

ENVIRONMENTAL CHANGES IN MALABAR UNDER COLONIAL RULE

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Abstract : Malabar was entirely distinct from the rest of the country in terms of its geographical features – mountains, sea coast, rivers, fauna and flora etc. The physical environment of Malabar helped to create a unique economic pattern and a typical social structure and organization. During the pre-colonial period the people of Malabar led an eco-friendly life which was dependent on the environment. But they never tried to exploit nature and natural resources excessively other than to cater to their basic requirements. The indigenous people interfere with the environment only for their subsistence. The tribal people living in the thick forest were well aware about herbal medicine and practices. The pre-colonial village life was self-sufficient. However the advent of western colonial powers in Malabar changed the scenario, and they introduced new colonial policies. The process of colonialism resulted in some degree of structured change in the economy and society of Malabar. They made deliberate attempts to change many of the traditional practices.

As a part of commercialization of agriculture, they implemented a plantation economy in the region. The westerners came to India mainly for trade and later transformed our environment base. The British government introduced economic policies in Malabar mainly conducive for spice trade. The large-scale expansion of cash crops resulted in the scarcity of food and destruction of wide forest areas. The British government converted thousands of acres of forest land into coffee and tea plantations.

Index Terms: Malabar, colonial intervention plantation economy, deforestation, commercialization of agriculture, forest policies, teak and tea plantation, occupational patterns, native resistance, internal migration.

I. INTRODUCTION

In ancient times, Malabar was really a geographical entity rather than a political unit or territory. The term Malabar was used for the first time by the Arabs, after their arrival to the land.¹ The term Malabar is derived from ‘malanadu’, ‘mala’ means hill or mountain and ‘nadu’ means region. Malabar is an Arabic usage derived from the words ‘mala’ and ‘barr’². The Dravidian word ‘mala’ means hill or mountain and the Arabic word means country. Many foreign travelers and indigenous writers have mentioned about the geographic and physical features of Malabar in their travel accounts. In the ancient and medieval writings ‘Malabar’ was used to denote the entire western coast³.

In the pre-colonial period, though the people of Malabar depended on the environment for their subsistence, they never tried to exploit nature and natural resources. Geographically, Malabar was a blessed territory with climate and fertile soil⁴. It is known that Kerala is prone to continuous seismic activity, which has resulted in major or minor changes particularly visible in the coast.⁵ Under colonial rule Kerala was divided into three political entities, the princely states of Travancore, Cochin and Malabar which was directly ruled by the British as a part of Madras Presidency. Malabar is one of the two districts of Madras Presidency situated on the west coast of India, lies between Northern latitude 10° 15 and 12° 8 and eastern longitude 75° 14 and 76 15 .⁶ The soil in these areas was extremely fertile⁷. The climate and seasonal changes had their impact on vegetation and the development of agriculture. Its unique geographical position and peculiar physical features have invested Malabar with a distinct individuality.

The indigenous societies always maintained contact with ‘other’ ‘modern’ or western or contemporary societies. This constant interaction resulted in fundamental changes to the traditional societies. The prevalence of colonialism has resulted in some degree of structural change in indigenous societies especially in its socio-economic and cultural fabric. The westerners defined their relations with the east on the basis of the theories of industrial revolution, like that of contract labor competitiveness, the struggle for existence and survival of the fittest. In this process, the natural relations were considered as limitless and were utilized without any hindrance or any thought of waste. The westerners came to India for trade and later transformed our

environmental structure and finally gained political control over India. From the ancient period itself, the trades from across the globe had been drawn to pepper, 'black gold'⁸. With the motive of collecting our natural resources for their benefit, they largely attacked the existing system of eco-friendly subsistence by introducing different methods.⁹ The most important among them was the forest laws and policies. Gradually it resulted in the colonization of the environment along with political colonization.

The pre-colonial environment condition was completely changed due to the colonial exploitative policies. Among the spices, pepper was the most valuable product but the other spices like cardamom ginger etc. also had a high demand. Malabar was an important gateway rich in tradition between India and Europe.¹⁰ Calicut, the unofficial capital of Malabar was once known as spice city and was an important destination for foreigners. In 1498 during the age of geographical explorations, Vasco Da Gama arrived at Calicut which resulted in crucial changes in previous trade relations prevailed in the Indian Ocean and on the coast of Malabar¹¹. They brought the crops like pineapple, papaya, guava, cashew etc. In the course of time the other European powers like Dutch, French and ultimately British established their domination over Malabar

After the Anglo Mysore war, the Treaty of Seringapatam in 1792 brought the whole of Malabar under British colonial rule. It was converted into a district of the Madras presidency under the British major McLeod who was appointed as the First Principal Collector of Malabar¹². The British Malabar contained not only the Malabar itself but also the Island of Lakshadweep and Mini coy¹³. The direct rule of the British affected fundamental changes in Malabar's political, social and economic order. The British introduced several environmental policies in Malabar. They implemented policies in Malabar mainly for the development of spice trade. As a part of their commercialization of agriculture, the self-sufficient village economy of Malabar was linked with the world capitalist economy. It was a structural change from feudal mode of production to capitalist mode of production. Plantation economy was the byproduct of commercialization of agriculture. During this time, cash crops like indigo, cocoa, cotton, tea, coffee, sugar cane, rubber etc. were largely produced instead of food crops. In their colonial exploits, the European imperial powers identified certain tropical crops significant to them, as these were most suited to their consumption requirements and commercial interests. Large scale expansion of cash crops resulted in the loss of food self-sufficiency in Malabar.

The cocoa plants were originally introduced in Malabar by the English East India Company. William Logan in his 'Malabar Manual' refers to the vigorously growing cocoa plants at an experiment farm at Mananthavady in Malabar¹⁴. These plants were planted in both the remote and tribal areas. The British introduced plantation agriculture for their economic motive, but it created some environmental problems especially deforestation. The plantation economy caused the removal of large scale forest areas in Malabar. The coffee cultivation in the hilltops of Malabar especially in Wayanad changed the ecological balance of this region¹⁵. Gradually the plantation spread their patch work pattern through the whole of the mountain area. In the course of time the planters have differentiated their crops by adding tea and pepper and experimental with cocoa, dominate the economy of Malabar¹⁶. Tea began to be planted on various estates in Wayanad from 1892 onwards. Another important plantation crop was pepper. Rubber plantation was started experimentally in Malabar. In 1842 onwards, the Britishers planted a wide range of teak in Malabar. Realizing the importance and potential of teak plantations, extensive research was taken up in Nilambur and Wayanad and planting techniques were standardized¹⁷.

As a result of commercialization of agriculture, people who were residing in the coastal area moved into remote areas. From the last decades of the 19th century, the migrated people captured most of the land from the tribes. The alienation of tribals from their home led to the destruction of tribal identity which pushed down the aborigines from the premises of their traditional living. The tribal life in Malabar provided a uniform pattern of existence. The tribal settlements in Malabar are mainly on the Western Ghats and low lying hills lie from the eastern boundary with the adjoining state of Madras and Mysore. The tribal subsistence economy was mainly dependent upon agriculture and forest products, which also provided them with social and cultural identities. There was an approximate equilibrium of natural resources. The tribals mainly depended on forest for all their requirements and they received honey, meat, bamboo, rice, herbs etc. from forest for their livelihood. Herbal medicines known to them were quite sufficient to cure almost all diseases. As a part of colonialism they introduced English medicine, which undermined the value of traditional indigenous medicines.

The relations between colonial state and Malabar forests during the early decades of British domination would prove this claim to be historically untenable. In 1806 timber monopoly was established throughout Malabar and Travancore. In 1805 the forest administration of the Malabar district was transferred

from Madras government to the Bombay government¹⁸. The human interaction with the forest during pre-British days was much less in scale compared to the cruel devastation that was followed under colonial rule. The forest policy of the British government in India resulted in the destruction of the traditional structure of occupational pattern among the tribals of Malabar. The Forest Acts of 1865, 1878, 1884 and 1927 restricted the villagers using forest products. The rights of the forest dwellers had ended. The newly created forest department began to energetically taken control of every untitled land¹⁹. Under the Government of India Act 1935, the power to enact laws on forest and wild animals were vested in the provincial legislatures. The British colonial policies marked a watershed in the environmental history of Malabar. From 1930 onwards Christian migration from Travancore to Malabar also affected the traditional culture. Ultimately the destruction of forest and their fauna, the way of life of those who subsisted from these resources was simultaneously affected leaving only the memories of survivors as direct testament of their forest culture.²⁰

The fiscal policy of the British government also caused the destruction of the traditional environment of Malabar. Their policy aimed to protect their commercial and industrial interest. Every year, acres of natural forest are being cleared for commercial and agriculture purposes. The government converted thousand acres of forest lands into coffee and tea plantations. During the year 1841 Parry and company of Madras assigned more than 2000 acres of forest land for planting coffee. By the end of 1866 more than 200 coffee plantations were started in Wayanad. Teak was planted for making railway sleepers and eucalyptus for meeting the raw materials required for heavy industries.

The environmental condition of Malabar, especially the Wayanad Hills helped Pazhassi Raja to wage guerrilla warfare against the British with the support of the tribal people.²¹ Pazhassi Raja fought strongly against the British in the jungles of Wayanad. The Migration of Christian farmers from Travancore to Malabar especially to the high ranges also played a vital role in the rapid abolition of natural vegetation. The farmers converted thousands of acres of forest land in to the cultivable land and the colonization scheme of the government to rehabilitate the ex- servicemen in the forests of Malabar added fuel to this problem²². The tribals of this region were the victims of those colonial policies and they lost their land and the sources of livelihood.²³

2. CONCLUSION

Malabar has its own historical identity on the basis of its geographical and environmental entity. Malabar remains a centre of attraction both to native and alien communities because of its natural beauty and biodiversity. The pre-colonial phase of Malabar offers an optimistic picture of resource utilization by keeping equilibrium with nature. The geography of Malabar enriched its forest, mountains, numerous rivers, climate, flora and fauna etc. It was really a gift of nature. The pattern of life was mainly based on environmental changes. The people interacted with the environment with mutual understanding and co operation.

However the real picture of the environment was changed after the entry of the colonial powers. The colonial intervention was in the form of introduction of plantation, construction of roads, bridges, canals and the opening of the land to the money lenders etc. The British plantation led to the disintegration of the tribal social, cultural system and their forest and agrarian oriented economy. Like other parts of the world, the rapid environmental degradation of Malabar was started with the coming of Europeans especially, the British. In the colonial agenda, there was no space for the welfare of the traditional communities, conservation of their ecology and environment. It is interesting to notice that tribal people were the earliest community in India, who fought against British imperialism. Malabar was not an exception to this scenario. The tribals of Malabar with their traditional weapons and facilities efficiently fought against the British under Pazhassi Raja in the last phase of the 18th century and early decades of the 19th century.

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