

Malabar Woods: Colonial Encirclement for Scientific Conservation or Systematic Exploitation?

Priyanka Guha Roy

Abstract

Malabar forests had been known in India's forest history as producing high quality of Teak. But these teak trees were mercilessly cut and destroyed for ship building purpose during the company administration in Malabar. The article appears interesting in the sense that this was done much before the promulgation of Forest acts which supposedly claimed to have been legislated to implement 'scientific forestry' for Indian forests which were being denuded and destroyed by the pre-colonial administration. So the Malabar forest destruction opens up a new arena of study in the forest history of India. That calculated forest destruction for colonial interests was the main intention of forest administrators and this was carefully concealed under the notion of scientific forestry. Malabar forests were first among the equals in regard to the realization of this motive. Thus the essay offers a separate niche to the study of colonial ecological history in the way of mapping the destruction of Teak forests of Malabar.

Keywords: *Colonial administration, East India Company, Industrial Revolution, Ship Building, Malabar Teak, Scientific Conservation, Forest Rangers, Teak Felling, Forest Exploitation, Ship Building*

Introduction

Malabar offers great resource potential as an ecological resource hub for teak timber, which attracted colonial investors seeking to artificially regenerate timber trees. These resources included forest resources, human resources, and even the environment itself. During the first few years of Colonial administration, there was the shameless cutting of Teak trees which disrupted the ecological balance and biodiversity. Nevertheless, systematic exploitation of forest resources in Malabar began during the late 18th century.

The Reasons That Led To the Survey.

Scientific Forestry, however, began under the excuse of pre-colonial Indian forests being destroyed. A study by Richard Grove (Grove, 1995: 467) explains that the primary motivation for forest conservancy in India was the threat posed by a changing climate, which results in extensive state forest control and the exclusion of private investment in forestry. His view is that desiccation poses a serious threat to Indian Environment, which was successfully propagated by East India Company surgeons like William Roxburgh, Alexander Gibson,

Edward Balfour, John Ellerton Stocks and John McClelland. This continued to pre-occupy the official mind of Government between the period 1850-39, and 1877-78 which were period of serious droughts, and are rapidly followed by the initiation of a state program designed to strengthen forest protection and legislation. But these legislations only legitimized forest destructions as the East India Company was the chief manipulator of Timber trade which was a major part of Mercantile economic relation that England had with India at that time. This led to the conducting of several surveys to identify strong timber yielding trees, and Malabar was no exception to this as it is a chief Teak yielding region. These surveys assuredly were conducted primarily to carry on the process of exploitation under the guise of conservation or scientific forestry.

What The Foresters Actually Intended?

With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and British territorial expansion in India, forests came to play an increasingly crucial part in the colonial economy. The watchword of the time was to bring more extensive forest areas under cultivation, and the whole policy tended in that direction (Ribbentrop, 1900: 59). This was naturally a transitory stage. The demands of both trade and population increased, and in consequence, the forests diminished in size. An indication of the escalating demand in Teak is evident in the increase in tonnage of British merchant ships from 12,78,000 tonnes in 1778 to 49,37,000 tonnes in 1860, and a large portion of it came from India. Actually, these changes brought about by the British have to be viewed in the context of social changes within Britain. The new rulers came to India with a specific history which to a large extent influenced their attitude to the extensive forests of India. Woodlands were often viewed negatively by the English. The cutting down of trees and forests was seen as a sign of progress. Forests represented a place of struggle between landlords and the disorderly crowd. The clearing of forests for agriculture was also a sign of improvement. The woods were regarded as a managed and controlled landscape rather than an untamed forest. In British India, the British ruler's attitude to forests was to clear the land for cultivation and progress. They wanted to gain control over forests through cultivation. These forests thus became a place to be 'controlled', power enforced, and a place where progress could be demonstrated by extending cultivation in these forested zones. The theories were new, but the effects were the same, thus obscuring the true transformation of ecology and forest dwellers, who were depended on it.

Colonial India thus witnessed such assertion of controlling trend. Many administrative changes in the last two decades of the eighteenth century actually strengthened the nascent imperial rule to the extent of exerting 'control'. This 'control' was established through implementation of strategic and commercial moves, revenue generation, and through the subjugation of forest lands for timber generation. Therefore the object of Forest administration as clearly stated by R.S. Troup, the Assistant Inspector General of Forests in 1917 (Troup, 1917:10) was mainly to conserve and improve the forests in the first place; and secondly to secure to the taxpayers the greatest immediate benefit from their commercial working.

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Daniel. R. Headrick has regarded science and technology as 'tools of empire' building process and also pointed out that these worked to shape the real motives of the European imperialists for gaining control of Asia (Headrick:1981). This science and technology was applied to gain control over the forest lands of Asia. Malabar was no exception to this process. The earliest efforts at some protection of timber resulted in the formation of a timber syndicate in Malabar in 1796, though it collapsed after some time. However colonial authorities felt that something must be done to keep up supplies and Ribbentrop regarded this period as the first approach to our present system of Forest conservancy, which was surely to conceal the intention of exploitation (Ribbentrop,1900).

Malabar Teak and Its Extraction

Malabar witnessed an intensification of the destruction of its forests to meet the demand for timber for shipbuilding. No supervision was exercised over the felling operations and a large number of trees were felled and lay rotting on the ground (Stebbing, 1922:4). Private contractors, both European and Indian, were chiefly responsible for this destruction. In fact over 6.500.000 deadar sleepers were extracted from Yamuna forests only in the years between 1869-1885 (Paul, 1871:122). Timber requirements were 'the first and by far most formidable' of the forces thinning Indian forests in Malabar as well (Cleghorn,1860: 60).

Entering into the main theme requires looking at the world politics of the time, which may take us to situate the crux of the situation. Modernization in the mid 18th century has its credibility to the development of the Industrial Revolution in England. But modernization is remotely sensed or remains unprogressive when it is not accompanied by scientific innovation. Scientific innovation led to the invention of machines and consequent surplus production and extraction of natural commodities. In the end, over the ensuing decades, England became the dominant force in Europe and began expanding its colony worldwide. In addition to dumping finished products and mining raw materials to satisfy the growing factories, timbers were also needed to build ships. Thus Shibi Jhonson mentioned that there were some other reasons behind this expansion (Johnson, 2010: 509). The making of the large vessels became very exigent by the 1790s (Johnson, 2010). The East India Company was seeking a new supply line of shipbuilding materials. Malabar appeared to be the only answer (Johnson, 2010). The British Empire had thus far managed to retain its monopoly on colonial expansion. This changed when France entered the fray. English interests in India lay not only in the raw materials it provided, but also in the Timbers it produced. Back then, Malabar Coast was known for its vast teakwood reserves (Johnson:2010). Teak had a very demanding role in England. But surprisingly this teak was supplied to Bombay dockyard for shipbuilding (Johnson, 2010). Napoleon Bonaparte's rise did have an important impact on Britain's internal policies, but intensified however the production of warships rapidly in Bombay (Rodriques, 2012:809). In the wake of British political hegemony over the Malabar region, the ratio of supply of shipbuilding teak was heavily reduced in the country. As an active and powerful constant for colonies, there was a huge demand for merchant vessels and warships in England.

Thus in view of the growing deficiency of Oak in England the court of Directors in 1805 in a dispatch enquired about the King's Navy's requirement of permanent supply of Teak from Malabar (Stebbing, 1922:6). This inquiry led to the immediate appointment of a forest committee whose reports showed that the capacity of forests in mature timber had been overrated. Royalty right in Teak was vested in the company prohibiting all further unauthorized felling of such trees. Decision was taken to appoint a special officer acquainted with forests for preservation and improved production of Teak and other timbers suitable for Shipbuilding. Before this growing demand for teak, Malabar as a colony had to face shameless exploitation of the teak forest. If we observe on a statistical report we can form an idea of how much timbers were cut in a year on an average. "The total tonnage of English merchant ships increased about fourfold during the period between 1788 and 1860. An average sized ship swallowed up to 3000 loads of timber, which comes to 1, 50,000 cubic feet. In a 120 gun-three decker, about 5000 loads of timber, and in an 84 gun large two-decker, about 4,000 loads of timber would be required. A 74 gunship, therefore, clear the timber of 50 acres, a considerable plot of woodland. The average consumption of navy during the 1790s was estimated at 50,542 loads of timber." (Johnson, 2010) As Louiza Rodrigues showed, "in 1800 a frigate named Cornwallis of 1363 tons with 50 guns was built and launched by British for the first time at Bombay Dockyard" (Rodrigues, 2012). This incident was the pioneer of large shipbuilding industry. Mainly the British warships were made of abundant timber and it was available especially in Malabar Coast region (Rodrigues, 2012).

Scientific Surveys and Deep Enroute into Malabar Forests:

Malabar, a major timber-producing region, was delivered to the English East India Company in 1792 after the Third Mysore War marked the defeat of Tipu Sultan. Only after this had all necessary decisions been made in order to adequately document and find out the major wood resources of the Malabar Forest (Rodrigues, 2012: 809). Lord Wellesley carried out successive surveys of the forest and provided information on the timber resources to the Company (Rodrigues, 2012). Captain Watson of the Police was appointed in 1806 the first conservator of forests, who within a couple of years established a timber monopoly throughout Malabar and practically annihilated more or less all private rights in the forests. However, due to general discontent among proprietors and traders, the post of Conservator was abolished in 1823. The benefits accrued to the forests were annihilated and unrestricted felling increased. Within a few years, the available supply of really first-class timber had reduced and prices had risen as a result of large forest areas being too heavily exploited by Governments and others. The first tangible step was taken in 1842 when Mr. Conolly, the collector of Malabar, created a seed farm and framed some simple rules in the interest of Forestry. He also started the practice of artificial regeneration of teak plants. This indeed marked the beginning of artificial teak plantations in Colonial India (Cleghorn, 1858). The years 1847 and 1856 saw the appointments of Gibson and Cleghorn as conservators of the Forests of Bombay. They both submitted reports in which, for the first time, the physical

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value of Malabar's forest was highlighted. Both strongly urged that the Government claim and exercise the proprietary right to all of these forests, as well as enforce stricter controls and above all, enforce a ban on shifting cultivation. The seriousness of the situation was however not recognized. Louiza Rodrigues (2012) made a geographical description of the Malabar Coast region,

"The forests of Malabar were divided into those of north and south Malabar... the forest of north Malabar were divided into the Begur, Chedleth, Kanoth ranges. These forests comprises in all an area of 164,928 acres or nearly, 259 square miles. The forests of south Malabar were divided into three ranges of Nilambur, Amarambalam and Mannarghat. These comprised in all an area of 170.351 acres of 266 square miles." ²⁹ (Rodrigues, 2012: 811)

East India Company exercised exclusive monopoly rights by taking under its control the entire Forest Administration of Malabar. In fact, Surveyor John Thomson gave his full report about the Malabar Coast. In this report, he described the importance of Teak trees as a major timber resource that could supply timber to the Bombay shipyard. Despite finding that teak trees were in abundance, his report was extremely valuable to the Company as it opened up a new path (Rodrigues, 2012: 812) More surveys were carried out which resulted in the classification of straight timber and its multiple varieties.

Finally, to enable control over the Malabar forest, the government passed an Act claiming that, "all private extraction of wood became an offence and punishable by law" (Rodrigues, 2012) Due to the increasing demands of timber another phase of exploitation was visible. The government convinced local proprietors to waive their claim over the land; in return they would be paid money as compensation (Rodrigues, 2012).

Smoothening of Extraction by Indian Agents

The English East India Company never worked alone to undertake this extraction process, but Indian merchants who worked to smoothen the supply of timber from Malabar to Bombay Dockyard assisted them. According to Public Department Diaries, the names of contractors in the early nineteenth century in Bombay were Bayon Chacooty, Chacora Moussa, Nusserwanji Jamsheiji, Ardeshir Dady, and Shapurji Callabhoy and Dadabhoy Rustamji (Rodrigues, 2012). Alexander Adamson, Forbes and Company, James Tate, and Taylor and Agnew were principal agency houses that also played a significant connecting role (Rodrigues, 2012). While timber merchants and local rulers could not supply timber in enough quantities when necessary for building ships, these agency houses were able to supply timber in huge amounts between the East India Company and timber merchants. Sometimes timber was purchased by brokers for the Bombay merchants. For transport of timber from the jungle to the riverside, elephants were used, as labour was very expensive in Malabar (Rodrigues, 2012: 813).

Yet, the trend of the colonial economy resulted in an enormous demand for more timber, as more connecting agents provided it, resulting in mass extraction. Within a few years,

timber-producing areas were located and timber extraction was facilitated. Lots of contracts between the East India Company and timber merchants were also signed. Timber was therefore available at very low prices during that time. Meanwhile, a decision was taken by the Bombay Government to remove the private trade and impose monopoly rights to the leading timber merchants of Malabar (Rodrigues, 2012:814).

Among several contractors, Chacora Moussa was most influential in the timber monopoly. On 27 June 1806, Chacora Moussa signed an agreement that resulted in Chacora getting twelve years of monopoly rights to transport timber in all districts of Tellicherry. Though Moussa was given the monopoly rights there were some restrictions imposed on him. It was his responsibility to take great care of the forests and fallen trees and to prevent anyone from felling other trees. In every hundred trees felled, seven were crooked and corresponded to the mould. After he was entrusted, the government believed that reckless cutting of timber could be prevented. But it never happened. By 1807, the forests of Malabar already showed signs of depletion of huge trees. The British government took all the conservancy measures but no arrangements were made to situate, manage or regulate the forestfelling (Rodrigues: 2012).

However, this discussion raised pertinent questions. In the first place, was the monopoly system established in Malabar successful in keeping steady the process of conservation? Also, did conservation and the cutting of trees go hand in hand? Was the conservation of forests followed to conceal the real intention of making a profit through timber extraction and trade? After examining the statistical table we can say that timber woods were cut recklessly and there was no doubt about it. Other than that, these legal processes as well as the intermediation of local trades had accomplished nothing.

But the most significant thing is that the Malabar Forest destruction signaled the consciousness in Government that conservation was needed to carry on the process of exploitation. This started the process of conservation resulting in the promulgation of Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878 for other forest zones later on. Nonetheless, reckless cutting continued unabated, but in a more stringent way. Forests being divided into three classes namely; reserved, protected and village; now began to be more systematically exploited. Because of England's unfamiliarity with conservation culture, the government realized that to make a good profit from forestry they should conserve first.

Forest Conservation policy in Malabar: Conserving Only to Exploit.

The evolution of the British Forest policy in India spanned roughly over a period of seventy years (1880-1947). It also endeavored to explore the displacement and devastation of the forests and subsequent execution of several forest legislations. A country's forest policy is not framed by one stroke of the pen but it grows and evolves with time. The advent of the colonial framework led to a strange interplay of events that played a vital role in the setting up of well-knit administrative machinery for looking after the forest reserves of India. Indian

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forestry faced great change and gradually denuded with the onslaught of Colonial conservation techniques and thus Malabar forests were no exception in this regard too. The writings of Ramchandra Guha and other environmental historians proved that British rule marked a vital role in the environmental history of India' (Guha and Gadgil, 1989: 141). The changed pattern of land use system, increasing deforestation, wildlife destruction, and change in ecological cycle appear to be the major studies of colonial ecological History. The present essay too, offers a significant contribution to the history of forestry in India in the sense that Colonial Forest History suffers from a great paradox in the way it claims to preserve the Indian forests but only follows rules that are destructive to the forests and led to its gradual denudation. Germany however is well known to have developed the concept of Forest Conservation and generated training in that direction. All the British Forest Rangers who were appointed to Indian Forests as Forest Inspector Generals were trained in Germany. So in general, the forest conservation system came from Germany. In supporting early forest policy, B. Ribbentrop said, "earlier administrators never thought of the significant part forests have always played" (Ribbentrop, 1900: 59). In the context of Malabar forest conservation, "the earliest record of these attempts is the formation of a timber syndicate in Malabar in 1796" and again he remarked, "Such effort did not improve matters, and led to the ruin of many valuable forests" (Ribbentrop, 1900). Thus the depletion of teak resources led forest rangers to think and this added to their growing unrest. This has been expressed by Ribbentrop "A feeling of unrest sprang up and it was felt that something must be done to prevent the ultimate drying up of supply" (Ribbentrop, 1900: 63). In his words, teak was considered a royal tree. Its regeneration appeared to be the first step. Thus, the motive of conservation of forests on behalf of the government led to the issue of an order by Bengal- Bombay Joint Commission, appointed to enquire into the internal circumstances of Malabar and to make regulations prohibiting the felling of teak below 21 inches in girth. Till 1805, everything was fine but after receiving the dispatch of the court of directors the situation changed. The order mentioned, "Kings Navy might, in view of the growing deficiency of oak in England depend on the permanent supply of teak timber from Malabar" (Ribbentrop, 1900: 64). This inquiry in fact appointed a new Forest Committee that enforced forest laws. The protection of Teak also became the priority of the Government. The teak trees were adequately guarded. Captain Watson was the special inspector who was in charge of this. In fact, it was Captain Watson who succeeded in getting the monopoly for Teak timbers. This monopoly was established throughout Malabar, Travancore and also abolished private rights completely (Ribbentrop, 1900: 65). In 1831 the Indian Navy board recommended the re-establishment of the post for forest conservatorship.

As far as the record is concerned, Mr. Conolly the collector of Malabar, succeeded in creating the local forest department and framed local rules (Ribbentrop, 1900: 67) and got surprised when he noticed that teak was vanishing rapidly. The preservation of forests became the prime intention of the British Government. These incidents proved that there was a heavy

need to preserve forests by any means. Finally, the Bombay Government appointed Dr. Gibson as the conservator of forests, after he had served for some years as an interim conservator in addition to his duties in connection with botanical gardens (Ribbentrop, 1900: 69). Dr. Gibson's report showed that the whole destruction happened during the early years through felling. On the contrary, the rapid increase of shifting cultivation aggravated the event. Dr. Cleghorn's report mentioned that the proprietary right should be claimed by the government in Malabar (Ribbentrop, 1900: 71). The year 1841 it was stated that all old leases and contracts stood cancelled and new agreements having suitable conditions that protected and safeguarded the future forest development in Malabar were issued (Ribbentrop, 1900).

Conclusion:

It may be or as was considered, forest conservation was a great boon for colonial India. But was it really true? What was the actual truth behind this conservation? If it is supposed that the government was much concerned about deforestation, why did they not stop the commercialization of the timbers? Another point is, there was a huge demand for timber for royal naval ships, and just because they enforced the law against private extraction of woods that only supported their extraction further, although extraction of wood by private parties was prohibited that too only to make available the timbers for colonial extraction. Of course, private extraction of wood cannot be supported, but this was allowed to those contractors who supplied timbers to the East India Company and the contractors profited greatly in the process. Thus colonial infiltration to manipulate resources was initiated mostly being facilitated by the compradors and the ecological resources were no exception. So, social forestry with the employment of tribals was strictly not followed so that the *Dikus* or agents and outsiders could easily make the Teak timbers available to the company agents. Thus 'Scientific Forestry' was only a problem and never was a solution because pre-colonial forestry meant utilization of forest by the state authority without hindrance to primordial rights of the denizens of forests. State rights and community rights never clashed in the past. The state had its due share of forest products and the tribal community drew its sustenance without difficulty. But the colonial control over 'woodlands' gave the whole scenario a new colour. In the name of conservations, rapid colonial exploitation happened. The sacred forest was torn apart by vulgar commercialization. Over the two decades, Malabar had to face the huge timber extraction, ecological imbalance, and shameless colonial policy of forest destruction. In the twenty-first century, we cannot even think of this kind of rapidity of obliteration. Hopefully, the post-independence phase saw a huge trend of Forest conservation and joint forest management being projected, which is characterized by the growing ratio of the plantation. But this artificial plantation as a substitute for rapid deforestation can hardly replace thousands of plant species of micro-organisms as well as animals of varying sizes destroyed in the past. To this day we do not even have a complete list of all living organisms from a single hectare of any tropical, humid forest. We do not have complete knowledge of

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how populations of these thousands of species interact with each other. Our knowledge about the growth patterns of tropical forest trees, or of the timing and periodicity of their seed production is limited. How can then one apply the scientific method in deciding on how to manipulate a resource base such as a tropical humid forest? The question remained unsolved more during colonial times. This is mainly because as Marc Bloch in his great study of French Agriculture remarked that “there are times when for once the formulations of problems are more urgent than their solution”. The problem was “scientific forestry” and no native foresters were capable enough neither to identify this problem nor to resist its development. The tribals realizing it to be a great danger protested but they were systemically marginalized and their struggle gradually shaded off to the mainstream movement.

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Bio Profile of the Author

Assistant Professor
Department of History
Kazi Nazrul University, Asansol
Email- basupriyanka1983@gmail.com

