interview of Richard Cotton is then followed by a short documentary which is very similar to the other two programmes mentioned above. All three share the same iconography. The camera only captures three different motifs; statues and pictures of Cotton, the irrigation works and farmers in the fields. These videos strengthen the association between Cotton and the prosperity of the farming communities, especially the Kammas. The violence inherent in colonial domination plays no role in this coverage.

The connection between Cotton and the power of the Kamma has also led to the toppling of one of his statues. The statue which was toppled was located on Tank Bund Road in Hyderabad, which today is the capital of both Andhra Pradesh and Telangana state. Cotton's statue, along with those of 32 other heroes of Andhra Pradesh, were erected by Chief Minister Rama Rao of the TDP when Telangana was still part of Andhra Pradesh.³⁴ Telangana, where Hyderabad lays, was split off from Andhra Pradesh in 2014 following a decades-long struggle for autonomy.

Telangana is the poorer, inland area of the Telugu-speaking area. The Telangana movement wanted this split, because it felt that the richer coastal Andhra was more influential in state politics and that it controlled the state's affairs to the disadvantage of Telangana. After rumours that statehood would be denied to Telangana circulated in 2011 the movement prepared the *Million March* on Hyderabad. Real turnout was closer to a respectable 25,000 marchers. The

³³ 'Cotton's Great-Grandson Coming on November', The New Indian Express, 21 November 2009, <https://www.newindianexpress.com/states/andhra-pradesh/2009/nov/21/cottons-great-grandson-coming-on-november-105984.html>.

³⁴ Nag, *Battleground Telangana*, chap. 4.

marchers dismantled and vandalised some of the statues at Tank Bund Road. Among those statues which were dismantled was also that of Arthur Cotton.³⁵ Cotton was not targeted because he was a British coloniser, but because to the Telangana protesters he symbolised coastal Andhra which they felt oppressed them. While Cotton's identity as a coloniser is not problematic for his worship by the Kamma, this worship itself has made his statue into a contentious symbol for the Telangana who feel oppressed by the Kamma and who therefore see Cotton as a symbol of foreign domination, just as they do with the statues of natives of coastal Andhra.

According to Pierre Nora, lieux de mémoire have three dimensions; a material, functional, and symbolic one.³⁶ The most apparent physical dimension of Cotton's memory are the many statues devoted to him. But newspaper and television reports about the statues and commemorations happening there are also part of the lieu. The museum dedicated to Cotton is a collection of all available materials which can evoke his memory. The original function of the Cotton statues was to memorise Cotton's achievements and to provide spaces where rituals could be performed to thank him, i. e. they were intended to be sites of memory. But with the rise of the Kamma to political and economic power his statues became symbols of the castes newfound power. This association has also turned him into a symbol used by the TDP to rally its mainly Kamma base. Symbolically, Cotton is what Nora calls a dominated lieu. "Dominated sites are places of refuge, sanctuaries of instinctive devotion" Nora explains; Cotton's memory is not one

³⁵ Ibid., chap. 1.

³⁶ Nora, *Realms of Memory*, 18–19.

that has to be kept alive by the government. Rather politicians can use the memory of Cotton which is cultivated on the village level.³⁷

Pierre Nora emphasises that unlike history, memory is alive and changing: this is clearly the case with the statues of Cotton. Building on Nora's statement that lieux de mémoire "provide a maximum amount of meaning in a minimum number of signs", Ann Rigney argues that lieux de mémoire are like "a self-perpetuating vortex of symbolic investment." With this she means that through the remembering happening at the lieux they also receive new meanings. She calls this concept convergence.³⁸ Convergence meant that as the Kamma grew richer and more powerful the Cotton statues they had built as thanks for the construction of the dams came to be identified with the new wealth.

The Telugu Desam Party uses the memory of Cotton to strengthen its hold on the Kamma, who are the party's main constituency. This conflation of Cotton statues with politics has made one of his statues the target of a political attack. The attack was not directed against his person, but against the power of the caste and area which he has come to represent. This serves to further strengthen the conflation of Cotton and the Kamma, as the dismantling of his statue was a symbolic attack on Kamma power.

His memory is completely focused on his dam building, which is not tainted by the colonial context in which he worked. The military aspect of Cotton's life plays no role in his memory. Just like Cotton who has been dead for 100 years the

³⁷ Ibid., 19.

³⁸ Ann Rigney, 'Plenitude, Scarcity and the Circulation of Cultural Memory', *Journal of European Studies*, 26 July 2016, <http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/10.1177/0047244105051158>.

memory of colonialism is not a real memory for most Kammass today and therefore it can be ignored when Cotton is remembered.

Considering this, the prominence of Arthur Cotton becomes less astounding, if still special. Cotton has become a symbol of the power of both a caste and a political party. As we have seen above, the erection of statues of such symbolic people is commonplace in modern Indian politics, however usually the persons memorialised belong to the same caste or ethnic group as those who build the statue. If the only goal was to celebrate life-saving irrigation works, the ancient king who built the dams which inspired Cotton could be made the objects of memory. However, during the 2,000 years of those dams' existence the Kamma had neither political power nor were they especially wealthy. Only after Cotton's dams did the rise into their modern position begin. Cotton has almost become a local. He is worshipped the same way as other Hindu deities are and he is unburdened by his colonial background.

Like the Dalit statues built by Mayawati the Cotton statues make political change visible. The 3,000 statues of Cotton spread over just three districts at the coast make it so that the power of the Kamma is constantly visible in the area. But Cotton not only represents the Kamma, he is also a symbol of regionalism. Celebrating Cotton outside of the areas in which he worked would make no sense. An Englishman who built a few dams in one corner of India has no place in the India which the BJP envisions; an India of "one nation, one language and one culture" seeking inspiration in its pre-colonial past.³⁹ Like the much slower removal of colonial statues in the non-Hindi South, the reverence of a Christian

³⁹ 'BJP's Linguistic Agenda Is Antithetical to Progress and Education', The Wire, accessed 23 July 2020, <https://thewire.in/education/bjp-rss-hindi-national-language-education>.

colonial official can also be used as a marker of difference from the more Hindu nationalist North.

4. Cotton the irrigation lobbyist in Academia

While the economic development of India in colonial times has been much criticized, especially development attempts in the form of the railway system, irrigation has fared somewhat better. In his very critical book *Late Victorian Holocausts*, published in 2006, socialist historian Mike Davis brings the Indian railway system into close connection to the many famines which beseeched India in the last quarter of the 19th century. He claims that the railways did not fulfil their goal of facilitating the transport of food to famine-stricken areas. Instead, the better connection, enabled by the railways, served to raise food prices even in areas that were originally not affected by famines of the era and enticed many peasants to switch from food crops to cash crops which left them more vulnerable in case of a drought.⁴⁰

In Davis' book, most British persons connected to the Indian famines are portrayed as either apathetic or downright evil. All work mainly for the profit of the imperialist system. There is, for example, the story of Richard Temple. As Lieutenant-Governor of Bengal, Temple averted a possible famine in 1873 through the importation and distribution of rice. During a drought which could have spelled the death of millions, only 23 famine related deaths were recorded. However, Temple's success was publicly criticised as an "extravagance" both by his superiors and the press. The problem was that his life saving measures were deemed too expensive and that he had intervened in the free market, which went completely against the economic doctrine of British India. His career

⁴⁰ Mike Davis, *Late Victorian Holocausts: El Niño Famines and the Making of the Third World* (London: Verso, 2017), 332–35.

was all but ruined.⁴¹ However, Temple got a chance to redeem himself during the next famine which lasted from 1876-78. He now proclaimed that “the task of saving life irrespective of cost, is one which it is beyond our power to undertake. The embarrassment of debt and weight of taxation consequent on the expense thereby involved would soon become more fatal than the famine itself.”⁴² Temple toured the country, seeing to it that as few people as possible received aid from the government and that even those who worked for it received smaller rations than inmates of Nazi concentration camps would later.⁴³ For this famine Davis quotes mortality estimations which range from 6.1 million to 10.3 million.⁴⁴

Cotton on the other hand is introduced as one of the leaders of what Davis calls the “pro-irrigation lobby”, which criticised the government’s reliance on railways for the prevention of famines. Instead this lobby stressed the need for more irrigation projects such as those which Cotton built in Andhra Pradesh. This would be paid for by stopping investments into the railways, which the lobby considered excessive.⁴⁵ Davis quotes one of Cotton’s pamphlet’s, *The Madras Famine*, in which the latter laments that “now we have before our eyes the sad and humiliating scene of magnificent Works [railways] that have cost poor India 160 millions, which are so utterly worthless in the respect of the first want of India, that millions are dying by the side of them.”

Davis then weighs up the different evaluations of colonial irrigation which Elizabeth Whitcombe and Ian Stone have produced. Whitcombe sees colonial

⁴¹ Ibid., 40–41.

⁴² Ibid., 41.

⁴³ Ibid., 43.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 7.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 351.

irrigation as mainly negative. She claims that the large projects were often badly adapted to local conditions and that they had many unintended consequences which hurt the farmers they were supposed to help. While Stone accepts Whitcombe's argument that the canals had many drawbacks, he judges their impact much more positively. He argues that the canals meant more wealth and more food security for those farmers which could use them.⁴⁶ Davis concludes that while Cotton's plans were not perfect that they would still have been much better than the inaction of the British government.⁴⁷

Ian Stone himself also thematises Cotton in his *Canal Irrigation in British India*, but contrary to Davis he looks at him not from a famine perspective but from an engineering one. His focus is more on the successful and the failed irrigation schemes of Cotton than on his hypothetical plans to end famine.⁴⁸ As the book is partly a response to Whitcombe's theses about Northern India Stone also focuses on the North, therefore leaving little space for Cotton who built all his works in the Southeast. However, a rather lengthy section of Stone's book describes the public conflict which Cotton had with another engineer, Proby Cautley, over the construction of India's largest irrigation work, the Ganges canal in North India. Cotton insisted that the plans of his counterpart contained several costly errors caused by the inexperience of the Northern engineer, who on his side insisted that it was Cotton who had no experience when it came to working with the Northern rivers.⁴⁹ Cotton's refusal to accept he was wrong ended in an embarrassing verdict by a committee of engineers which decided against him.

⁴⁶ Ibid., 351–53.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 355–58.

⁴⁸ Ian Stone, *Canal Irrigation in British India: Perspectives on Technological Change in a Peasant Economy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002), 20.

⁴⁹ Ibid., 49.

Cotton's continued unwillingness to let the case rest afterwards diminished his former brilliant reputation. His lobbying for irrigation works to prevent famine could then be dismissed as coming from a "crank with 'water on his brain'".⁵⁰

For Stone the real reasons for this conflict are not only disagreements over canal design, but Cotton's fear of losing his position as the most respected engineer in India. Stone describes Cotton as a man "supremely confident in his own abilities" who would not tolerate disagreement with him, while Cautley is described as a more popular and modest engineer who was more interested in his work than in being praised.⁵¹ Cotton had "undoubted talents as an engineer" but according to Stone these were wasted because he made himself so many enemies with his belligerence. Another big weakness of Cottons' was his bad judgement when it came to assessing how much demand there was for his dams and how expensive they would be. This was made obvious when the private canal companies which he supported proved to be extremely unprofitable.⁵²

Being concerned with the British response to Indian famines, Cotton is for Davis a visionary who provided a way out of the famines, but who was not heard because the government put financial considerations above famine prevention. Stone on the other hand sees Cotton as a gifted engineer who did not realise how unrealistic many of his ideas were. Stone's proud Cotton who could not stand being outshined by another engineer is a more complicated figure than Davis' Cotton whose lifes-aving plans are foiled purely by government apathy. Cotton is shown as the opposite of the colonial officials, which Davis disdains, rather than being connected to them because of his service for the colonial state. Neither

⁵⁰ Ibid., 52.

⁵¹ Ibid., 53.

⁵² Ibid., 55–56.

authors thematise Cotton's intensely imperialist mindset, focussing instead on famine prevention and recognition as reasons for his working. Like in the popular memory of Cotton, only his irrigation work is remembered. However, neither of them seems to be aware of the status which Cotton enjoys in modern day Andhra Pradesh.

5. Arthur Cotton, Builder of Empire

Arthur Thomas Cotton was born in 1803 in Surrey, England. He came from a long line of landed gentry which prided itself on its century long service for king and country. With the exception of one brother who became a reverend, all of the seven Cotton brothers served in the army, navy or Indian Civil Service. Two of them even worked with him on irrigation projects.⁵³

He joined the army engineers when he was sixteen and shipped out for India in 1821. After working in various engineering positions in Madras Presidency, twenty-year-old Arthur Cotton volunteered for the First Anglo-Burmese War.⁵⁴ After the end of the war Cotton returned to Madras, now as Superintendent Engineer of the [irrigation] Tank Department. Over the next decades Cotton constructed several large irrigation systems in Madras Presidency. He retired in 1860 with the rank of general and returned to England where he was knighted. He spent much of the remaining 39 years of his very long life campaigning for more investment into irrigation in India, as he had already done when he was still serving.

Cotton did indeed tirelessly work for famine relief and irrigation. But he did not do so in the hopes of being worshipped as a saint or deity in the future. While Cotton was frustrated by the governments in both India and Britain, because they would not see the merit of his ideas, this did not mean that he was not an imperialist. Why then did Cotton dedicate his life to irrigation?

⁵³ Hope, *Sir Arthur Cotton*, 8–11.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, 14–16.

One does not need to search long to find out something about the ideology and motivations of Arthur Cotton. In fact, his daughter clearly spells it out already in the preface to his biography: “My father was truly an empire maker, as he was an empire lover; no one ever more zealously longed for the spread of England’s civilisation, her privileges and her blessings over distant lands where, hidden too often behind the curtain of natural beauty, or surface intellectuality, there lies a hidden depth of misery and darkness, such as we, in our favoured country, can scarcely know.”⁵⁵

It would be fair to group Cotton into the very diverse group of “liberals” in British India. While they ranged from evangelicals and free traders to utilitarians, Thomas Metcalf finds that they shared some basic assumptions, mainly that human nature was the same everywhere and that it could be transformed.⁵⁶ However, this did not mean that they saw Indians as equals. They acknowledged that Indian culture had shown greatness in ancient times, however they thought that India had stagnated or even declined since then and could only better itself through foreign intervention. If Europeans gave rational laws and government to the Indians, they would eventually become rational beings capable of ruling themselves. Arthur Cotton’s greatest successes, several dams in the Madras Presidency, were based on Indian dams which had been constructed in the area around the beginning of the common era and which are still in use. He acknowledged that “this is the mode of construction originally used at the ancient native work called the grand anicut, which has stood for so many centuries”⁵⁷ but at the same time he considered Indians below Europeans, complaining that in the

⁵⁵ Hope, *Sir Arthur Cotton*, viii.

⁵⁶ Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, 29.

⁵⁷ Hope, *Sir Arthur Cotton*, 105.

past they were prone “to lower ourselves to the level of the natives.”⁵⁸ Instead the British should have their mode of government override that of the natives to enable progress. Cotton thought that the most vital item missing for the progress of India was water, which would have to be supplied by the British.

The second tenet of his worldview came to Cotton after he began his service with the Indian Army. His daughter tells the story of how while returning by ship to India from the First Anglo-Burmese War, the 21-year-old began to wonder about the origins of the world and started his study of the bible which he continued until death. He always felt the presence of God and “his motives, pursuits, and interests were all coloured by his prevailing study”.⁵⁹ Faith guided and justified all of Cotton’s actions throughout his life. He believed the British empire to be blessed by God and that India had been put into British custody by god.⁶⁰

The fact that he has become an object of worship among Hindus would certainly not have pleased the deeply Christian Cotton. For Cotton, even the use of music in church was a stepping stone to idolatry. At the end of his life Cotton was convinced that the hold of Hinduism and Islam over India was about to end and that the time for Christianity had come.⁶¹ Cotton did not only preach his gospel of irrigation in Britain, he also supported Christian missionaries during his service in India⁶² and was hopeful that his beneficial works would convince the locals of the superiority of Christian government.⁶³ In modern Andhra Pradesh Christians don’t make up much more than one percent of the population.

⁵⁸ Ibid., 98.

⁵⁹ Ibid., 19–20.

⁶⁰ Ibid., 103.

⁶¹ Ibid., 551–52.

⁶² Ibid., 167.

⁶³ Ibid., 124–25.

When Cotton tried to convince the public of the necessity of his plans, he did not advertise them only to stop famine, the purpose for which he is remembered in Andhra Pradesh and by Davis. Instead, most of the effects of the irrigation systems would benefit the British Empire and therefore Cotton's British audience. Cotton claimed that not only the Indian population was hurt by the lack of irrigation, but that the colonial state was missing out on millions of pounds of potential yearly tax revenues. This was true even more so during times of famine. As seen with the example of Richard Temple above, the colonial state was reluctant to spend money for famine relief. Cotton claimed that instead of needing aid, districts with sufficient irrigation could still net the state handsome revenue even in times of drought.⁶⁴

The British need for imperialism was often justified by claiming that it brought "civilization" to the non-Western world.⁶⁵ For Cotton this was not just a post facto rationale to justify colonisation. Rather it enabled, as India was put under British rule by God. The British were beholden to "applying the means which God has placed in our hands for the benefit of the countries He has given us charge of." Such good government would not only be appreciated by God, but also by the natives. Cotton was afraid that British neglect of irrigation systems compared to earlier native rulers lessened the government's legitimacy in the eyes of the peasants.⁶⁶

It is curious in this regard that Cotton is credited with having brought prosperity to coastal Andhra, when a large part of his work consisted in the repair of native

⁶⁴ Ibid., 361–63.

⁶⁵ Bernard Porter, *The Absent-Minded Imperialists: Empire, Society, and Culture in Britain* (Oxford, UNITED KINGDOM: Oxford University Press, Incorporated, 2006), 242–43, <http://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/uunl/detail.action?docID=422702>.

⁶⁶ Hope, *Sir Arthur Cotton*, 125.

works which had fallen into disrepair under British rule. His original works were based on the Grand Anicut, a dam on the Kaveri river, which Cotton's daughter called "of unknown age" but is estimated to be almost two thousand years old.⁶⁷ This might be because only after Cotton's work the rise of the Kammas to such an influential caste began. Therefore, this prosperity is connected to him and not the Hindu kings of old.

Finally, there is the military aspect of Cotton. As mentioned above Cotton fought in the First Anglo-Burmese War in the 1820s. This was the only military campaign that he took part in. He was, however, proud of it for all his life, retelling his experiences often until the end of his life. His daughter retells how in old age he told young soldiers some of his stories, declared that "there was no profession like that of the army" and encouraged them "to become good soldiers of Jesus Christ."⁶⁸ As we have seen above Cotton thought that the British conquest and domination of foreign peoples was condoned by God.

Cotton in Southern India did not fight during the mutiny. However, his brother General Sydney Cotton was in Peshawar in Punjab at the other end of India at the time. Cotton's daughter proudly tells of Sydney Cotton's service during the mutiny when he took "as prisoners, five thousand of the mutineers, whom he had disarmed." She is proud to tell the reader that Cotton was regarded as a very able commander during the mutiny, who was ready to carry out all "stern measures" which were deemed necessary by his superiors at the time.

The Cotton's were firmly opposed to what is often seen as the "first independence war of India", which they considered a mutiny against justified British rule. This

⁶⁷ Ibid., 102.

⁶⁸ Ibid., 557.

opposition to Indian independence does not damage the positive memory of Cotton. This is likely because there was no violent conflict in Andhra Pradesh during the mutiny, which means that the locals lack memories of both the uprising against the British as well as the cruel British reprisals which followed the defeat of the mutiny. Indeed, a historian from Andhra Pradesh has argued that the first mutiny of Indian soldiers against the British occurred in what is now Visakhapatnam, the largest city of Andhra Pradesh, in 1780 already. This claim was lodged after the Chief Minister of the state of Odisha claimed the first mutiny had occurred in his state, in 1817.⁶⁹ This shows that Andhra Pradesh and Odisha, both states not affected by the conflict of 1857, have a different understanding of its importance than more Northern states where anti-British resistance is an important part of the local identity.

⁶⁹ Sumit Kumar Onka, 'Historians Pick Vizag Revolt as First War of Independence', Deccan Chronicle, 21 July 2017, <https://www.deccanchronicle.com/nation/current-affairs/210717/historians-pick-vizag-revolt-as-first-war-of-independence.html>.

6. Conclusion

The statues of Arthur Cotton that dot the countryside of Andhra Pradesh are not statues of a colonial official which have somehow survived until the present. They are the statues of a hero of the Kamma caste who is partly responsible for and symbolises the success of the Kamma in independent India. The evangelical Cotton has become a Hindu deity who is accepted as a local. Celebrations of Cotton which conflate him with Kamma success have made it so that the statues built to thank him for his dams, have become statues which celebrate the Kamma themselves. Cotton's value as a symbol of Kamma wealth and power make him useful for the TDP which is the main Kamma party and this also strengthens the connection between him and the caste again.

While they seem oblivious of Cotton's modern importance, Davis and Stone don't thematise his imperialist designs either. Instead they focus purely on his building project, seeing his motivation as a mix of vainglory and humanist desire to save lives. Likewise, popular memory puts no importance on the fact that Cotton was an occupier, who ultimately had the wellbeing and glory of the British empire on his mind.

The fact that Cotton is seen as a hero of the Kamma instead of an imperialist has ironically made him the target of an independence struggle. But the Telangana militants who toppled his statue did not seek independence from British rule. Rather even they identify Cotton as a symbol of the Kamma caste far from the coast which they see as oppressing them. His statue in Hyderabad is akin statues of colonial rulers that used to be common all over India.

The statues are also a symbol of an India with a plethora of religious, ethnic and caste identities. As regional culture and peculiarities come under attack by a

central government which wants to force its vision of a Hindu state on the whole of India, statues such as that of Cotton also become symbols of regionalism and resistance to the centre. It will be interesting to see if they still stand in 100 years.

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