

The Madness at Deolali

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The slang word 'doolally' or 'doolali' is used to describe someone who is 'out of one's mind' or 'crazy'. It is a derivation of 'doolali-tap' and originates from the latter part of the nineteenth century. The first part of this phrase is derived from the name of a small military town in the Indian state of Maharashtra called Deolali. The second part is a Hindustani word for fever, often ascribed to malaria, although in Sanskrit, 'tapa' means simply heat or torment. Taken literally, it is best translated as 'camp fever'. By the time of the Second World War, the term had been shortened to 'doolally'.

Deolali is located in the Western Ghats of India, near Nasik (Nashik) about 180km north-east of Mumbai (formerly Bombay). It has a long military history, with the first cantonment being established by the British in 1861. The Deolali cantonment was a transit camp for soldiers from the days of the British Raj until after the Second World War, acting as both a training camp for newly arrived soldiers and a point of embarkation for those returning home. During the Second World War, it was known as the British Base Reinforcement Camp and supplied reinforcements to the Fourteenth Army area(1).

Soldiers arriving in Bombay were transported to Deolali by train. Acclimatisation began almost immediately with route marches, physical training and close order drill. Depending on the op-

erational requirements, troops remained at the camp for anything from a few days to several weeks and were then dispatched throughout the continent.

In the nineteenth century, the trooping season operated during the winter and spring only. This had little effect on reinforcement drafts, but for 'time-expired' soldiers at the end of their tours of duty, this limited season could have disastrous consequences. Soldiers posted to Deolali to await repatriation after the end of the trooping season in March would have to wait until the following November for the first troopship home. According to one source, '*...time-expired men at Deolalie had no arms or equipment... (so) time hung heavily on their hands... (and) exemplary soldiers got into serious trouble...'*(2). Some military duties continued, but for many, the long Indian summer and the relentless monsoon season were simply too much to bear. The area around Deolali has a pleasant climate when compared to nearby cities such as Mumbai and Pune, with cool winters and hot summers (seasonal range 5-40°C on average). But, with little else to do in the summer months, soldiers often succumbed to the heat. Prior to the monsoon season, the area around Deolali could become little more than a dust bowl. Soldiers arriving towards the end of the summer often slept on the sandy floors of their tents as there were not enough beds to

go around. Their misery was frequently compounded by sand fleas. Suicide was not uncommon, '*...the climate being so hot and so dusty — that one sergeant put a bullet through his head in his bunk*'(3).

The only relief was the nearby town of Nasik. Nasik is one of the holiest places for Hindu worship in India, with numerous temples and ghats lining the banks of the river Godavari. However, it was also famous for its gin parlours and brothels, which inevitably attracted the bored soldier. Syphilis and other venereal diseases were rife, and in severe cases, required hospitalisation.

Malaria has always been rife in India(4). Human settlement around Deolali was prone to mosquito infestations, and continued to be a problem for British Forces during the Second World War despite the use of anti-malarials(1). Relapsing fevers and episodes of cerebral malaria would have afflicted the rather static population of the cantonment, accounting for the fever, madness and torment of the slang term.

Despite association with psychiatric maladies, Deolali itself never had a dedicated psychiatric hospital. However, there were many asylums in that part of India (5). Like many hospitals of the time, the military hospital at Deolali treated all patients, including the disturbed or deranged, while aggressive patients were usually confined in the prison(5). So why did Deolali become associated with mental illness?

Mental healthcare in India paralleled the advances being made elsewhere in the nineteenth century. However, there were some important differences. For

example, colonial racism made mechanical restraint a necessity in civilian institutions because colonial patients, convinced of their superiority, would not tolerate the '*...shame of being laid hands upon by natives*'(6). Colonial patients were usually confined separately from Indian patients to maintain the image of colonial superiority. Mildly 'nervous' or 'fatigued' officers might remain in India after a brief convalescence but more serious illness, or failure to recover their senses within a year of being confined, ended in forced repatriation to England (6). The mentally ill were swept away to Deolali from all over India for confinement away from the scrutiny of the local population to await repatriation(5). However, the long sea journey home was not the place for unstable patients who might be a risk to themselves or their shipmates. While wounded or physically ill patients were evacuated on the next available ship, mentally ill patients were confined for longer periods until safe for repatriation. Many would have been left untreated except in a custodial manner while awaiting the journey home(5).

Frank Richards wrote, '*The well known saying among soldiers when speaking of a man who does queer things, "Oh, he's got the Doo-lally tap," originated, I think, in the peculiar way men behaved owing to the boredom of that camp*'(2). While this may have been true at times, the reason that Deolali became synonymous with mental illness has more to do with the limitations imposed on troop movements by the seasons, the debilitating effect of the summer climate, alcoholism, venereal diseases, malaria,

and the difficulties of treating mental illness in the colonies.

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