

From Madras to Bangalore

EMILY STEVENSON

STEPHEN PUTNAM HUGHES

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Image 1: "Mylapore Temple Tank". Published by Raphael Tuck & Sons, London, early 20th century. The caption reads: "Mylapore Tank: Madras is built in a straggling fashion along the seashore. Most roads run between the groves of palms and other trees. The shops often stand back from the streets with gardens in front of the compounds that are almost parks and rice fields wind in and out between them."

A careful examination of picture postcards of Madras and Bangalore of the early 20th century shows that this medium tells us a complex story of colonial urbanism and the history of photography that sheds a new light on these two cities.

POSTCARDS were the first widely available and affordable form of mass-produced photography. In the early decades of the 20th century, when postcards were at the height of their popularity, they were a new media craze that swept the globe. They were something akin to Instagram, an innovative and affordable mobile form of photo sharing and social networking.

It has been estimated that in Britain alone approximately six billion postcards passed through the British postal system between 1902 and 1910.

More picture postcards were produced for British India than any other part of the Empire outside of Britain, yet this vast popular archive has not featured well in histories of global media. They have been commonly viewed as trivial scraps of old-fashioned colonial nostalgia. Compared with the high market value museum collections and the scholarly attention paid to historical photography of India, postcards have to a large extent been neglected as photography's degraded, ephemeral, poor cousin. (<https://www.frontline.in/>)

We have tried to tap into this neglected mountain of historical evidence through research that has resulted in a public exhibition that is currently running in London. Titled "From Madras to Bangalore: Picture Postcards as Urban History of Colonial India" (on at the Brunei Gallery, SOAS, University of London, from July 12 until September 23), the exhibition covers a selection of picture postcards from the two cities between 1900 and the 1930s.

By pairing these two prominent south Indian cities together, this exhibition tells a tale of how they were linked through a set of common representational styles, networks of photographic production and the movement of both people and postcards. We map out how picture postcard practices forged a set of relationships between Madras and Bangalore in the early 20th century.

Postcards are a conventional system for visually representing urban life, which has remained surprisingly intact for well over a century and has spread just about everywhere in the world. Each postcard offers an emblematic image of the city that is meant to encapsulate and visually materialise a "sight" that is produced as an object that can be sold, bought, written on, taken or sent to other people. Most often the postcard's presumed mode of address is to visitors or postal recipients that are not familiar with the city. The postcard offers a pictorial vocabulary that translates the cluttered urban environment into "sights" that can be isolated and recorded, dropped in the mail, collected and organised in scrapbooks. As such, these postcards are not so much "a window on to the past" as a visual framework that helped recipients imagine the social and cultural geographies of cities and their inhabitants. In the early decades of the 20th century, they were the most widely circulated and popular media of urban experience the world over.

It is all too easy for us looking back on historical postcards to fixate on the images as if they hold some inherent meaning in and of themselves. However, what distinguishes postcards from other forms of photographs is that they are also a kind of postal correspondence, which links people in widely dispersed situations through both images and written messages. They were meant to be inscribed with messages that might convey much more than their images. From our current perspective, postcards' combination of image, text, address

and postmark can teach us a great deal about the history of Madras and Bangalore. It can also tell us much about the networks postcards napped out as they were produced and consumed in these two cities.

As the two most significant British Indian cities in the Madras Presidency—separated by only 215 miles (344 kilometres) and intimately linked through administration, trade and migration—postcard production networks of exchange were particularly strong between them. Not only did many photographic materials reach Bangalore from Madras, but photographers themselves moved between the two cities as they changed and expanded their businesses.

Decolonising postcard production

There can be no doubt that the postcards of Madras and Bangalore spoke in the main to European expectations, perspectives and experience of the cities. Most of the surviving postcards of India from this period were sent abroad by Europeans living and working in India to their families living outside of India. As a result of this, and the fact that paper products have a shorter life in India's climate, these old postcards are now much more difficult to find in India. Moreover, from a quick look through the picture postcard images, messages and addressees, one might easily assume that these cards were a one-sided product of British rule. On the basis of our research, however, we have found that this would be an oversimplification. When we look closer into the production history of these postcards, it becomes clear that they tell a more complex story than a one-sided colonial encounter and demonstrate that a hard and fast distinction between “Indian” and “Western” photography in India was not at play on the ground.

Postcard production circuits in India were part of a complex global network. It was not unusual for a photograph to be taken in India, printed in postcard format in Germany or Italy, then published by British or Indian companies to be sold across India and finally sent through the postal system abroad or within India with written messages. Alongside these national and global networks of postcard production that linked Madras and Bangalore, however, there were also extensive local networks of photographers, apprentices and studios in south India that played a crucial role in producing postcards. There was a thriving market for postcards in south India at the time, and we were surprised to find so many different photographic studios producing postcards in the relatively small geographic areas of Madras and Bangalore. We have found evidence of at least 34 postcard producers operating in the two cities at this time, and there are certainly to be more that we have not yet been able to verify.

The largest global company operating in these two cities was Raphael Tuck & Sons. Tuck's began as a framing and picture business in 1860 in London, but its colourised postcards eventually became its biggest business and were sold across the globe. It produced huge quantities of picture postcards of all over India's major cities, and its booklets of carefully curated "collo-photo" and "sepia" postcard sets were specifically produced for sale at the English Emporium on South Parade, Bangalore, and Spencer's & Co. Ltd on Mount Road, Madras (images 1 and 2). In many ways the company epitomises the global reach of the postcard medium and the prevalence of European consumption in the postcard market. However, to deduce from this that large-scale producers of postcards of India were headquartered only in the metropole would be inaccurate. (<https://www.frontline.in/>)

Working in both Madras and Bangalore, Higginbotham & Co. and Spencer's & Co. Ltd were undoubtedly the biggest players in terms of the numbers of postcards produced, with each going over 1,000 in the early decades of the 20th century. Higginbotham & Co. was headquartered in Madras and, after 1897, also Bangalore. Whilst Higginbotham & Co. remains well-known today as India's longest-running bookstore, what is less known is that in the early 20th century it published more postcards of south India than any other company, with Bangalore and Madras featured most prominently.

Despite depicting two different cities, these postcards share an instantly recognisable style, typeface and layout, and thereby unite the two cities in part of a larger representational schema (image 3). Some of the postcards were captioned in a manner that made it impossible to distinguish whether the image was from Madras or Bangalore (image 4). The company's stores located on Mount Road and South Parade would have been popular places for European residents and visitors to pick up postcards to send to friends and family. In a postcard of Mount Road, the sender made a mark on to the image itself to show the location of the Higginbotham's shop where the postcard was purchased (image 5).

Spencer's & Co., with its headquarters on Mount Road, was a company established in 1863 by Charles Durrant and J.W. Spencer as an auctioneers and general, upmarket goods store. Like Higginbotham's, Spencer's produced many of its own postcards of cities across India but mainly concentrated on Bangalore and Madras (image 6). It also served for a time as the local agent and retailer for Raphael Tuck & Sons cards as noted above.

It was common for photographic studios to initially set up in the larger city of Madras before subsequently establishing branches in the Bangalore cantonment. Wiele & Klein on Mount Road, for example, was a renowned studio and prolific postcard producer (image 7). The studio was run by two Germans, Ernst Frederick Hermann Wiele and Theodor Klein, whose business

interests bridged Madras and Bangalore over the course of their careers in south India. By 1900, Wiele had established his workshop at Jumble 20 South Parade. Wiele's Studio, Bangalore, produced a wide array of picture postcards of the city, which were often hand-tinted using watercolour in an especially painterly style (image 8). Similarly, Del Turco & Co. established studios on both Mount Road and South Parade and produced picture postcards of both cities. (<https://www.frontline.in/>)

From archival records and the addresses printed on postcards themselves, it is clear that the majority of picture postcard producers in Bangalore were located in the cantonment with multiples around South Parade, whilst in Madras several prominent studios were clustered along Mount Road. This trend for postcard producers to be located in particularly European areas of Madras and Bangalore is indicative of the fact that the market for picture postcards was geared towards Europeans.

Beyond the handful of leading postcard producers, however, there were many smaller players in the market that tended to be located in other parts of the cities more closely associated with Indian-run businesses and Indian residential areas. In fact, we were surprised to learn that there had been so many Indian postcard producers in a trade that was oriented towards Europeans. Indian photographers played a significant role in the production of postcards and, going by their occasional use of local language captions, seem to have been trying to push the market beyond European consumers (image 9). This is something that has previously gone largely unacknowledged in histories of the medium.

Although each of these companies' postcard production was smaller in number than that of the leading companies, there were in fact far more Indian-owned photographic studios operating in south India than European ones. Companies such as Ratna & Co., Venkiah Bros., R. Shaikahmed Saib & Co. in Madras and Maruthy & Co., T. Manchayya, A.P.S. Pani, B. Muniratnam Rajoo, P. Valu and T. Mamundy Pillai & Sons in Bangalore all produced postcards alongside the larger companies (images 10, 11 and 12). Amongst the numerous Indian photographers, apprentices and studios involved in producing postcards, S. Mahadeo & Son was, perhaps, the most prolific with several branches in multiple cities, including Bangalore and Belgaum. Its studio in Bangalore was first located on Dickenson Road before it was moved to St. John's Road around 1913 and continues today in the form of G.G. Welling on M.G. Road. Further research is needed to learn more about these photographers and their work, but it is certain that together they made important contributions to the postcard trade in south India.

When the production history of early 20th century postcards of Madras and Bangalore is examined, it becomes clear that the two cities were linked through global, regional and local photographic networks that reveal the crucial role that both Indian photographers and regional itinerant practice played in this medium's success. (<https://www.frontline.in/>)

Postcards were by design a mobile form meant to travel along the lines of the postal network. They were a form of popular social media that made connections between people across spatial differences. As such, the messages on the back of postcards from Madras and Bangalore leave us a historical record of the personal connections and social traffic between the two cities.

Amongst the postcards consulted for this project were two sizable personal collections from families in the United Kingdom that date to their time living in south India in the early 20th century. Both collections speak to the back-and-forth between the two cities. The first collection we examined comprises 120 postcards that the teenager May Reynolds compiled into a postcard album in Birmingham. The postcards date between 1912 and 1919 and all but a small number were written by her aunt, Annie Reynolds. Annie moved to Madras in 1912 to join her husband, Will Reynolds, who worked in the office of a Mount Road automobile business that was being managed by his uncle, Kenneth Reynolds. Over the course of this detailed record of a one-sided postcard correspondence (we do not have a record of the letters and postcards that were being sent to India), the messages tell the story of Annie and Will's everyday life in Madras. They tell us about such habitual events as their weekly trips to the church at St. George's Cathedral, their visits to the Horticultural Gardens for walks and the milestones of their son, Billie, who was born in Madras (image 13). In addition to their daily routine in Madras, the messages also narrate frequent journeys and prolonged visits to Bangalore (images 14 and 15). For British residents in Madras, Bangalore was an important destination to meet up with friends, escape the heat of Madras and to recuperate during periods of illness. Travel from Madras to Bangalore was an important part of their social world. In the album there are postcards of Bangalore that were sent from Madras and postcards of Madras sent from Bangalore, suggesting an easy interchangeability between the two cities that felt like home in India to the Reynolds family (image 16).

Another personal collection of postcards that we were able to consult was sent between India and Scotland, primarily by Mr and Mrs Brown to Mr and Mrs McDonald at Dalkeith Road in Edinburgh. The postcards narrate a story of the Brown family who lived in Madras with their daughter, Ella. George Brown's profession is not specified, but he speaks occasionally of stocktaking and the seasonal "ups and downs" of trade. The collection comprises nearly 200 picture postcards of various Indian cities but with a concentration on Madras and

Bangalore. The postcards span a period of eight years, from 1904 to 1912. They were sent with great regularity and sometimes multiple postcards were even posted on the same day. The correspondence regularly gave updates on health and business. They also narrated family stories, for example, about the cathedral they visited every Sunday, photographs sent for the McDonald's album, Ella's role in a local play and a joke played on Mrs Brown for April Fool's Day. The weather was a frequent topic of the postcard messages, with the "stifling" heat of Madras often lamented (image 18). But like May's album discussed above, this collection shows the close connections between Europeans living in Madras and Bangalore. The Browns visited Bangalore regularly for "holidays", describing it as a "lovely place" with "bracing" weather and a number of friends referred to as "great pals" (images 17, 19 and 20).

Through our research we have therefore found that Madras and Bangalore were linked through global, national and local networks of postcard production and consumption. Not only were there commonalities in the ways in which the two city's streets, monuments and people were represented, but photographers, consumers and postcards themselves moved back and forth between the cities. When studio and publisher information, images and messages of postcards of these two cities are closely examined, it becomes clear that this medium tells us a complex story of colonial urbanism and the history of photography that sheds a new light on Madras and Bangalore.

Emily Stevenson, a final year PhD research student, and Dr Stephen Putnam Hughes are both in the Anthropology and Sociology Department at SOAS, University of London. Follow daily uploads from the exhibition on Instagram: SOASpostcard