

# Multiple Voices: History of Community Forest Management in Colonial South India 1850-1950

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**Abstract :** The relation between forests, state, and communities has been a controversial issue in colonial and post colonial India. This trend persists due the fact that forests have been a contested space for various agencies such as state, industry, and different social groups. These competing claims over forests had significant impact on the forest policy process in India. History of communal forests in South India demonstrates the complex process of contestation between the state and communities on the one hand and within different communities on the other during British rule and its influence on policy formulation. This article proposes that while socio-economic and politically dominant sections negotiated with the colonial state and maximized their benefits and majority of tribes and the rural poor requirements were not given due attention. This article documents the history of discourse and practice of community forest management in colonial South India.

**Key Words:** forests, community, south India, colonialism, village forests

## Introduction

This paper documents and history of community forest management in South India. While so doing attempt has been made to document various voices that participated in making of forest policy. The main argument of this paper is that forest policies are not only shaped by the colonial authorities but also native society consisted of peasants, politicians, intellectuals also actively participated in policy making process. It was this process that ultimately determined the nature of community forest management policies in south India.

South India represents a unique space in the narratives of colonial forest history for it had long history of communal forest management practice during colonial period. The narrative of happy eco-friendly peasant communities in pre-colonial period and disruption of this situation by exploitative colonial state was advocated by some studies (Murali 1995). This approach is modified by studies which analyze multiple voices within colonial bureaucracy on forest policies. It is argued that bureaucracy in South India vociferously favored communal rights of forest dependent communities, but such attempts are not successful due to the annexinist position taken by the colonial state (Guha 1993, Rangarajan 1994 and Sangwan 1999). The discourse of colonial bureaucracy was perceived as autonomous domain without much interference of the native voice (Pathak 2002).

However, the modal of hegemonic and exploitative colonial state and passive natives has been questioned by some studies. The collaboration between native elite and colonial governance process brought out by some studies (Ludden 2005). This premise is applied in analysis of forest policies. It has been empirically demonstrated the way Havik Brahmins, who were economically powerful community acquired concessions in the form of exemptions of their lands from forest reservation in South Canara district (Sabrwal and Lele 2004). The potentiality of vibrant communities in terms of retaining privileges from the onslaught of colonial rule by the way of resisting had been amply brought out by some studies (Cederlof 2005, Sarvanann 2003).

The studies on colonial forest policies in general and communal forest management in particular focused on micro level regional analysis in South India. Consequently two issues are not being addressed by existing studies: firstly demands of the natives for communal forests in the context of national movement and its impact on forest policy: secondly, the political economy communal forest management and thirdly socio-political dimension of native demand for creation of communal forest. This article proposes that communal forest management in south India emanated from the context of collaboration between rural elite and colonial state which undermined the livelihoods of forest dependent communities such as tribes, pastoralists and landless.

### **Discourse and Practice of Community Forest Management**

Expansion of colonial state's apparatus during the period of 1800-1860 appropriated a massive quantum of forests for shipbuilding (Ribbentrop 1989) and railways.

<sup>1</sup> This exploitation had inflicted heavy pressure upon forests and compelled the colonial state to evolve strategies for conservation of forests. During the period from 1865 to 1882, intense debate took place on the nature of ownership over forests. This debate was centered on state versus people regarding ownership patten over forests. Eventually this debate was settled in favor of state control (Murali 2004). But the rights of village communities over forests remained as a perpetual issue to the Madras government. Studies by Ramachandra Guha, Rangarajan focused on policy discourse within the domain of bureaucracy. But implementation process of communal forest policy remained unstudied. Study by Murali (1995) documents the perceptions of peasants on communal forests in the Madras Presidency. But did not explain how these perceptions influenced the outcomes of policy measures in Madras Presidency. Consequently, the operational process community forest management during colonial period remained to be a neglected aspect in colonial forest studies. This article focuses on this point so as to make forays into the domain of the way colonial rule operated in rural South India.

In the discourse on communal forest policy, three models of communal forest management were discussed within colonial bureaucratic circle:<sup>2</sup> firstly the model exists in France wherein forest management was delegated to local

political bodies like municipalities for benefit of the people: secondly in Germany communal forests were created and managed by the state with the involvement of communities (Powell 1882) and finally Brandis, proposed for creation of village forests on waste lands in India which he estimated to be 390,000 square miles (Brandis 1873). Along with implementation of scientific forestry, communal forest experiment was also given priority by the colonial state.

The project of scientific forestry introduced by the colonial state was implemented in the form of extensive reservation of forests, declaration of certain trees as reserved category and exclusion of customary access of the people. This process led to an unprecedented interference of state bureaucracy in day to day lives of the people in the countryside. Consequent upon which there existed severe unrest in the countryside against forest policies. This factor forced the colonial state to devise certain mechanisms to address the discontentment of the people. First official pronouncement on communal forest was made by the Indian Forest Act of 1865 under the name of village forests. But the Act did not provide any mechanism for their implementation. Some provincial level forest policies incorporated village forests into policy formulations. The Rawal Pindi forest rules envisaged village forests as a source for free supply of timber, grazing, firewood and other products to communities. The British Burma draft rules of 1873 defined village forests as 'Forests and plantations in the vicinity of towns and villages, and which, though they are the property of Government, are designed to supply timber, wood, fuel and other forest produce for the use and convenience of the inhabitants of such towns and villages' (Brandis 1878: 77). In the domain of discourse and practice on communal forests, the Madras Presidency emerged as an active participant.

### **Communal Forest Management in Madras Presidency**

Forest department in the Madras Presidency was established in 1856 and rules for management of forests were promulgated in 1862 (MecLean 1985). These rules proposed for certain institutional arrangements for management of communal forests.<sup>3</sup> Systematic forest policy was prolonged due to the lingering debate between governments of India and Madras on the nature of policy to be adopted on communal rights of the people over forests. The very idea of forest conservation advocated by foresters was attacked by revenue officials with the argument of forests as property of village communities and hence the state control did not exist. This resistance was aimed at restricting the expansion of forest department's control over forests, which was contrary dominant ideology of laissez-faire which perceives imposition of secured property as enjoin of progress. And extension of state control over forests viewed a dilution of the colonial state's main object (Barton 2002).

In this background, the rhetoric of communal rights by revenue officials was mainly articulated due to the fact that the lower level bureaucracy of revenue department mainly belongs to the dominant agrarian communities.<sup>4</sup>

They exercised pressure on higher level revenue officials to adopt the view of non interference in the customary access of village communities in forests.<sup>5</sup> The notion of forests belonging to village communities, which was advocated by revenue officials, aimed retaining the control of dominant agrarian communities over forests and village commons.<sup>6</sup>

The Madras Forest Act was promulgated in 1883, to facilitate state control over forests. However, the claims of dominant agrarian communities were so forceful that the Act had made provision on village forests (Brandis 1883). The communal forest management in the Madras Presidency was experimented with two names i.e., village forests (1885-1890) and panchayat forests (1914-1950). The first phase of communal forest experiment was pronounced in 1884.<sup>7</sup> This policy defined village forests as ‘Where the practice of grazing cattle, sheep or goats, or of cutting trees (other than reserved trees) or other forest produce for fuel, or building, agricultural or domestic purpose, or of cutting grass for thatching or fodder, or thorns for fences, or leaves of trees (other than reserved trees) for manure, free of charge, has long and steadily obtained, the Collector shall set apart once for all such areas as he may consider reasonable for this purpose.’<sup>8</sup> This provision was created for two purposes: firstly, to allow the customary access of the people to village commons and secondly, to create loyal communities to assist forest department in management of village commons.

The operational process of communal forest management during the colonial period was not given due attention by historians. This has been mainly attempted by developmental studies focused on forest policies. These studies superficially document the history of communal forest management as their main object is to analyze contemporary policy process on community forest management. (Sundar 2001, Profemberger and Mecgreen 1996). Consequently the operational dynamics of communal forest management policy in colonial period remained to be a hypothetical generalization.

Two models of village forests were experimented in the Madras Presidency i.e., village forests for each village and creation of village forests for a group of villages with inclusion of all unreserved lands under village forests. While the first model was experimented in tribal districts such as Nilgiri and Vizagapatam and second model was introduced in plain districts such as Cuddapah and Kurnool. Initially village forests policy was implemented in Nilgiri district in 1885 as this district consists of tribes who resisted the land grabbing by government and European planters. Village forests here defined as ‘the free supply to the indigenous villagers (Badagas, Kothas, Todas, Irulars and Kurumbers) of wood for building or agricultural purpose, fuel, grass, fruits and similar produce, as well as grazing for domestic cattle wherever possible. The uses of village forests will, as a rule, be enjoyed solely by the indigenous inhabitants of the village within such forests are situated’.<sup>9</sup>

The communal forests modal adapted in Nilgiri district was a combination of France and Germany modals. That is the state as owner of forests delegated the management responsibility to local bodies. The following regulative mechanism was devised to regulate peoples' access in village forests.

- 1) Full-grown trees may be cut with the permission of the *Monigar*, after he had inspected and marked the trees.
- 2) No person shall graze or permit to be grazed in any village forests.
- 3) No person shall be allowed to cut more wood, or gather more fuel, grass, fruit, &c., than permitted for his domestic use;
- 4) Selling of any wood, fuel and grass, &c., gathered in a village is forbidden, except to persons entitled to cut or gather such wood, fuel, grass, &c., under these rules.
- 5) All disputes amongst villagers regarding the produce of village forests settled by the village punchayet consisting of the Monigar, Currnam and three of the principal ryots of the village not concerned in the dispute or the matter in appeal.<sup>10</sup>

The form of governance instituted for management of village forests in Nilgiri district shows the nature of communal forests policy by the colonial state. The controlling authority was give to village chiefs, besides three principle ryots, who invariably belong to dominant sections of village. Implementation process community forest management was vested in the hands of village chiefs. This process strengthened control of dominant sections within tribal society on forests and village commons.

Village forests experiment was also introduced in Cudapah and Kurnool districts. Village forests here were created under the rule 10 of the section 26 the Madras Forest Act. Being dry districts with large number of cattle wealth, and troubled by continuous factions in villages, these districts received the attention of the Madras government. The village forests here consist of all unreserved lands of the village. The following regulations were implemented for management of village forests:

#### **Access to forests without permit**

- Grazing of cattle except goats
- Collecting and removing dead-wood, in head-loads only, as fuel
- Collecting and removing for manure leaves of 4<sup>th</sup>-class trees
- Collecting and removing thrones for fencing
- Taking the bark of creepers for fiber
- Collecting minor fruits

**Access to which permits required**

- Cutting and removing timber for agricultural purpose
- Cutting and removing timber for field watch platforms.<sup>11</sup>

Village forests experiment was continued only for five years. It was due to following reasons: the Madras government felt that village forests were obstacle for creation of reserved forests; officials of the forest department were not in favor of village forests as the department lose handsome revenue from grazing; and finally the Madras government abandoned village forest policy to extract revenue from grazing and minor forest products by incorporating village commons and grazing grounds under reserved forests category. In 1890 the Madras government has abandoned the policy of village forests. This measure was justified with the argument that 'The idea of village forests must be altogether abandoned, that it is desirable to have the sources of fuel and fodder supply under the Government control and to have the reserves in fairly large locks' (Voelcker 1986: 162). This measure marked an end of village forests policy in the Madras Presidency. The main reason for abandonment of village forests was perhaps due to revenue contribution of village commons to the total revenue of forest department as well as state. This political economy consideration motivated the colonial state to bring most of village commons under reserved forests category. The following statistics on grazing revenue shows the reason why village forests were incorporated into reserved forests: **Table: 1.**

**Revenue on grazing fees from Reserve Forests in Madras Presidency**

Year	Revenue from Grazing (In rupees)	Total forest revenue	% of grazing share in total forest revenue
1886-87	81,203	12,46,738	6.5
1887-88	1,05,811	13,74,920	7.6
1888-89	1,29,855	15,15,006	8.6
1889-90	1,43,845	15,57,627	9.2
1890-91	92,621	17,95,408	5.00
1891-92	1,15,794	16,94,215	6.80
1892-93	1,75,589	15,77,212	11.13
1893-94	2,66,891	19,43,75	13.70
1894-95	3,28,293	N A	N A
1895-96	3,40,496	21,67,630	15.70
1896-97	3,76,354	21,88,917	17.19



1897-98	3,63,905	21,51,144	16.91
1898-99	3,76,354	20,75,254	18.13
1899-00	4,89,765	23,13,507	21.16
1900-01	5,10,451	24,43,773	20.88
1901-02	5,40,068	24,96,494	21.63
1902-03	5,78,500	25,92,779	22.31
1903-04	6,07,400	26,90,571	22.57
1904-05	6,27,474	28,30,542	22.61
1905-06	6,62,837	30,36,892	21.82
1906-07	6,78,537	34,50,733	19.66
1907-08	7,27,343	38,58,026	18.85
1908-09	7,82,510	38,86,296	20.13
1909-00	7,69,770	41,84,633	18.39
1910-11	6,31,643	N A	N A

**Source: Compiled from Annual Administrative reports of Forest department for relevant years.**

Initially, the income on grazing was insignificant in the total revenue of forests. But after 1890s the income from grazing source steadily increased, and became an important revenue source which constituted 20% of the total income of forest department (Table-1). This escalation in the revenue from grazing reflects the policy of the Madras government, which converted village commons and waste lands into reserved forests. Increase in revenue was possible due to the tax imposed on grazing in reserved forests (Table-2).

**Table: 2. Grazing fee in reserved forests**

Grazing rates Per annum	Rs. A. P
Buffaloes	0 8 0
Bulls, Cows, Bullocks, Claves, Horses, Asses and	0 4 0
Foals	- - -
Sheep, cow, goats	0 2 0

**Source:** Annual Administrative report of Forest department, 1890-91, p. 28.

### Peoples' resistance to forest policies

The colonial state could not sustain the momentum of revenue extraction from village commons. After 1890, forest rules became a symbol of oppressive colonial rule in the countryside as they affect all sections of rural society. The forms of resistance against forest policies reflect the class character of rural society. Dominant

sections of peasant sections put forwarded an organized defense, small peasants, pastoralists, and land less depended upon of forests as a main source of livelihoods resorted to violation of forest rules as main form of resistance.

Abandonment of policy on village forest and conversion of accessible forests into reserved forests increased the regulatory powers of forest department. The period of 1890-1915 marked an intense struggle between the people and forest department.<sup>12</sup> And forest department emerged as one of the most unpopular departments of the Madras government.<sup>13</sup> The table three shows the annual crime reported due to illegal entry of the people into reserved forests.

**Table: 3. Forest crime reported in Madras Presidency**

Year	Number of cases	Year	Number of cases
1885-86	2,269	1903-04	21,883
1886-87	2,443	1904-05	21,930
1887-88	3,358	1905-06	23,021
1888-89	3,377	1906-07	23,141
1889-90	3,088	1907-08	24,453
1890-91	5,577	1908-09	25,470
1891-92	8,124	1909-10	25,277
1892-93	10,905	1910-11	26,489
1893-94	10,007	1911-12	28,995
1894-95	9,883	1912-13	29,892
1895-96	9,610	1913-14	31,177
1896-97	11,638	1914-15	32,541
1877-98	14,993	1915-16	30,885
1898-99	18,295	1916-17	28,087
1899-00	20,450	1917-18	27,091
1900-01	22,130	1918-19	26,160
1901-02	23,750	1919-20	27,537
1902-03	23,125	--	--

**Sources:** Compiled from the annual administrative reports of forest department of relevant years.

### Multiple voices- Communal Forests

Though there was no organized violent defense against forest policies, there existed hectic resistance by all sections of the people in the countryside. While combined resistance of forest dependent people against forest



rules created a widespread anti-colonial awareness, this was used by dominant peasant communities for their benefits. Their links with the Indian National Congress and other political associations enable them to articulate demand for communal forests forcefully. This alignment of dominant peasant sections with the Congress provided a platform for them to negotiate with the colonial state for communal forests. This process was executed by a combined effort of the native intelligentsia, press, revenue officials and dominant agrarian communities. The effort of these sections was aimed at acquiring control over forests in the plain areas, and tribes, who depended upon forests for livelihoods did not, figured in this discourse. It testifies the fact that the political forces fought with colonial rule mainly represented the class interests than broad based common interests of all sections of the people (Kumar 1987).

An organized defense by dominant sections of peasants against forest policies was articulated through various channels. Petitions against forest policies reflect the range of resistance from challenging the validity of forest reservation to demand for communal forests. Most petitions consist of three broad themes: documentation of problems due to forest polices and systematic critique of them; ascription of great antiquity to communal rights over forests and demand for revival of customary rights in the form of communal forests. In a petition by Subba Reddy and his family members, which was dominant peasant caste from Chittoor Taluq of North Arcot district demanded for exclusion of certain portion of forests from reservation. It was argued that their family possessed the portion for more than eighty years and carefully guarded from encroachment and damage. The following quote reflects and nature of communal management of forests practiced in the plain areas.

The Petitioners humbly beg to add that the forest in question was originally planted and improved by, the forefathers of petitioners about 70 or 80 years ago, and ever science petitioners' ancestress and latterly petitioners themselves have been improving and maintaining the forest by planting young trees in place of withered ones and by employing watchman to water and watch them; and that petitioners have in return for the large outlay been enjoying from time immemorial, the producer of the forest such as leaves for manure, wood for agricultural purposes and for fuel and so on.<sup>14</sup>

This narrative indicates the exclusive nature of communal forests enjoyed by the dominant agrarian sections. It was this kind of communal forests that were demanded by dominant peasant sections as they lost free access to forests essential for agriculture. In a bid to accelerate their demand for communal forests some petitions exaggerated the problems due to forest policies. The following narrative by peasants of Salem district argue

That contrary to the immemorial custom of ages by which the ryots have been permitted to graze their cattle upon the common plain, they are now hand-cuffed from the enjoyment of their rights of common. The Sheppard and the cow-hard are told that it is trespass to tree and upon ground where their father tended sheep or cows. To their vexation and bewilderment are they told that fines and punishments will be their rewards for the troubles of grazing cattle on the forbidden grounds...This is a source of great annoyance which is growing almost intolerable.<sup>15</sup>

The narratives of the dominant communities attempted to ascribe great antiquity to their customary rights over forests and demanded for their restoration. Patttabhi Ramireddi complained that: 'From the time of Adam and Eve we have been using the forests. I do not know why the Forest Department should come in and fix a fee'.<sup>16</sup> Thus, there was a constant attempt to historicize their claims so as to make them more concrete. Naveen Reddy, who owns 200 acres of land, while interacting with the Madras forest committee expressed that: 'before reserves were constituted all lands were common lands'- when the committee asked to suggest for mitigation of problems due to forests policies, he proposed that: 'If the forest department do not take it up, but on the other hand if the revenue department or the Village Panchayats take the management under their hand then grievances may be redressed'.<sup>17</sup> Creation of communal management was projected as panacea for grievances due to forest policies.

The reduction of cattle and goats number was linked with the operational process of forest policies.<sup>18</sup> The discourse on community forest management needs to be located in the prism of class structure. While the small peasants and land less labor demand for relaxation of restrictions,<sup>19</sup> economically dominant peasant communities demanded for communal forests.<sup>20</sup> It shows that the discourse and demand for communal forests as a policy was mainly exclusive in nature.<sup>21</sup>

### **Native press and communal forests**

The role of native press, which represents the voice of native and its impact on forest policy, had not been given adequate attention in the existing historical studies on colonial forest policies. Some studies attempted to capture the reflections of the native press on forest grievances. But their preview confined to the coverage of spontaneous violation of forest rules during the national movement (Murali 1987). Consequently, the role of the native press in shaping the policy has not been explored. In the Madras Presidency the native press emerged as an important agency to articulate not only the grievances due to forest policies but also made valuable suggestions on nature of communal forests. They kept public informed on the problems due to forest policies and projected the creation of communal forests as a remedy to grievances. The *Hindujanasamskharini*, a Tamil daily opined that: 'People in this country had never been accustomed to pay a tax on firewood, but they are now made to do so, that is precisely reason why many people hate the forest rules and the department'.<sup>22</sup>

The editor of the *Swedeshimitran*, a Tamil newspaper, reported that prior to the implementation of forest policies plenty of forest and waste lands were attached to villages and people enjoyed the access without restrictions. He suggested a viable remedy for problems due to forest policies in the following quote:

The waste lands adjoining villages should be planted with trees and given to villagers who should be made responsible for the cost of planting and maintaining trees on those lands, in return for their labour, the

villagers should enjoy free of tax or on payment of an easy tax on the produce of these forests. They should be allowed to take timber from the forest and other products as well, in such quantity as they require but a penalty should be imposed on those who wantonly destroy the forests'.<sup>23</sup>

Similar opinion was expressed in another edition of the *Swadeshimitran*,

For many generations people have been freely utilizing the forest products for purpose of life, and to put sudden restriction upon the long continued practice by the adoption of stringent measures will but cause the people much distress. The officers of the Forest Department should therefore, be kept under proper control and not allowed in their zeal for carrying out the measures stringently that would ignore the time immemorial rights enjoyed by the people.<sup>24</sup>

The native press boldly attacked forest department and claimed that it was the main factor for misery of the rural poor. The *Calanandi* reported that: 'The expenditure of department should be reduced by removing the District Forest Officers and entrusting their duties to the Assistant Collectors and by making over changes of the duties of the forest subordinates to revenue officers wherever possible'.<sup>25</sup> Besides the critique, several editorials of newspapers put forwarded proposals on communal forests. The editor of the *Swadeshimitran* demanded for creation of village forests for each village to supply free forest products to the people.<sup>26</sup> The *Dashabhimani* a Telugu periodical suggested that government should conduct an enquiry on the extent of waste and forest lands and create village forests for free supply of forest products.<sup>27</sup> At one level the native press evolved a systematic critique of forest policies and at another level demanded for communal forests as remedy to the misery caused by forest policies.

The role of political and civil society organizations in addressing the issues pertaining forest policy remained to be unexplored in the literature on colonial forest policies in South India. In fact political associations had actively participated in forest policy process. The strong anti-colonial feelings in the country side due forest policies forced the political association to take a note of them. In 1885, the congress working committee appointed a commission to enquiry into the grievances of agricultural population due to forest policies in Bombay. The Madras Mahajansabha and the Karala Mahajanasabha collaboratively conducted an enquiry into the operation of forests policies and demanded for relaxation of forest rules.<sup>28</sup> Entry of political organization into the struggle against forest policies resulted in emergence of new political discourse. This discourse evolved a systematic critique of forest policies and proposed for revival of native communal forest management.<sup>29</sup> The district level associations also took up the issue of forest policies. In 1894 the Guntur District Association, adopted a resolution on protest against reservation of *porombobokes* in villages.

The political discourse on communal forests did not exist in a monolithic form of favoring for communal forests. Some voices expressed their reservation against communal forests with an argument of such a measure may widen conflicts in villages.<sup>30</sup> But forceful demand for communal forests was a predominant feature of the

discourse on forest policies by the natives.<sup>31</sup> Venkatappaiah, leader of the Congress in Guntur district suggested two models of communal forests. Firstly, small forests for each village if available, and secondly allotment of forests for a group of villages. Krishan Rao, joint secretary of the Nellore district Congress proposed for revival of the *Kancha* system in which highest bidder acquires control over communal forests. For him, communal forests should be supervised by the intelligent ryots of villages as custodians. The reason he explains that 'the poorer ryots did not actually take part in the Conference. Generally the intelligent part of the community and persons who have been in a position to understand these matters attended. There were poorer persons whose demands were not properly represented'. This shows the nature of political discourse on communal forests management which mainly concerned the requirements of dominant sections of agrarian communities. In the three agricultural conferences held from 1909-1911 resolutions were passed and demand for communal forests under the supervision of village panchayats.<sup>32</sup>

The grievances related to forest policies also captured the imagination of urban public sphere of the Madras Presidency. The district peoples' association of Mudhra district passed a resolution in 1909 with a demand of 'sufficient land must be set apart for in each village' for communal forests.<sup>33</sup> The political discourse on communal forests reflects the class bias. Demand was articulated for communal forests mainly for grazing source as it is important for dominant agrarian communities at the same time, tribal people who equally suffered did not get their attention.

Having experienced consistent unrest in the country side, the Madras government appointed a committee to enquire about the problems due to forest policies. This committee known as the Madras forest committee consists of two native officers. This committee after extensive enquiry recommended for communal forests under the management of panchayats. Quite often the state and its organs in the colonial and contemporary India project the community forest management as benevolence policy by the state for the development of people. But close examination of the discourse on forest policies reveals that it was an imperative for the state as an administrative expediency. Forest departments' credential as an organ of bureaucracy was seriously questioned by the people.<sup>34</sup> In a way, the legitimacy of the colonial state was seriously questioned in the countryside of the Madras Presidency. Forest department became a symbol of the state oppression. It was this context that forced colonial state to initiate policy changes towards communal forest management. This has served four objectives of the colonial state: firstly, the consistent demands and protest of the dominant agrarian communities were satisfied;<sup>35</sup> secondly the administrative burden of the degraded forests which neither forest nor revenue departments were willing to hold were to transferred to communities; thirdly, the energies of the forest department was diverted to efficient conservation of timber forests,<sup>36</sup> and fourthly colonial state wants to give certain relaxation to the people as they were increasingly came under the influence of national movement

(Murali 1987, Sarkar 1980, and Venkatarangaiya 1967). It was in this context that Madras government incorporated the recommendation of the Madras forest committee into the policy process. Some of the important proposals of the committee as follow:

### **Duties of Panchayats**

- 1) To regulate the number of cattle to be grazed, prohibition of goats and management of grazing rotation.
- 2) To prevent the denudation of the grazing grounds and specially for collecting the grazing revenue.

### **Power of Panchayats**

- 1) To admit or exclude any cattle of their own village from the grazing grounds, or where limitations ordered, to decide what cattle are to be admitted. This will include the powers to exclude the cattle of any person who is found cutting or doing other harm to the forest without permission, or who fails to pay his share of the revenue or who refuses to obey the legitimate orders of the panchayats.
- 2) To impound cattle which graze without permission.
- 3) To regulate these of fuel so far as it is available for domestic or agricultural purpose.<sup>37</sup>

The recommendations of the Madras Forest Committee were implemented in some districts in 1914. But the momentum of this policy picked up after the Retrenchment Committee dealing with the reorganization of forest department suggested for creation of 'ryots forests' in 1923. It was proposed that the forests required for every-day needs of agricultural population may be managed as communal forests. For management of ryots forests, the committee recommended for of panchayats (Boag 1933).

Forest panchayats are defined as small committees consisting of 5-9 members elected by the general body of cattle owners from among themselves in the village. These committees are authorized to issue grazing permits, collection of tax and protection of forests. The government policy on forest panchayats steadily progressed. After 1918 creation of forest panchyats in districts such as Bellary, Guntur, Western Cuddapah, Chelglput, Anantapur and Chittore was initiated. A special staff was created for general administration of forest panchayats in 1922. The forests brought under the management of forest panchayats were transferred to the Land Revenue Department in 1<sup>st</sup> July 924. By 1930s 3,303.78 square miles of forests were transferred to forest panchayats.

### **Election Process of Forest Panchayats**

In 1931, the Madras government promulgated an order, which resembles the joint forest management strategy adopted by the government of India. The election process of forest panchayats resemble the similar process of



the community forest management policy initiated by the government of India. The election process of panchayats was conducted by a Divisional Officer personally or through Deputy Thasildar. For selection of panchayats, general body consisting of all villagers was created. The members of general body should possess a permit in reserved forests. All general body members elect management committee consist of 5-9 members. The following members are not eligible to become forest panchayat as follows:

1). Is not a British subject; 2). Is a female; 3). Having been a legal practitioner has been dismissed or is under suspension from practicing as such by order of any competent court; 4). Is of unsound mind; 5). Is under 25 years of age; 6). Is an insolvent; 7). Is a deaf-mute; 8). Is a leper; 9). Has been sentenced by a criminal court to transportation or to imprisonment for a period of more than six months. The selection procedure of forest panchayat shows that it has excluded the poor, women and vulnerable from the governance of forest panchayats.

The everyday functional aspects of forest panchayats are difficult to track, but we do have a general picture on the way they functioned. The forest lands allocated for management of forest panchayats were mainly degraded forests and close to human habitation, which increased the incidence of over grazing and illicit felling.<sup>38</sup> The forest panchayats were mainly controlled by dominant sections of peasant as they were main stake holders. But this policy neglected the interests of women, pastoralists, small peasants and agricultural labor. This policy gap led to consistent degradation due to lack of support from all sections of village in conservation activities.

The main reason attributed for the ill-functioning of forest panchayats can be captured from the following quote: 'The revenue officials neither had sufficient time to properly supervise the work of these panchayats nor could they enforce the adoption of the technical principle of forestry of these panchayats. Consequently, the forests suffered particularly from enormous illicit grazing especially by goats, over grazing by cattle and indiscriminate lopping of trees for manure leaf etc. Some of these panchayats exercised no control whatsoever either due to their inefficiency or due to factions among themselves.' (Rao 1960: 9-10). This deplorable state of forests allotted for panchayats forced the government to initiate a policy shift. The independent government transformed the control of panchayats forests to the forest department on 26<sup>th</sup> April 1948.

Independent Indian government gave slow poison for the death of forest panchayats with the policy increasing the control of forest department. After passing the Forest Act of Andhra Pradesh in 1967, which was closely modeled based on the Madras forest act of 1882, panchayat forest were removed (Rao 1995). This act divided the forests into reserved, protected and private forests. There was no provision for communal forest



management. The panchayats forests concepts was gradually merged with social forestry. However, the demand for community forest management continued, from the newly emerged political elite, which resulted in the concept of joint forest management and community forest management. This move was projected as new innovative method toward establishment of people's centric forest management. Of late some of the recent studies demonstrate that community forest management surrounded by several short comings which undermined the expected results.

### **Conclusion**

The modal of exploitative colonial state and helpless forest dependent communities can be questioned by the evidence of South India. Colonial policy systems are resisted in fact forced for alternation by resistance and contestation of the natives. It was the dominant agrarian communities which articulated the notion of community involvement in forest management. This demand was mainly put forwarded by native press, petitions by peasants and political associations. But the demand for communal forest management was confined to plain based agrarian economy. The problems of tribes due to forest policies are not given attention by the native press and political association. This shows the parochial nature of national intelligentsia in colonial South India. However, the demands of natives are incorporated into policy process by the colonial state in bid to trim down administrative responsibilities on the one hand and creation of loyal rural allies on the other. This shows two important things: firstly, communal forest management has been a strategy to meet the native demands and secondly, colonial policy systems are modified by the assertion of socio-economically dominant communities. Thus, communal forest management policy during colonial period initiated the process unequal access of commons in village society. This process mainly benefited rural elite, and poor peasants, pastoralists, agricultural labour, and claims of women were neglected. This led to big gap between normative policy framework and peoples' claims. Participatory forest management in India is inevitable due lift by the colonial rule. But unfortunately, similar kinds of problems are visible in participatory forest management in independent India.

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> Cleghorn, (1861) estimated that each mile of the railway track required 1760 sleepers of durable timber. If we compare his estimates with the expansion of railway track by 1879 in the Madras Presidency, railways consumed 26, 00000 sleepers for construction of railway track and annual maintenance of the railway track consumed about 330000 sleepers In Board of Revenue Proceedings, here after referred as (BRP), Madras, 8<sup>th</sup> April 1879, No. 919, p. 3172, Tamil Nadu State Archives (TNSA).

<sup>2</sup> Both Brandis, (1875), Powell, and (Gamble 1875 discussed about village forests in their works and recognized their importance in the agriculturally predominant county like India. But both of them viewed that village communities can be given only user rights but not property rights due to the fact that forests and waste lands belong to the state in India.

<sup>3</sup> Board of Revenue Proceedings (henceforth BRP), Madras, 16<sup>th</sup> March 1863, No. 1567, p. 1. TNSA. This correspondence consists of Government Order, (No. 2645, 20<sup>th</sup> December 1862, which proposed for formation of Topes, village groves mainly inflectional sections of village. Some of topes still exist in Andhra and known by the family names of people formed them. Most of these topes are named after families of Brahman, Reddy, Kamma, and kapu, which are dominant agrarian castes in Andhra. However, the access to them was prohibited to lower castes especially untouchable castes.

<sup>4</sup> Village level official of reveue department such as *karanam*, *patel* or *reddy* (village police), *thasildar*, *thalari* mainly belong dominant castes of villages.

<sup>5</sup> The notion of village communities having efficient system of resource sharing without conflicts questioned by some studies and argued that forests and grass lands are used by dominant agrarian communities in villages. For details see, J.R. Freeman, (1999) and Ludden, (2005).

<sup>6</sup> Colonial land settlement process in Andhra region in the form of zemindari, rayatwari settlements, bestowed immense powers to the dominant communities in villages as they acted as intermediaries between village cultivators and revenue authorities. Village commons were controlled by these communities as they exercise control over large extent lands and powers in villages. For details see, (Firminger 1969).

<sup>7</sup> BRP, Madras, 25<sup>th</sup> July 1884, No. 2541/ F-201, pp. 1-7, TNSA. In 1884 Madras government issued gridlines for management of forests, which are not included in reserved forests under the section 26 of the Madras Forest Act. These rules enabled the state to take over village common lands under the supervision of forest department. The rule 7 proposes for creation of village forests by collector, rule 10 enable the state to take over village common lands for public utility.

<sup>8</sup> BRP (Land Revenue hereafter referred as L/R), Madras, 1890, Forest no, 707, this proceeding consists of several correspondence on communal forests, p. 29, TNSA.

<sup>9</sup> BRP, LR, Madras, 5<sup>th</sup> May 1886, Forest no, 234, has correspondence related to village forests policy in Nilghris. pp. 7-6. TNSA.

<sup>10</sup> *Ibid*, p. 6, the Subsidiary Rules for the Management of Village Forests under the Rule 7 of the Madras Forest Act, laid down gridlines on village forest policies.

<sup>11</sup> Letter from the Collector of the Kurnool District to the Conservator of Forests, North Circle in BRO, L/R, Madras, 28<sup>th</sup> March 1887, F. No. 182, p. 13. TNSA

<sup>12</sup> Annual Administrative Reports of forest department record several physical attacks by people on lower subordinate, staff; in the Cuddapah district, one forest guard and one fire patroller were killed in 1892. In the same year, a watchman and his father were killed in the Sashachelem range; in several district physical attacks on forest staff was a common feature.

<sup>13</sup> Forest department became the most unpopular department in the country side of the Madras Presidency. Destroying the assets belong to forest department was perceived a heroic activity. In tribal areas frequently reserved forests were fired. In the annual administrative report of forest department from 1895-1915, every year fire accident cases in Andhra regions were reported. Government could not control these incidents as lack of evidence on the crime and cooperation from people. In the plain areas, the confrontation between lower forest subordinates and people was a frequent phenomenon. In a bid to remove this problem, the Madras government instructed all collectors to minimize the problem due to forest policy in villages in 1911.

<sup>14</sup> BRP, L/R, Madras, 2nd October 1890, Forests no. 159, TNSA. Petitioners belong to Reddy, which was an official designation to village officials in medieval period, but transformed into a dominant agrarian caste in Andhra. They claimed prescriptive rights over the forests in their village. Their claim was rejected by Forest Settlement Officer, the further appealed to higher courts. But their claim was rejected on the point that ownership over forests absolutely belongs to the state and people could only enjoy privilege in the form of access to forest produce.

<sup>15</sup> BRP, L/R, Madras, 19<sup>th</sup> July 1889, Forest. no. 686, Petition from the ryots of Salem District, similar petitions see Memorial from ryots of Coimbatore District, BRP, L/R, 28<sup>th</sup> April 1891, Forest no. 396; Petition from ryots of Kurnool District, in BRP,LR, 12<sup>th</sup> April 1892, Forest no. 392. Memorial by ryots from Cuddapah District, in BRP, L/R, 8<sup>th</sup> January 1890, Forest no. 6; Memorial form ryots of Nellore District, in BRP, L/R, 5<sup>th</sup> November, 1900, Forest no 649; Petitions from the ryots of Kurnool District, in BRP, L/R 22 April 1904, Forest no. 358; Petitions by the ryots form the Kistna district, in BRP, L/R, 19<sup>th</sup> February, 1907, Forest no. 136. TNSA

<sup>16</sup> He was a cultivator belong to dominant caste from Nellore district, he is an owner of 350 cattle, see *The Madras Forest Committee* (henceforth MFC, Vol .II), Madras, Government Press, 1913, p. 32.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid*, p. 18, for management of village commons two agencies other than forest department are preferred i.e., revenue department and local panchyats.

<sup>18</sup> Raghava Reddy and Vankatappa Naidu both have more than 300 acres of lands, submitted their grievances to the committee that: while Raghava Reddy claimed that before reservation of forests he has 2000 cattle and 1000 goats, after reservation, cattle number reduced to 200 and goats were reduced to 34. Venkatappa Naidu narrated that he has 1000 goats and all were sold after forest reservation. And proposed that only way to solve this problem is to undertake the management of grazing in forests collectively, in MFC, pp, 22-23.

<sup>19</sup> Small peasants and landless interacted with the Madras Forest Committee expressed that the restriction on their access should be relaxed, and they may be allowed to have free grazing, firewood, and wood for agricultural implements.

<sup>20</sup> BRP, L/R, 16<sup>th</sup> September 1904. TNSA. Some of the cattle breeders from Nellore district put forwarded a memorial to the government on the bad plight of affairs on account of forest policies and restriction on grazing. They demanded for alternation of grazing policy and devolve the grazing for communal management.

<sup>21</sup> BRP, Revenue Settlement and Land Records and Agriculture, Madras, 12<sup>th</sup> December 1906, the representation by the Agricultural Association, Nellore marshaled the facts to push their demand for more relaxation of rules on grazing. They calculated that while the maintenance of 100 head of cattle requires Rs. 308 and returns from that are Rs. 220, with Rs. 88 deficient. The argument was that maintenance cost far exceeds the returns from cattle. They proposed that renovation of Kancha system and allotment of grazing grounds to the ryots who have large number of cattle at minimum rate of tax. It was proposed that in the absence of such cattle owners, grazing grounds may be allotted to small ryots.

<sup>22</sup> Native News Paper Reports, (hereafter referred as NNPR), Madras, translated version of the Native Newspapers in Madras Presidency, *The Hindujanasamshkarini* (Tamil Daily) 26<sup>th</sup> February 1887, p. 25. TNSA.

<sup>23</sup> NNPR, Madras, *The Swadeshimitran*, (Tamil Daily), 26<sup>th</sup> February 1887 6<sup>th</sup> June 1885, p.20. TNSA

<sup>24</sup> NNPR, Madras, *The Swadeshimitran*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1886, p.55. TNSA

<sup>25</sup> NNPR, Madras *Calanandi*, (Tamil Weekly), 11<sup>th</sup> May 1889, p. 232. TNSA

<sup>26</sup> NNPR, Madras, *The Swadeshimitra*, 16<sup>th</sup> April 1887, p. 55. TNSA

<sup>27</sup> NNPR, Madras, *Deshabhimani*, (Telugu, weekly) from Cuddapah District, September. 14<sup>th</sup> May 1892, in p. 220. TNSA

<sup>28</sup> NNPR, Madras, *The Karala Patrika*, September 7<sup>th</sup> 1885. TNSA

<sup>29</sup> The issue of grazing was taken up by political organization at different layers such as the Indian National Congress, district level political organization and others.

<sup>30</sup> A missionary from Guntur district, John Dussman felt that communal forest management benefit only dominant sections of village; in MFA, p. 236, Muhmmad Sheriff of Nellore district argued that most of the villages were full of factions and communal forests many not be feasible in Nellore, in MFA, p. 14; Sessa Charlu, a lawyer from Nellore district argued that in communal forests are formed only inflectional *ryots* will take away all the benefits and he proposed that if this experiment to be introduced it should be under the supervision of the forest department, in MFC, p. 95.

<sup>31</sup> Several lawyers, who also own vast extent of fertile lands demanded for creation of communal forest management by entrusting management responsibilities to local communal bodies. For instance, Venkatamarama Aiyar, lawyer and agriculturists from Nellore district suggested for allocation of degraded forests for the management of Panchyats, in MFC, p, 82, The Zamandar of Muthyalpad of Nellore district proposed for creation of Panchayat for management of forests close to villages, in MFC, p. 91

<sup>32</sup> The MFC, pp. 122-23.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid, p. 334.

<sup>34</sup> After 1890s Forest department became most unpopular department in Madras Presidency, especially the lower subordinate are treated as enemies. It is because the day to day access of the people was controlled by the lower staff. Sending cattle to pond, imposition of heavy fines on trespassers, collection of mamools, taking bribes all these practices of lower staff of the department contributed for hostile relations between the people and the department.

<sup>35</sup> Most of the people interacted with the Madras Forest Committee were big formers owning more than two hundred acres of lands and enormous number of cattle. They forcefully demanded for revival old grazing practices under the supervision of village panchyats. In MFC, p. 27.

<sup>36</sup> After 1920s forest officials mainly focused on silviculture and preferred the policy of transferring grazing lands and degraded forests for the management of local communities. It is argued that such measure, not only reduce the administrative burden of forest departamtn and reduce the hostile relation with the people. This thinking is reflected in the following quote by conservator of forests: 'The real remedy to the peoples' grievances related to the access to forests was in the words of the Conservator of Forests in Northern Circle that: 'The ideal to be aimed at is the surrender of all forests on which the villagers depended on for their daily wants to the management of village interests itself, but such a surrender must be accompanied by some guarantee that the forests are not destroyed by the selfishness of the present generation'. Thus, the forest officers proposed that people were the appropriate managers to manage forest resources on which they depended upon. However, this move was adopted by the Forest officials mainly to withdraw from the responsibility of managing unimportant forests and to focus on Silviculture operations, in Annual Administrative Report of Forest Department AARFD, 1919-20, p,

<sup>37</sup> MFC, Vol. I. p. 22.

<sup>38</sup> Government Order, No.1185, 1<sup>st</sup> June, 1931, Government of Madras, Revenue Department (Andhra Pradesh State Archives). It was a comprehensive government order on panchayat forest management.

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