CHAPTER – VI
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Idukki is a District in the High Ranges of Kerala. Deforestation in the District and the High Ranges during the last two centuries is presented in three phases. The early phase of 1750-1860, the plantation era of 1860-1940 and the settlement phase of 1940-1965.

The Early Phase (1750-1860)

In Travancore, forests belonged to the State. Key species, such as teak, rosewood were classified as “royal.” Only the government could harvest them (Stebbing, 1922). Ward and Corner in their 1820 survey, noted that forests in the High Ranges were already being depleted of valuable trees, particularly those adjacent to streams (Ward and Corner, 1827).

Teak was critical for construction and maintenance of the British military and merchant fleets. By 1830s the forests adjacent to Travancore were nearing exhaustion. In Travancore itself, the harvest of teak was more carefully managed and replanting efforts were underway (Stebbing, 1922). Management and replanting efforts were not entirely successful. Most harvesting was done by contractors. In 1837, Mr. Munro, the conservator of Travancore forests reported that “the system of throwing open teak forests to all who wish to cut, or giving them to contractors, is in the highest degree of ruin. They cut indiscriminately all that come in their way; any range of forests, however extensive, would be destroyed if left to their tender mercies” (Stebbing, 1922).

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1 The Travancore Report (August, 1837) from Mr. Munro, the Conservator of the Travancore Forests, to the Resident, Colonel Fraser, quoted in Stebbing (1922) p.73
Timber smuggling was also a major governmental concern in the mid 1800s, and various methods were tried to limit it. In 1886 the Government offered for the first time, rewards for information about cutting of trees and prohibited the felling of several valuable species without royal permission (Bourdillon, 1893). Initially, timber harvesting had been permitted under a seigneur system involving the purchase of permits from the government at the rate of one rupee per tree. Watch stations along the rivers and roads formed the only control of smuggling. Bribery of the low paid watchers and the reuse of permits became such common practice and subsequently governmental depot system was initiated. The depots proved no more effective in limiting corruption and in 1887 the government reverted to the previous system (Bourdillon, 1893). Corruption added to the problems facing the government in its attempts to assert control over forest areas, despite management efforts and the key species in the forests of the Travancore High Ranges were depleted by the end of the 1800s.

In the early 1800s, numerous cardamom gardens planted by ethnic Tamilians were scattered throughout the High Range areas adjacent to the Madras plains (Bourdillon, 1893). Early gardens were generally areas where the forest undergrowth was cleared and cardamom allowed to regenerate naturally or with slight help (Aiya, 1906). Their owners would visit the clearings at harvest time and for occasional weeding and thinning of trees, but did not live on the site.

Throughout this early period, the tribal population of the hills was viewed at best as a source of labour for forest related activities and more generally as a prime cause of forest destruction through shifting cultivation (Bourdillon, 1893). Hill tribes had been employed to collect forest produce and to undertake other forest related
activities even before. Travancore gained control over the cardamom hill region (Lovatt, 1972)\textsuperscript{10}. Bourdillon’s comment concerning the use of tribal to collect wild cardamom in areas leased out to contractors by the government reveals the prevailing attitudes at that time. In order to collect the spices, it was a recognized custom that the bidder shall order the hill men to collect for him without remuneration, he being a government contractor, a certain quantity per head, the total being of course for in excess of his bid. The contractor then delivers to the amount agreed on, and retains the rest as his profit, while the hill men deliver their quota to the contractor and exchange any further quantity they can collect for salt, knives and cloths. This was a bad system, as it breaks the continuity of the monopoly and permits a trade in the spices (Bourdillon 1893)\textsuperscript{11}. Bourdillon’s concerns centered on governmental control over the spices trade, as did those of most government officers. Tribal were, at best, simply a labour force for work in the forests. (See Map 6.1, Travancore Early Phase)

**The Plantation Era (1860-1940)**

The Travancore government viewed the High Range forests primarily as a source of revenue. Government actions were designed to increase, control and protect that revenue. Cardamom plantations were encouraged but actual ownership was ambiguous. Forest harvesting had already depleted many areas of their valuable species. The government responded by offering rewards for trying to control the transport of forest produce in relation to prevailing wages. Corruption was rampant. The plantation era (1860 – 1940) was characterized by the widespread European development of coffee, tea and cardamom plantations, encroachments and the construction of cart tracts and dams.
Map (6-1)
Travancore State - Early Phase
Adapted from
Pillai V. (1940), The travancore State Manual, Govt.of Travancore, Thiruvananthapuram, P 372-373
The first major coffee plantation in the Western Ghats was started around 1830 (Playne, 1914-15). In Travancore itself the plantation era started later, in the early 1860s. In 1862 the first clearing for coffee was made (Aiya V.N., 1906) and in 1865 the government published rules allowing the sale of lands for the purpose of cultivating coffee and other crops (Bourdillon, 1893). Much land was also given to influential European families in the form of free grants (Lovatt, 1972). By 1893 roughly 40,000 acres of land in Travancore had been sold for the purpose of coffee cultivation (Bourdillon, 1893). However, coffee was facing major problems. A leaf wilt disease began to affect the plantations in the 1870s, and by 1880 the disease, combined with low prices and foreign competition, had caused cultivation to be suspended on many plantations (Tharakan G.K and Tharakan K.P.M., 1985). Planters then turned to tea. Most of the large tea estates in the High Ranges were started in their last two decades of the 1800s (Playne, 1914-15).

Coffee and tea cultivation dominated in the High Ranges. Two of the main plantation areas were centered on Peermade and Munnar. In 1914 the Kannan Devan Hill produce Company owned twenty six estates and had 17,300 acres of tea, most of that near Munnar (playne, 1914). A variety of smaller European owned estates ranging from a few hundred to several thousand acres, were established in the Peermade area. (See Map 6.2, Travancore - Plantation Era)

Encroachments

Although the government was concerned with limiting encroachments and forest clearing as an objective to obtain full revenue from the lands, these incompatible objectives were held away during the different periods. Encroachments were common. In 1986 W. Rec., a British political agent travelling through
Map - (6-2) Travancore State showing Plantation Era
Main tea and cardemom areas (shaded)
Adapted from Pillai V. (1940) 372-373
Devicolam commented that one planter “complains of delay in getting patta (title) for land near Bodymettu, but that seems to be due to his having taken more than the extent that he applied” (W. Rec, 1896). In 1899, the Government issued a notification complaining that its Revenue officers could not distinguish lands granted to coffee estates from encroachments because estates were not maintaining the original survey marks and boundary stones properly. Plantation owners were required to maintain the boundary marks; if they did not, revenue officers would do it for them and recover the costs from the owners (Govt of Travancore, 1916).

**Cart Trades and Ooms**

Travancore’s attempts to assert its sovereignty over the High Range area and the advent of European plantations underlay the development mostly in the form of cart tracks of road network. Topographically, the High Range area was much more accessible from the Madras side and most transport routes were in that direction. Travancore was intent on improving access from its side.

One of the first roads started by the newly formed Travancore Public Works Department in 1863 was the Ghaut road from Kottayam to the State frontier near Gudalur via Peermade. This cart track was completed to Peermade in 1871 and to the frontier in 1884. By 1906 truck paths and cart tracks, often constructed by the planters, also connected Munnar with the plains of Madras and to a lesser extent, Travancore (Aiya, 1906).

More roads were built towards the end of the plantation era with the initiation of large scale hydro electric power projects. The first dam in the High Ranges was constructed in the late 1800 near Kumily to provide irrigation for areas in the Madras...
presidency. Major dam construction started towards the end of the plantation period with the initiation of the Pallivasal hydro-electric project (Commissioned in 1939) in the northern part of the Devicolam (Govt. of Kerala, 1982).

Briefly stated by the end of the plantation era the High Range area still isolated but good transportation roots had been established between the centers of European owned cultivation and the plains to the east and west. The plantation era provided key elements that moulded later migrations to the High Ranges. These elements included (1) continuing depletion of forests in remote locations (2) the development of an initial road network (3) the major hydro electric project (4) encroachments on forest lands by both land less settlers and wealthy individuals.

**The Settlement Phase (1940-1965)**

During the early 1940s of the settlement phase, extensive food shortage occurred throughout Travancore. Food shortages and famine (1941-44) led to regular demand for the opening of large forest areas for food cultivation. In response to this, the Government opened forest lands on an emergency basis for food cultivation and encouraged encroachments. Large migrations particularly by Syrian Christians of Central Travancore took place (Sivanandan, et al. 1986) during the period.

In 1941 the government granted exclusive cultivation rights (known as “Kuthakapattam”) in State forest areas (Chandrasekharan, 1973). Five acres of land could be distributed to individuals for food cultivation on a short term lease (Kuthakapattam) basis. The land grants (Kuthakapattam) by the Government were temporary leases and no permanent improvements were allowed. In 1944, the Conservator of Forests reported that roughly 13,600 acres of reserved forests throughout the State were offered for cultivation. Encroachments on forest land went on unhindered during this time.
Migrations of the Syrian Christians

Between 1930 and 1951 as many as 70,000 Christians have migrated from Travancore to forest areas in the Western Ghats of Malabar. Most of these migrations occurred in the period from 1940-1950 from areas of Kottayam and Thodupuzha. The first major migration by Syrian Christians into high sections of the Western Ghats occurred in the 1940s (Tharakan, 1978). By the time of Indian Independence in 1947 the stage was set for widespread settlement of the High Range areas. All that was needed was a catalyst to open the areas. Post Independence politics provided this catalyst. The “grow more food” campaigns (1941-1950) and the migrations of Syrian Christians to Malabar had exposed a wide section of the small-holder population to the idea that cultivation in the High Ranges, if not easy, was at least possible.

Institutional and Physical barriers to settlement were also weakening. The Forest Department’s control over the resources in its custody was not strong, particularly in the cardamom hills at Udumbanchola, where authority was split between the Forest and Revenue Departments.

The High Range Colonization Scheme

Pattam Thanupillai (the former Chief Minister of Travancore Cochin who had started the colonization schemes) made clear that, the colonization schemes were a major reason why the High Range area was to remain in Kerala. The goal of the High Range colonization scheme was to settle 8,000 families on 50,000 acres of land at four sites in the lands adjacent to what is now Tamilnadu (Govt. of Kerala, 1982). Each family was to be given financial assistance plus 5 acres, the remaining land was for common use. The total settlement goal was never reached. However, a number of settlement colonies could be set up. The Kallar Pattom colony near Nedumkandam is
the largest settlement and contains roughly 1300 families. Other colonies contain less than 100 families each (Govt. of Kerala, 1982).

**Encroachment Evictions**

As in the case of the grow more food campaigns, large-scale forest encroachment accompanied the High Range colonization schemes. Farmers living near the Kallar colony say that for every family who came on the scheme, a much larger number encroached lands in adjacent areas. These people were often relatives or friends of the colonists, but many others came as well.

A permissive approach towards settlers facilitated forest encroachment during the State Re-organization period. In 1952-53 at the end of the grow more food campaigns there was widespread concern over the encroachments which had accompanied it. Soil erosion and forest conservation were major topics. In July, 1950, the government formed a committee to look into forest encroachments and the leased land. This became known as the “Anti-Erosion Committee.” The Committee strongly recommended that, except for paddy in low-lying marshy areas, no permanent cultivation of forest lands in the Cardamom Hills Reserve on either side of the Periyar should be allowed (Karunakaran, 1975). Evictions were carried out in some areas, including places where the short-term leases granted during the grow-more-food campaign had expired, through out 1952 and early 1953 (Malayala Rajyam, 1953). In March, 1953, a few months before the public debate over state reorganization began, the Travancore-Cochin Legislative Assembly passed a bill staying evictions from leased lands.

**Encroachment and Governmental Responses**

Forest encroachment has occurred continuously from the formation of Kerala. The governmental response has followed a regular sequence: a series of strong
statements, blockage of eviction attempts by popular outcry; formation of commissions to evaluate the problem and regularization of encroachments prior to a certain date, accompanied by strong statements concerning the fate of subsequent encroachers. The encroachments continued. The cycle then started again. The occupation of forest areas has been “regularized” (the term used in Kerala) four times since the formation of Kerala State in 1956.

Briefly, by the 1940s the region’s physical isolation had decreased substantially. Most of the population was Tamilians, but a few Malayalis particularly Syrian Christians held mid level jobs on European plantations. Many of these lands were granted without survey. Responsibility for forest areas was divided between the Forest and Revenue departments and the resultant bureaucratic turf wars made it difficult to control the encroachments. By the early 1950s widespread confusion existed regarding the authorization of encroachment rights of the settlers on govt. forestlands.

The post independence State reorganization period brought with it a revival of the old Tamil-Malayali tussle for control of the High Ranges. The Govt. of Travancore-Cochin initiated settlement programmes in the High Range areas in order to shift the regional linguistic balance. More importantly, the government and politicians encouraged or at least turned a blind eye to Syrian Christian encroachments until the process of State reorganization was completed. Politicians and officials profited from illegal land distribution. Govt. departments could do little to control encroachment in the context, even when inclined to do so. The High Range area was included in the new State of Kerala but, in the process huge areas of forestland were encroached and brought under cultivation.
The majority of the settlers who came both in the grow-more-food campaigns and during the process of State reorganization were Catholics. Centres of the Catholic community adjoined High Range areas. Catholics were a strong well organized and educated community familiar with cultivation in hilly areas. Other communities did not have these advantages. Syrian Catholics now form the dominant community in the High Ranges.

As soon as State reorganization had been completed the government attempted to evict unauthorized settlers and those whose leases had expired. Widespread evictions proved impossible in the political context of the new State of Kerala. As Catholics dominated in the settler communities, evictions could be interpreted as having a communal element. Furthermore, in Kerala politics, no single party has ever had a fully commanding position, and minorities have substantial power. Attempts at evictions led to the gradual recognition at the State level of the political power of the settlers in the High Ranges. This culminated in the fall of the Congress government in 1964 and the formation of the Kerala Congress party, a party to represent settlers of High Ranges.

Since 1964, despite splits and disagreements within the Kerala Congress, the right of the settlers to occupy lands in the High Ranges has never been seriously threatened. Title has been granted to some settlers; others occupy lands under a lease arrangement and others have no legal right to lands. Few settlers greatly fear eviction. Encroachments have been regularized in 1976 and except in a few blatant cases of encroachment, few evictions have occurred. As late as December 1988, the government was still attempting to regularize encroachment and settlements up to 1-1-77 and hoping to grant title, despite the requirement of central concurrence contained in the Forest Conservation Act of 1980.
The long history of encroachment and settlement in the High Ranges has left tenure rights in a highly confused situation. The Forest Department officially owns the trees, in many areas, while the Revenue Department owns the land and the cultivators occupy much of this land.

The impact of deforestation and the consequent socio-economic condition of the tribal in Idukki district are the subject analyzed in the next chapter.
REFERENCES


4. Ibid.


6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.


19. Ibid.


27. Ibid.
