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THE CONDITION OF FORESTS IN SOUTH INDIA DURING THE TIME OF BRITISH RULE

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Abstract

The British colonial government was leading the large-scale deforestation of forests for commercial purposes for expansion of their empire. Exploiting the forest wealth while denying the natural rights of the tribal people. Any earlier attempt towards conservation was intended to meet the future requirements of the imperial power. The timber requirements for Royal Navy and Railway lines, the Colonial government strategically expanded forest cover under their jurisdiction. They started forest conservancy by implementing forest laws over the years of their administration for extraction of fine wood. The Indian Forest Act 1865 was enacted by the British to create a state monopoly in the forests and to ensure proper forest management. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, most of the forest areas of the country were constituted either into reserved forests or protected forests. Its effects on Traditional Methods of Forest Management like shifting cultivation, collection of minor forest products, fire wood and grazing. Due to this reason many tribes were revolt against British Administration.

Introduction

The natural vegetation is rich in earlier years in India, over the time they have been declining. Until the British Colonial period in India, a large number of people mostly indigenous tribal communities used to live in or around forest areas depending entirely on forest products.¹ Ritual; cultural as well as social celebrations were strongly interrelated with the forest environment. For those people, the entire forest area was their home. They used to move from their vicinity to an additional to collect food, fodder, firewood, wild game and many other products for their subsistence purposes. They accustomed to sell or barter very little to outsiders to get

non-forest products. Before the rule of the East India Company (1757-1857), there was no limit on the collection of forest and forest products in India.² People used the forests for their own needs but did not destroy them on purpose. We first see this approach properly with the arrival of the British. The British administration main target is to strengthen their rule over India and to increase their revenue from forest products. Earlier administrators of English had no proper policy on conservation of forests.³ The British colonial government was leading the large-scale deforestation of forests for commercial and strategic purposes necessary for the expansion of their empire.⁴ In other words, plundering the forest resources by denying the natural rights of the natives and their association with the forests.⁵ It is a miserable fact that the British have completely forgotten that forests are a balance of nature and home to many species of animals.

According to Velayutham Saravanan, colonial rulers did not give significance to the environment, and their foremost principle was to generate income from the forests in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.⁶ In fact, colonial forest policy has shattered not only subsistence agriculture but also the traditional methods of forest management.⁷ It should be noted that income requirements, the expansion of commercial crops, the development of the mining industry and the construction of railways contributed to the deforestation in the nineteenth century.⁸ The British had no good intentions in their forest conservation policies unless they were intended to meet their future needs.⁹

Objectives

1. To explain how to increase the demand of forests.
2. To find out the people dependency on forest resources.
3. To know the impact of the forest laws on tribal and peasants.
4. To explain the annihilation of traditional methods of tribes by the British rule.
5. To identify the causes of tribal revolts

Forest became an important resource

In the past, mankind did not need to think about forests because the population was small and the forests were spread over a large area. The tribes made their home in the forests. Although some forests have been cut down due to their ancient farming methods (podu) they are regenerating. The people of the villages used the forests for building houses, grazing cattle and cooking sugarcane. As long as human desires are limited and forest resources are abundant, the idea of how to protect forests will not come. Even at the time of Dravidian Civilization the people were not destroyed forests at any more. But the Aryans who migrated to India destroyed the forests for agricultural purpose. The ancient culture of the Hindus developed in the forests and ashrams. Hindus have great respect for the vans (forests) and gardens near the temples. Trees are also a part of their worship.¹⁰

When kingdoms became strong enough, the rulers began using forests to manage them. The rulers of the Magadha Empire set up a separate department to manage the forests. At the time of Chandragupta, the royal buildings were probably constructed to a large extent of wood, like the Burmese palace at Mandalay; but from

the reign of his grandson, Asoka, brick and stone were generally substituted for timber.¹¹ At the beginning of the Muslim invasion, forests were cut down to conquer other parts of India. Many people, fearing Muslim invasions, abandoned farming in their areas and sought refuge in remote forest areas. This continued until the British period.¹²

The British themselves were new to ideas of systematic forestry, as they had no developed forest organization then in Britain. So government used forests for governmental purposes and people used according to their requirements. As supplies of first class oak timber became short in England, they started to get the information of Indian Forests. It is observed that Teak is the substitute for oak timber. So Britishers started to find out the teak forests in India. It has been said that the most immediate object of the Forest Department is to meet the present demand for timber and fuel. But this demand is always increasing. The population itself increases, requiring more fuel. There is already a large demand for railway sleepers, and for railway and steam ship fuel. Internal trade also takes a greater quantity of teak, sandal wood, jungle wood and other forest produce.¹³

A Strategic Increase and Systematic Reduce of the Forest Cover

According to Shiva Ramakrishnan in his book, "Colonialism and Forestry in India", the main objective of the British administration was to extract income from the forests and use them for the development of the colonies. Indian forests became a boon for the British for their economic self-sufficiency and for their timber needs. They began to recognize the importance of forests from one angle.

In the latter part of the eighteenth century, it was decided to overcome the shortage for timber formed in England by Indian forests.¹⁴ So colonial rule mainly focused on extracting teak timber to meet the demand of King's Navy in England in the early nineteenth century.¹⁵ That's why they wanted to increase the forest area under their jurisdiction.

For that purpose, in 1806 the post of 'Conservator of Forests' was created and Captain Watson from the East India Company Police Service was appointed as first holder of this position, vested with wide-ranging powers.¹⁶ For two years he worked tirelessly to control the forests along the Malabar coast, especially the teak trees, so that no one could cut them down without permission. His main objective of conserving the forest for the commercial purpose of their state would be fulfilled if they could control the people from cutting down the trees to get into them.¹⁷ In 1855 Lord Dalhousie, the Governor General, outlined a permanent policy for forest conservation. It laid down that all teak timber was State property, all benefit from it accruing to the government.¹⁸ His memorandum, known as The Charter of Indian Forest, has upheld the rights of natives and tribes over forests.¹⁹

Dietrich Brandis, a German Forester, the then Inspector General of Forests to the Government of India, introduced for the first time the method of what he called 'linear valuation survey's' and framed on the data obtained what was virtually the first working plan, with an estimate of the growing stock and a calculation of the annual sustained yield.²⁰ That means the number of trees to be felled should never exceed their annual

production by natural or artificial means. Subsequently, the British administration proclaimed that the royalty right of the teak trees belonged to the Company, and also prohibited unauthorized felling of royal trees.²¹

Brandeis noted the flaw in government policies in forest conservation. In fact there are many hurdles in implementing the decision of the Government of India. Thus in 1863, Brandis and Clegorn pointed out the need to identify the government and village forests in Madras in advance. Recognizing the need for effective management of forests, in September 1869, the Government of India requested the Government of Madras to effectively protect the frontier border and vast forest reserves.²² Mr. Beddome then conservator of forests in the Cuddapah District, collected systematically all information relating to the working of the forests at that time and produced the first 'Manual of Forest operations' in Madras.²³

Attempts were made to gain full control over the forests by using the powers vested in the British Government by the Indian Forest Act 1865. It was amended by the Indian Forest Act, 1878 to classify forests as reserve, protected and village forests. The Madras government later enacted the Madras Forest Act, 1882, which prohibited village rights over forests. During the last two decades of the nineteenth century, most of the forest areas of the country were constituted either into reserved forests or protected forests.²⁴ The need to establish more bases in the reserved forests and to expedite border work so that conservation could be effectively arranged by the British to meet their needs.²⁵

Any attempt to protect the forest was not really to conserve it but to ensure the future supply, particularly to meet the demand in England.²⁶ By the end of 1881-82 there were 46,213 square miles of Reserved and 8,612 square miles of Protected forests. At the end of 1897-98 the area had increased to 81,414 square miles of Reserves and had decreased to 8,845 square miles of protected forests. Reserved and protected forests constitute permanent forest estates, maintained for the purpose of producing timber and other produce and for protective reasons as such, they fall within the Category of "permanent forests".

The extent of protected forests is constantly changing, as new areas are identified and incorporated into the reserve's classroom, after final settlement.²⁷ The total extent of permanent forests in India as per present available data, is 607,340 sq km (231,493 sq miles), forming 77.4 per cent of the total forest area.²⁸ At the end of the year 1874, the Madras Presidency contained 1,01,202 acres of firewood reserves.²⁹ Within the duration of 6¹/₂ years only from Cuddapah District, 86,662 tons of fuel was cut for the Railways.³⁰ In 1888, fuel and Timber was collected from Cuddapah District forests more than they required.³¹ Earlier forest is a natural resource and supported to the people in different ways directly or indirectly. But at the time of British rule it is converted onto commercial enterprise. They treated forests as their one of the best revenue source in India.

The table below shows how the forests were cut down for British commercial benefit.

Value of Timber and Wood Exports from Madras Presidency: 1855/56 – 1875/76

S.No	Year	Value (in Rupees)
1	1855-56	736117
2	1860-61	931317
3	1865-66	1654166
4	1870-71	1013878
5	1875-76	1045109

Source: Maclean, C.D (1885), Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency, p.344.

Effects on Traditional Methods of Forest Management

Shifting cultivation

There is a traditional belief that forests are reserves of land for the extension of cultivation and that conversion of 'jungle' lands into crop lands. Shifting cultivation is one of the most ancient system of farming. It is practiced in different parts of the world. It is primarily practiced in all the North Eastern States and practiced partially in North India and Andhra Pradesh, Kerala and Karnataka. Shifting cultivation basically consists of clearing of plot of forest land by burning the vegetation and cultivating the plot of land for one or two years. After this, the old cultivated land is then left fallow so that to regain the vegetation cover.³²

Due to population growth, those who adopt ancient farming practices rely heavily on forests. The tribes have been burning the forest for livestock welfare, clearing it for temporary cultivation, and destroying it to create lasting cultivation. And wherever the government has the good, it has not intervened to ban such practices.³³ But the British government has decided to ban certain activities, that are harmful to the forest in these areas. Carefully consider whether to enforce more stringent rules; In later times, the rights of local communities were completely suppressed.³⁴

The Indian Forest Act, The Madras Forest Act and other forest conservative methods enacted by the British government, prohibited on certain lands the breaking up for clearing for cultivation. So that villages those were depend on shifting cultivation have faced shortage of food grains. But the important thing is that once upon a time the land used for agriculture could be seen growing in forests without the involvement of human beings.³⁵ However, the tribal way of life was disrupted by the British declaring this ancient tribal farming system a threat to the forests.

Effects on collection of Minor Forest Produce, Grazing, Firewood

British forest policy mainly emphasized the conservation and procurement of timber products. Minor forest products are less important than most other forest products. But, Forests in India have therefore a value to the state far value of in excess of their mere financial profits. Forests provide the forage needed to protect the country's agricultural livestock and starvation. Forests supply ready-made materials for housing and roofing, fuel and small forest products to villagers to their enjoyment of life. The use of forest manure for farmer farms was already in use.

In 1886-87 the collection of minor forest produce was 6,705 Mds, and in 1888-89, MFP was 9,978 Mds.³⁶ Once the British start their forest conservation efforts, the restrictions brought forward on the villagers to enter into forests. Only the villagers authorized by the forest department can collect minor forest products from the reserved forests. Other local people used to collect forest products for their subsistence or commercial purposes from protected or unclassed state forests.³⁷

Tribal Revolts

The tribals are living in the forests away from civilized society and they were concentrated near the hills and peaks in the forests. This is because their social and economic life is intertwined with seasonal forest products. The tribes who, like the Khonds and Sauras in Ganjam and Vizagapatam, the Koyas and Reddis in the Godavari, the Chentzuz in Kurnool and Kistna, the Yanadis in Nellore and Cuddapah, Kurumbers and Irulars in the Nilgiris and other small tribes were lived in the Forests of South India.³⁸ The British government was influenced by the imposition of a number of restrictions on forest tribes. The tribesmen had to abandon the exclusive rights and ancient farming practices and do as the forest department said. Compensation and free grazing for their cattle will be allowed. The forest officials were causing a lot of trouble to the tribals. Villages should be regularly identified as being forested. This increased the sense of insecurity among them.

The British, however, for their selfish interests, made the lives of the tribals dependent on the forests worse. The forest laws were enacted to prevent tribals from freely entering the forests. In the name of forest protection, the forests were divided and those living in them were shifted to other place.³⁹ Britishers were not recognized the natural birth right of the tribal so ever the jungles. Because of the above actions, for the freedom from British administration, the tribes fought against the British.

In 1786-87, a tribal zamindar namely Guragaballi Desureddy, a Konda Dora revolted against East India Company. In 1800, a tribal army led by Pandu Dora attacked the platoons of East India Company. In 1802, Koyas of Chodavaram rose against the British under the leadership of Rama Bhupathi. Rampa Pituri led by Dwarabandham Chandraiah in 1879. The Lagarayi Pituri against British led by Garagonda Manga Raju in 1916-1918. In 1922 a Koya revolt started under the leadership of Alluri Sita Ramaraju. Tribesmen do not like the interference of outsiders. Such was the peaceful continuation of tribal life that the British were forced to revolt under the wrong circumstances, infiltrating them regularly and causing them many troubles.

Conclusion

Forests are abundant in the Madras Presidency, especially in the Andhra region. Before the arrival of the British, those who lived in and depended on the forests were living with the help of forest products without any trouble. The British created forest laws and policies for the conservation of forests, but these were created problems to the tribals. The tribals have been deprived of all the common rights on the forests. The tribes revolted against the British because of interrupting their natural affiliation with the forests, in the way of life of the tribes.

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