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Commercialisation of forests, environmental negligence and alienation of tribal rights in Madras Presidency: 1792–1882

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The colonial policy on forests and forest-dwellers during the early nineteenth century has not been explored extensively, and has not been placed under scrutiny.¹ Studies so far have mainly focused on how the Forest Acts progressively curtailed the rights of forest-dwellers but failed to assess the direct impact on their economy/rights.² However, some studies attempted to give a bird's-eye view of the impact of the Forest Acts on the different categories of population.³ But they were centred on areas other than the Madras Presidency.⁴

Further, the colonial forest policy on environment for the early nineteenth century has not been explored, and the studies are focused on the period

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¹ Ramachandra Guha, 'Forest in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis', *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter *EPW*), Vol. 18(44), 29 October 1983, pp. 1882–96; *idem*, 'Forest in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis', *EPW*, Vol. 18(45–46), November 5–12, 1983, pp. 1940–47; Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Imperial agendas and India's forests: The early history of Indian Forestry, 1800–1878', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), Vol. 31(2), 1994, pp. 147–67.

² *Ibid.*

³ Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, 'State Forest and Social Conflict in British India', *Past and Present*, No. 122, February 1989, pp. 141–77.

⁴ David Baker, 'State Policy, the Market Economy, and Tribal decline: the Central Provinces, 1861–1920', *IESHR*, Vol.28(4), 1991, pp. 341–70.

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immediately after the first Forest Act 1865. Guha argued that the 1865 Act had been enacted mainly to ensure control over the forest supply for railways, and environmental issues had been neglected by not enforcing the rules. While drafting the Forest Act 1878, the debate on environment had taken place among the Forest Department officials at the centre and presidency level. At the central level, the emphasis was on controlling the forest by the state, whereas at the presidency level, particularly in Madras, the district administrators, while opposing the central views, wanted the needs of the local people to be considered. Ultimately, the presidency level protest was suppressed by the colonial administration.⁵ According to Guha, the debate on environment had taken place within the Forest Department while drafting the Forest Act 1878.

Grove has argued that the debate on environment had taken place among the British colonial surgeons during the early colonial period. His claims are based mainly on private papers, published records and imperial level archives where the British colonial surgeons have discussed the issues arising out of deforestation and its consequences on climate, rainfall decline, water supply, drought, famine, etc. Further, they apprehended that 'headwaters of rivers watering the fertile . . . lowlands of the presidency would clearly be affected'. He concluded, therefore, that the idea of forest conservation for environmental protection was strongly shaped, particularly after the 1830s, both in the Madras and Bombay Presidencies in 1856: 'the basic infrastructure of state forest conservation was in place in all presidencies as well as elsewhere in India'.⁶ Whether his claims were reflected in practice in the Madras Presidency has to be ascertained with the help of presidency level archival sources. During the early nineteenth century, whether any importance was accorded for maintaining ecological balance and environmental protection or only a crass commercial forest policy was followed is of great importance.

The colonial government claimed that the forests were destroyed mainly by the forest-dwellers, and hence it had to restrict the tribal rights over forests including their right over common property resources. Is this true? Has not any other factor led to the denudation of forests? Has the colonial administration really emphasised forest conservation or was it more interested in commercialisation of the forests? While restricting tribal rights on forests, has any measure for their development been initiated by the British during the nineteenth century? Towards answering these queries, Salem and Baramahal region has been chosen, as it had the largest forest cover and forest-dwellers in the whole of Madras Presidency.

⁵ Ramachandra Guha, 'An early environmental debate: The making of the 1878 forest act', *IESHR*, Vol. 27(1), 1990, pp. 65–84.

⁶ Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial expansion, tropical island Edens and the origins of environmentalism 1600–1860*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 380–473.

Salem and Baramahal regions lie between north latitude 11° 14' 46" and 120° 53' 30" and between east longitude 77° 30' 52" and 78° 53' 05". In 1793, the total geographical area of Salem and Baramahal regions was 6,391 square miles, of which 4,997 square miles (78.19 per cent) were plains and 1,394 square miles (21.81 per cent) hills. The total number of villages was 6,041 of which 435 were classified as hill villages. The total extent of agricultural land was 4,090,268.2 acres. The number of irrigation sources were: 495 wells, 397 annicuts and 2,345 tanks.⁷ There were 12 minor rivers which mostly originated from the hills and flowed for about 497 miles.⁸ In 1796, the total number of cattle resources were 567,641 and 566,625 sheep.⁹ In addition, a number of plant species and fauna were found in Salem and Baramahal regions, particularly in the hill areas. There were several important trees viz., sandalwood, teak, vengay, kadukai, velvelam, avaram, tamarind, naga and karangali, besides several medicinal plants in the hills.¹⁰ As far as the climate was concerned, summer starts in February and it continues till the later part of June, and then, from November onwards the winter begins, and continues till late February.¹¹

In 1793, the total population of Salem and Baramahal regions were about 600,000 of which 27,713 persons or 4.62 per cent lived in the hills. Population density per mile was 2,528 and this rate was 3,159 for the plains and only 174 for the hills.¹²

In Madras Presidency, neither conservation was emphasised nor the tribals' access to forests was restricted during the pre-colonial as well as the early colonial period. In the 1830s, the tribal land and forest of Shervaroy hills were taken for coffee cultivation and, subsequently, several restrictions were imposed on the customary use of the forest. No other hill tribes have met with such problems in the Madras Presidency. Until 1882, the colonial government did not have a concrete forest policy for the Madras Presidency as a whole. In most parts of Madras Presidency, forest cover was invariably destroyed by the contractors, traditional industries, neighbourhood towns and villages until the early colonial period.¹³ With these pre- and early colonial factors, establishment of the British iron-making industries, Madras Railways and introduction of commercial crops into the hill areas,

⁷ Board of Revenue (hereafter BOR), Misc, Vol. 151-A, 1791-94, pp. 41-42, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai (hereafter TNSA).

⁸ Colonel Alexander Read, *General Report on Salem*, 4 April 1800, para 11, TNSA.

⁹ R.K. Puckle (Epitomised and Annotated), *Colonel Read's Report on the original settlement of Salem in 1791-1796*, Salem, 1868, p. 98. See also BOR, Misc. Vol. 157, 20 March 1798, TNSA.

¹⁰ Dietrich Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1883, pp. 173-75.

¹¹ Baramahal Records (hereafter BR), Section II, *Geography, 1791-1794*, Vol. 1, p. 32, TNSA.

¹² BR, Section III, *Inhabitants*, Vol. 1. pp. iii & iv, TNSA.

¹³ Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, Chapters II, III and IX.

large extent of prime forests were destroyed. In the early nineteenth century, conservation of forests was completely neglected by the colonial government. The second-half of the nineteenth century witnessed a little importance being given for conservation, that too, mainly for supplying fuel-wood for the Madras Railways and British iron-making industries. Without considering the factors responsible for the denudation, the colonial state imposed several restrictions on the tribals' traditional rights without initiating any measure for their development/welfare in the Salem and Baramahal region.¹⁴ Whenever the tribals revolted against the appropriation of their rights, they were suppressed by the colonial military power.¹⁵

This article attempts to analyse commercialisation following the colonial Forest Policy and the alienation of tribal rights on forests in the hill areas of Salem and Baramahal region of the Madras Presidency in the period between colonial intervention (1792) and introduction of the Madras Forest Act 1882. It consists of nine sections. The first section deals with the destruction of forests in general and the colonial policy. The second section analyses the denudation of sandalwood in particular and the colonial commercial policy. The third section gives an account of the indiscriminate felling by the Indian indigenous and British iron-making industries. The fourth section is on the establishment of Madras Railways and destruction of forests. The fifth section concentrates on the destruction of forests by the plain neighbourhood towns and villages. The sixth section looks at introduction of commercial crops which lead to clearing of vast tracts of forest cover. The seventh section focuses on the restrictions imposed on the tribals by the Madras Forest Act. The eighth section discusses the impact of the introduction of commercial crops and the Madras Forest Act on the tribals. The last section provides the concluding observations of this article.

I

Early Colonial Forest Policy

The colonial rulers had neglected the forests and their conservation during their early period.¹⁶ They did not have a concrete forest policy till the sixth decade of the nineteenth century. Instead of maintaining ecological balance and protecting the environment by preserving forest resources, they leased

¹⁴ For details see V. Saravanan, 'Tribal Welfare and Colonial Policy in Salem and Baramahal Regions of Madras Presidency During the Colonial Period: 1792-1947' (unpublished).

¹⁵ For details, see V. Saravanan, 'Tribal Revolts in Salem and Baramahal Regions of Madras Presidency During the Late Eighteenth Century' (unpublished).

¹⁶ K. Indhrani, *The Forest Policy and Administration of the Madras Presidency under Crown 1858-1935*, unpublished Ph.D dissertation, Department of History, University of Madras, Madras, 1982, p. 238.

them out for a meagre amount. Till 1835, they levied a duty on woodcutting in the different parts viz., Denkanekota and Namakkal of Salem district. Forest and forest produce were used without any constraint by paying a little amount both by the hill people as well as those from the plains. Woodcutting rights were not rented/leased out till 1835 in the Salem and Baramahal region. The Collector of Salem states, ' . . . the right of cutting wood has never been hitherto rented in this district'.¹⁷ It was, therefore, left to the commonsense and economic compulsion of the people to protect their own interests.

In addition to the utilisation of forests by the locals and neighbours, the British Iron and Steel Company was accountable to a great extent for the annihilation of forest cover in the different parts of Madras Presidency. Prior to 1835, the Iron and Steel Company got a lease of woodcutting rights from five taluks (Chidambaram, Virudachallam, Cuddalore, Elavansoor and Bhuvanagherry) in South Arcot district; three taluks (Wodiarpolliam, Aragalore and Voleondapooram) in Trichinopoly district and one taluk (Sheally) in Tanjore district.¹⁸ Privileges were given to entertain the forest resources in favour of the companies without considering the importance of protecting natural resources.

To extract more revenue, a separate system of leasing was followed for the different forest products since 1834. There was a separate renting system for sandalwood (see section II) and other forest products. In Salem district, some parts of the jungles were rented by the natives for cutting bamboos and other timber; in some other areas the right of cutting sandalwood had been rented.¹⁹ Kolli hills of Salem district were rented out, for the exclusive right to levying a duty on woodcutting for timber and bamboos, at Rs 78 per annum. In 1835, Heath proposed to take the lease of Kolli hills for a period of 21 years and, if approved by the Court of Directors, for 20 more years.²⁰ For the first five years, he offered it at the rate of Rs 156 per annum. During the second and third five-years, he proposed to take over the whole district at the rate of Rs 500 and Rs 1,000 per annum respectively; and for the subsequent period of six years, the rent was at the rate of Rs 1,500. On renewal, he offered to pay at the rate of Rs 2,000 per annum for the entire lease period.²¹ But the Collector refused to accept Heath's offer to obtain monopoly rights of cutting wood in Salem district on the ground that it would produce great public inconvenience as ' . . . it would not only interfere with the supply of the country furnaces and other manufacturers

¹⁷ BOR, 21 November 1835, Vol. 1468, p. 10792, TNSA.

¹⁸ Letter from the Secretary to the Chief Secretary to the Government, dated 8 October 1835, BOR, Vol. 1470, p. 11536, TNSA.

¹⁹ Letter from Heath to BOR, dated 2 September 1835, BOR, Vol. 1467, p. 10500, TNSA.

²⁰ BOR, Vol. 1468, 21 September 1835, p. 10792, TNSA.

²¹ Letter from Heath to the Collector of Salem, dated 9 February 1835, BOR, Vol. 1468, p. 10794, TNSA.

requiring machinery now existing or which may be established, but it would completely put a stop to the preparation (except by Mr Heath) of that useful article, magnesia cement, for which large quantities of charcoal are required, and which bids fair soon to become a valuable article of export from the district'.²² He further stated that the right of levying a duty on cutting wood had already been rented out in two taluks, i.e., Denken-cottah and Namakkal.²³ In addition, the Collector had earlier called a separate lease for sandalwood cutting rights for the different hills. Consequently, the Collector opined to give monopoly rights for cutting wood except for those hill ranges with sandalwood which existed in six taluks viz., Attur, Namakkal, Salem, Denken-cottah, Tripatoor and Tengrakotta of the total 14 taluks.²⁴

In the same year, Heath applied to the Board of Revenue for a grant of exclusive right of cutting wood for fuel for the use of the Iron and Steel Company from the government wastelands and jungles of the Salem district for a period of 21 years. He assured that the existing rights of the natives and the revenue sources of the government would not be disturbed. Also, he offered to pay two annas per 128 cubic feet quantity of fuel-wood.²⁵ Based on the Collector's recommendation, the government ordered 'not to permit fuel to be cut in the government woodlands of his district for the use of iron works on the European plan, except those belonging to the Indian Iron and Steel Company'.²⁶ Between 1858-59 and 1875-76, Rs 8,29,134 were received from the forest sources other than sandalwood in Salem district.²⁷ This indicated that the tribals did not destroy the forest as the government had encouraged felling by traders and contractors for a meagre amount.

II

Colonial Policy on Sandalwood

Sandalwood had been preserved and utilised only by the rulers during the pre-colonial period. For example, Tipu Sultan had preserved the sandalwood in the hills of Dhanaiguncottah for more than 10 years while using the buildings. And it was guarded by about 200 peons. Immediately after colonial intervention, these trees were entirely cut down by a body of

²² Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 12 September 1835, BOR, Vol. 1468, p. 10791, TNSA.

²³ *Ibid.*, p. 10792.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 10790.

²⁵ Letter from Heath to BOR, dated 2 September 1835, BOR, Vol. 1467, pp. 1499-1501, TNSA.

²⁶ Minutes of Consultations, dated 27 October 1835, BOR, TNSA.

²⁷ Board Proceedings (hereafter BP) No. 996, 3 March 1877, TNSA.

armed Nairs of Calicut. Later, the colonial government prohibited felling of sandalwood in all the mountains. But the intention was not to preserve but to extract more revenue in future.²⁸

Sandalwood in Salem district was cut down not only by the neighbourhood merchants/inhabitants but also by merchants from distant places like Tanjore. One such group led by a Brahman, a native of Tanjore had cut down and carried away 1,000 pags via the Gujelguttu pass; but this was seized and sent to Madras for being exported to China.²⁹ With a view to tap the Chinese market, which the government considered as important, it took some steps to preserve sandalwood in the forests.³⁰

After colonial intervention, the demand for sandalwood increased not only within India but also in foreign countries, especially in China. In fact, the price of sandalwood was determined by the Chinese market demand.³¹ While middlemen were encouraged, the official machinery was also used to hew sandalwood from the different parts of the Madras Presidency.

Sandalwood was largely found in the hills and forests of the north-western parts of the Madras Presidency viz., Salem and Baramahal, Coimbatore and South Canara regions. In 1800, British middlemen sought permission to purchase/procure sandalwood from the above mentioned regions to export it to China. Accepting the proposal, the government gave the instruction for purchase of sandalwood being entirely open in Mysore and Canara regions. It also recommended that the place of sandalwood purchase should be within the Company's territory.³² In response, the middlemen also assured, ' . . . the terms of purchase can be settled on the arrival of the sandalwood, having every reliance on the liberality of the Board in the settlement . . . the first sort of sandalwood should be free from any marks and the larger the pieces the better'.³³ Consequently, the government sent a communication to the Collector to inform the agent regarding the amount of sandalwood that was ready for cutting, charges of carriage to Madras, different kinds of quantity and the amount of quantity readily available at hand.³⁴

Favouring the agents, the government instructed Collectors regarding the sandalwood cutting: ' . . . the larger and heavier the pieces are the

²⁸ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 19 February 1800, BOR, Vol. 247, p. 1955, TNSA.

²⁹ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 21 April 1800, BOR, Vol. 250, p. 3742, TNSA.

³⁰ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 28 April 1800, BOR, Vol. 250, p. 3742, TNSA.

³¹ H.R. Morgan, *Forestry in Southern India*, ed. John Shortt, Madras, 1884, pp. 30–31.

³² Letter from the Secretary, BOR to G.M. Baboon, 17 May 1800, Salem Collectorate Records (hereafter SCR), Vol. 560, p. 26, TNSA.

³³ Letter from G.M. Baboon to the Secretary, BOR, 13 June 1800, SCR, Vol. 560, p. 25, TNSA.

³⁴ *Ibid.*

better they (agent) are calculated for the market, . . . it also will save the wastage and expense of cutting, and can be more conveniently packed upon the backs of the bullocks for the purpose of conveying it to Madras'.³⁵ The Collectors were directed that the sandalwood pieces were to be cut into three feet long pieces and the roots in small sizes.³⁶ The government also invited 'one Candy of several sorts (of sandalwood) and . . . specify the probable proportion of each'.³⁷ To collect and export sandalwood to China, Collectors were instructed not to interrupt the bullock cartload. In 1812, the Board of Trade requested the Board of Revenue to give instructions to the Collectors for transmitting 600 candies of sandalwood from Canara.³⁸ It also decided to advertise purchase of sandalwood.³⁹ Later, in 1836, advertisements were made in the newspapers for attracting sandalwood supply.⁴⁰ Thus, the colonial government provided privileges and necessary facilities to the middlemen for exporting sandalwood to China.

The colonial government had received a large amount of money through sandalwood export to China. For example, in 1800–1801, about 3,776–30–48 star pagodas was received by the Collector of Salem for sandalwood supply to the Board of Trade.⁴¹ From Coimbatore district, 62,984–11¾ mounds or 3,144–11¾ candies of sandalwood were delivered to the Board of Trade between 1799 and 1809, and it was worth 104,915 star pagodas 9 fanams 8 cash.⁴² The Collector also ensured supply of a probable quantity of 2,537 mounds from 3,214 trees for the year 1810. For the years 1817–1820, 6,817 mounds of sandalwood was supplied from the 8,691 trees.⁴³ A large quantity of sandalwood was auctioned in Coimbatore district. The revenue from sandalwood progressively increased: Rs 3,826–13–3 in 1834; Rs 15,063–8–9 in 1835; and Rs 22,554–1–1 in 1836.

Even after the permanent settlement (1802–03) the colonial government reserved the right to collect the woodcutting tax against the *mittadar*. For example, in the Sanklydroog, the government rented out woodcutting rights for three years at the rate of 205 star pagodas per annum, exclusive

³⁵ Letter from the BOR to Collector of Salem, 19 November 1800, SCR, Vol. 560, p. 133, TNSA.

³⁶ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 3 December 1800, BOR, Vol. 268, p. 10284, TNSA.

³⁷ Letter from the BOR to the Collector of Salem, dated 19 November 1800, SCR, Vol. 560, pp. 133–34, TNSA.

³⁸ Letter from the Secretary to the Board of Trade to the Secretary, BOR, dated 20 August 1812, BOR, Vol. 582, pp. 10084–85, TNSA.

³⁹ BOR, Vol. 261, dated 29 August 1800, p. 7400, TNSA.

⁴⁰ Letter from the Marine Board Office to the Secretary to the BOR, dated 16 January 1836, BOR, Vol. 1490, p. 269, TNSA.

⁴¹ Letter from BOR to the Collector of Salem, 6 July 1801, TNSA.

⁴² Letter from the Collector of Coimbatore to the President and Members of the BOR, dated 15 June 1811, BOR, Vol. 544, p. 5938, TNSA.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, p. 5940.

of the permanent settlement amount.⁴⁴ In July 1800, the Salem District Collector transported 309 mounds consisting 1,743 pieces to the Board of Trade. Of this, 165 mounds had been cut within a month from the forest, 117 mounds were from the different villages and 27 mounds recovered from those who clandestinely plundered from the jungle.⁴⁵ Sandalwood was found in big sizes in Salem and Baramahal region. For instance, 165 mounds of good sandalwood was produced from 40 trees. In other words, four mounds of good sandalwood was derived from each tree. According to the Collector, 200–400 candies could be supplied annually from Salem district.⁴⁶ The price of the sandalwood per candy was between 18 and 20 star pagodas. By and large, the commercial forest policy was the root cause for the destruction of sandalwood in the Salem and Baramahal region during the early nineteenth century.

Sandalwood was sold directly by the Collector in the region during the early nineteenth century. The rights to cut down sandalwood were not leased/rented out to private contractors. In the latter period, only some parts were rented out. As such, the Denkencottah jungles were leased out for every three or four years for Rs 400 in 1821; Rs 2,100 in 1822; Rs 2,100 in 1823; Rs 2,000 in 1832 and 1833.⁴⁷ In the other parts of the district, sandalwood cutting rights were under the control of the Collector. But, sandalwood was cut down without restraint by the plains people. These sandalwood trees were ‘. . . clandestinely sold at a considerable extent in bazaars of Salem, Namakkal and Attur’.⁴⁸ In addition to the colonial commercial forest policy, the merchants and neighbourhood plains people were also responsible for the destruction of sandalwood in the Salem and Baramahal region.

The Collector gave a proclamation prohibiting felling sandalwood on 25 June 1835. He sent a direct communication to all the principal merchants and also announced this through beating of tom-toms throughout the villages in Salem taluk.⁴⁹ Accordingly, plains people were not allowed to cut down sandalwood from the hills/forests and at the same time the merchants were to refrain from buying it. In spite of this, the merchants purchased about 18 mounds of sandalwood. The Collector imposed some penalty to prevent clandestine sale in future.⁵⁰ In the Tengrikota taluk, about 100 mounds of sandalwood was seized. As a measure to avoid all

⁴⁴ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 6 September 1806, SCR, Vol. 3159, p. 83, TNSA.

⁴⁵ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, no date, July 1800, BOR, Vol. 258, p. 6641, TNSA.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 6642.

⁴⁷ BOR, Vol. 1498, No. 24, 28th March 1836, p. 5077, TNSA.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*

⁴⁹ BOR, Vol. 1553, 24 July 1837, p. 91, TNSA.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

these illicit fellings, the government proposed to rent out sandalwood in the Salem district as a whole. Two persons were appointed to ascertain the quantity of sandalwood in Salem, Attur and Namakkal taluks.⁵¹ The intention behind this was to earn more revenue through leasing out sandalwood cutting rights and conservation was never a concern of the colonial administration.

Sandalwood in the Hills

Sandalwood was abundant in the hill areas of Salem and Baramahal region (see Table 1) and no revenue was obtained from the Shervaroy, Kolli and Pachamalai hills between 1820 and 1835. In 1830, only Rs 280 was collected from the Attur taluk.⁵² Felling was absent in many hills except Kolli and Chitteri hills where only a few trees were cut down. It categorically shows that the tribals were not behind the destruction of sandalwood in the hill areas. Expecting a large amount of revenue, a separate renting auction was publicly invited by the Collector in 1835. Only two offers were made to have exclusive rights for cutting sandalwood at the rate of Rs 300 and 340 respectively. The former wanted the lease for 15 years and the latter for eight years. Not satisfied, the government refused to lease out for this paltry amount for a period of 10 or 15 years.⁵³ Again, the Collector urged the government to lease out the hills to prevent illicit felling of sandalwood in the extensive forest of the Kolli hills.⁵⁴ It evidences that the government did not emphasise the conservation of forests.

In 1835, the Collector invited proposals to lease out sandalwood cutting rights in Shervaroy hills. The offer came for 10 years at the rate of Rs 300 per annum. But the government refused to accept it. Consequently, a new proposal was invited in 1836, and the offer was Rs 340 per annum for 5 years.⁵⁵ The Collector urged the government to accept the offer, failing which no revenue for sandalwood would be received from the hills.⁵⁶

Accepting his recommendation, the government ordered to appoint two persons to ascertain the quantity of sandalwood in the different hills and paid them Rs 30 each for two months.⁵⁷ Finally, sandalwood cutting rights

⁵¹ BOR, Vol. 1505, 26 May 1836, p. 7467, TNSA.

⁵² Letter from the Collector to the BOR, dated 20 August 1835, BOR, Vol. 1463, p. 8901, TNSA.

⁵³ Letter from Fischer to the Collector of Salem, dated 30 July 1835, BOR, Vol. 1463, p. 8903, TNSA.

⁵⁴ Letter from the Revenue Board Office to the Chief Secretary to the Government, dated 28 April 1836, BOR, Vol. 1501, p. 6539, TNSA.

⁵⁵ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 18 February 1836, BOR, Vol. 1494, pp. 4018–19, TNSA.

⁵⁶ Letter from the Collector of Salem to the BOR, dated 28 March 1836, BOR, Vol. 1498, pp. 5076–78, TNSA.

⁵⁷ Letter from the BOR office to the Chief Secretary to the Government, dated 26 May 1836, BOR, Vol. 1505, p. 7467, TNSA.

Table 1
Numbers of Sandalwood in Different Hills of Salem District: 1837

Hills	I sort	II sort	III sort	Trees cut down and shooting cut	Young Tress	Total
Shervaroys	1,190	4,373	5,365	—	2,081	13,009
Neiyamalai	1	15	4	—	—	20
Aranuthumalai	10	508	941	—	1,317	2,776
Pachamalai	2,575	3,145	2,830	—	2,942	11,492
Chitteri	316	1,535	2,603	41	—	4,495
Kollimalai (Namakkal)	240	888	6,201	92	6,065	13,486

Source: Board of Revenue, Vol. 1587, 11 December 1837, pp. 15047–56, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

in Kolli hills was leased out at the rate of Rs 340 for 8 years. Between 1862–63 and 1875–76, Rs 147,537 was received from sandalwood in Salem division Forest Department.⁵⁸

III

Indigenous and Company Industries

The indigenous industries viz., iron-smelting and sugar-boiling industries dependent on forests for fuelwood to some extent, were responsible for the denudation of green cover in the different districts of Madras Presidency during the pre- and early colonial period. Absence of coal in the Madras Presidency made these industries completely dependent on the forests for their fuel needs.

Iron-beds were largely found in Salem and according to the Geological Survey of India, there are five groups viz., Kanjamalai, Kodumalai, Singapatti, Thalamalai–Kollimalai and Thirtamalai groups.⁵⁹ Indigenous iron-smelting furnaces were found in many villages of the district. According to Brandis (1883), 10 villages in Attur taluk, 33 in Salem taluk and many villages in the Namakkal and Uttankarai taluks were engaged in iron-smelting works.⁶⁰ These industries were also to some extent responsible for the destruction of forest in the hill areas of Salem and Baramahal region during the pre- and early colonial periods.

Colonial intervention saw the closure of the iron-smelting industries in places where they were unable to face the competition of iron from England and the gradually increasing scarcity of fuel-wood which had led

⁵⁸ BP, No. 996, 3 March 1877, TNSA.

⁵⁹ H. LeFanu, *A Manual of the Salem District in the Presidency of Madras*, Vol. I, Madras, 1883, p. 98.

⁶⁰ Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, p. 182.

to high prices.⁶¹ On the contrary, the colonial government encouraged the British iron-making industries and had given some exclusive privileges during the nineteenth century. In 1830, J.M. Heath set up iron-making industries at Porto Nova in South Arcot and availed the right of cutting trees for fuel in the government wasteland. Then he had made agreements with various Collectors to get lease for 21 years to raise ore and cut down trees for fuel. Under this lease, they did not pay any rent for the first five years, subject to the payment of a small annual rent for the remaining lease period. The government also provided financial assistance for these industries. In 1853, the East India Company was started with a capital of Rs 400,000. Exclusive rights of cutting ore from the government wastelands in South Arcot, Salem, Malabar, Canara and Coimbatore was granted to it for a term of 30 years, subject to an annual payment of Rs 500 as rent.⁶² The company erected new works at Tirnomalai in South Arcot district and Pulampatti in Salem district. Due to scarcity of fuel, the company's iron-making industries at Pulampatti were closed in 1858. Porto Nova operations came to an end in 1866 and Beypore and Tirnomalai in 1867. Again, in 1875, the company's iron-making industry established in Madras secured rights to make charcoal in 42 square miles of forest land in North Arcot on paying a small seigniorage and it was discontinued in July 1877.⁶³

In addition to the native iron-smelting industries and British iron-making company, the sugar-boiling industries in the different districts of the Madras Presidency consumed a large quantity of fuel-wood during the early colonial period. After colonial intervention, the British sugar factories also accentuated denudation of forests. For example, Messrs Parry and Co, Sugar Factory at Tiruvennanallur had consumed annually about 3,500 tons of wood, and the same group's sugar factory at Nellikuppam consumed more than that of the first one.⁶⁴ In some places, only a meagre amount was collected as tax for supplying fuel-wood to the sugar factories. The Aska Sugar Factory in Ganjam paid one rupee per license to cut down an unlimited quantity of firewood till 1879. This sugar factory had felled about 10,000 tons annually from the forest.⁶⁵ It proves beyond doubt that the native iron-making industries during the pre-colonial period and the colonial policy on the colonial iron-making industries and sugar-boiling industries during the nineteenth century resulted in the destruction of the hill forests to a greater extent in the different regions of the Madras Presidency.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 53.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 55.

⁶³ *Ibid.*, p. 58.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 200.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 34.

IV

Establishment of Madras Railways

Establishment of Madras Railways in the Madras Presidency witnessed a large extent of forests being wiped out. The Madras Railways had used fuel-wood more than coal during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. While coal had to be purchased from outside for a heavy price, wood was largely available within the Madras Presidency at a cheaper rate. The consumption of fuel-wood by the Railway had increased remarkably from 9,821 tons in 1863 to 54,358 tons in 1868.⁶⁶ In 1878, the Locomotive Superintendent of Madras Railway estimated that the average cost of coal and wood per ton, for the five-year period (1873–77) was Rs 28–2–11 and Rs 5–15–11 respectively (see Table 2). The average consumption of wood per engine mile for the same period (1873–77) was 89.53 lbs, whereas for coal it was only 26.75 lbs. In other words, the quantity of coal required per engine mile was only 1.00 lbs, and for wood 3.35 lbs. Though the required wood per engine mile was high, the price was very low when compared to that of coal. The average (1873–77) cost of coal per ton was Rs 28–2–11 while 3.35 tons of wood cost only Rs 20–1–4. The amount expended on fuel-wood consumption by Madras Railway during 1873–77 was Rs 1,736,482. Of this, 40 per cent, equal to Rs 694,593 was saved with the consumption of wood instead of coal.⁶⁷ Against this background, the Madras Railway preferred

Table 2
The Average Prices of Coal and Wood: 1873–77

(in Rupees)

Year	Cost Per Ton					
	Coal			Wood		
	Rs	A	P	Rs	A	P
1873	28	14	6	5	15	4
1874	32	6	5	5	13	6
1875	28	12	2	5	13	11
1876	24	6	7	6	1	6
1877	25	5	10	6	1	1
Average	28	2	11	5	15	11

Source: Government Order No. 373, Public Works Department (Railways), 26 April 1878, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 32.

⁶⁷ Government Order (hereafter G.O.) No. 373, Public Works Department (Railways), 26 April 1878, TNSA.

to use wood rather than coal. Between 1873–77, about 354,921 tons of wood was purchased for the Railway fuel (see Table 3). Subsequently, fuel-wood requirement of Madras Railway had increased every year.

Table 3
Fuel-wood Purchased for the Madras Railways: 1873–77
(Quantity in Tons)

Year	Total Quantity Purchased
1873	44,693
1874	55,107
1875	57,466
1876	77,731
1877	119,924
Total	354,921

Source: Government Order No. 373, Public Works Department (Railways), 26 April 1878, Tamil Nadu State Archives.

In 1878, the agent of the Madras Railway stated that the approximate requirement of wood for fuel was about 91,000 tons.⁶⁸ In 1881, railways consumed about 68,420 tons of wood. Of this, about 55,760 tons had come from the private forests and the rest was drawn from the government forests (see Table 4). The colonial government had also purchased a large quantity of fuel-wood for Railways from private forests.

Table 4
Sources of Fuel-wood Supply to Madras Railways
(in Tons)

Sl No	Districts	Government	Private	Total
1	Nizam's Dominions	–	2,550	2,550
2	Bellary	–	1,120	1,120
3	Cuddapah	8,860	1,800	10,660
4	North Arcot	2,750	23,440	26,190
5	Mysore	–	850	850
6	Salem	650	10,750	11,400
7	Coimbatore	400	–	400
8	Malabar	–	15,250	15,250
Total		12,660	55,760	68,420

Source: Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, p. 40.

⁶⁸ Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, p. 40.

The idea of protecting forests was initiated as early as in 1865 in the different districts of the Madras Presidency. This was not for maintaining ecological balance and to protect the environment but for the future requirement and constant fuel-wood supply to the Madras Railways. To put it differently, protection of forest was to further commercial interests. About 3,482 acres of forests were protected in the different districts of the Madras Presidency between 1865 and 1874 (see Table 5). These protected forests were cut down between 1875 and 1882 and about 12,536 tons of wood was consumed. Prior to the Madras Forest Act 1883, some forests were protected/reserved only to be cut down for the Railways' fuel and berths.

Table 5
Protected Forests in Different Districts

Sl No	District	Reserve	Protected since	When cut	Area cut in Acres	Outturn in Tons	
						Total	Per Acre
1	Cuddapah	Ballipalle I	1867	1876	3	59	19.6
2	Cuddapah	Ballipalle II	1871	1876	3	35	11.6
3	Cuddapah	Kodur Hill	1871-74	1880-81	135	1,919	14.25
4	Cuddapah	Yerraguntlakota	1873	1880-81	155	958	6.25
5	Cuddapah	Vakaticonah	1874	1880-81	200	1,248	6.20
6	North Arcot	not stated	1865	1875	1	11	11
7	North Arcot	Mamandur	1871	1880-82	1,777	4,952	2.8
8	Salem	Varigampatti	1866-67	1876	100	455	4.5
9	Salem	Varigampatti	1866-67	1875-79	886*	2,255	2.8
10	Salem	Morur	1866	1882	100	384	3.8
11	Salem	Pothur	1868-69	1877-78	112	140	1.25
12	South Arcot	Gingee	-	1876	10	120	12

* Note: 100 acres cut in 1876 from part of the 886 acres cut in 1875-79.

Source: Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, p. 45.

Due to the laying of Madras Railways, a large number of valuable trees were cut down in the forest areas of Salem and Baramahal region. In 1859-60, seigniorage amounting to nearly Rs 23,500 was realised on berths alone, and the number of berths supplied in 1859-60 was about 245,743.⁶⁹ The colonial government did not take any action against these forest fellings. In 1866-67, hundreds of thousands of trees were cut illicitly by the cattle drivers for the railways. The government was helpless as the Magistrates refused to convict them for theft.⁷⁰ In 1870, the Conservator of Forests stated that the government should look at the amount of timber

⁶⁹ F.J. Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer, Salem District*, Vol. I, Part II, Madras, 1918, p. 248.

⁷⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 249.

being taken out freely from the Salem jungle alone, and come to terms that no forest could possibly stand a drain of that nature.⁷¹ The fuel-wood supply to the railways stated to have come from private forests was, in fact, cut on government land, and the forest officers had neither the establishment nor resources to prevent it.⁷² Brandis, Conservator of Forest in the Madras Presidency (1881–83) recommended that the Railways should be encouraged to extract the maximum from private forests, and once it exhausted that, then the government forest may be used.⁷³ But it is evident that the colonial government did not take any measure towards conservation. The railways continued, as ever, to consume a large quantity of trees from both the private and government forests during the late nineteenth century.

V

Consumption of Neighbourhood Towns

A considerable extent of the hill forest cover was denuded by the villages in the vicinity and thickly inhabited towns in the Madras Presidency. In Salem and Baramahal region, most of the hill slopes were cleared by the neighbourhood plain inhabitants.⁷⁴ Firewood demand of the two major towns viz., Salem and Attur, was largely supplied from the neighbouring hill slopes, as also from distant places. The fuel-wood demand of Salem town was met from: (i) Topur forests, which was about 24 miles away from where the wood was brought in carts; (ii) the southern slopes of Shervaroy hills, off 3 miles, and mostly brought through headloads; (iii) forests adjoining Manjavadi pass, off about 12 miles, the wood was brought on cartloads; (iv) headloads from Bodamalai hills, about 5 miles away and; (v) from Jarugumalai, about 2 miles away. For headloads, certain amount, i.e., one pie to four pies was paid according to the description of the wood.⁷⁵ Till 1870, there was no tax on the fuel-wood supply to the Salem town.⁷⁶ Brandis (1883) estimated that about 10,000 acres of well-stocked forests were required to meet the fuel-wood demand of Salem town alone.⁷⁷ The thickly inhabited towns and villages were also accountable for the destruction of the forests during the pre- and early colonial regime of the nineteenth century.

⁷¹ *Ibid.*

⁷² Brandis, *Suggestions Regarding Forest Administration*, p. 40.

⁷³ *Ibid.*, p. 51.

⁷⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 175.

⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 3.

⁷⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 181.

VI

Coffee Cultivation

The British initiated coffee cultivation in different hill regions during the early nineteenth century. In Southern India, coffee plantations were established on the highlands of the west coast regions viz., Mysore, Coorg, Travancore, Wynaud and Nilgiris during the nineteenth century.⁷⁸ Of this, Wynaud and Nilgiris belonged to the Madras Presidency. To some extent, coffee plantations were set up in the Shervaroy hills of Salem district. In Madras Presidency, the coffee plants/plantations were introduced in different periods between the late eighteenth century and first half of the nineteenth century. The first coffee plants were introduced at Tripatoor in Baramahal towards making large-scale plantations by Colonel Read, Collector of Salem and Baramahal in the year 1795. But these plants perished due to lack of maintenance.⁷⁹ Later, a small tract of land was brought under coffee cultivation in Jawadhy hills near Tripatoor by the natives. In 1825, coffee plants were introduced in the Shervaroy hills by M.D. Cockburn, and in Wynaud, around 1833, by Major Bevan. The first regular plantation was opened by Mr Glasson in 1840 on the hills at Manantoddy, followed by others. In these regions, coffee was cultivated in the grass or bamboo land, making the venture unprofitable. So, coffee plantations were transferred to South Wynaud. In 1855-56, the number of estates increased in these regions. In 1857, about 12,000 acres was under coffee cultivation, of which 10,000 acres or 83.33 per cent was held by 32 European colonists, and the rest by the natives. In the Nilgiris, coffee plants were introduced in 1846. In the beginning, plantations were established in the eastern slopes which got extended to southern, northern and north-western slopes. During the first-half of the nineteenth century coffee estates were mostly held by European colonists.

In 1885, coffee plantations were there only in eight districts, of which seven belonged to the southern districts of Madras Presidency and the rest in the northern districts. Coffee plants were largely found only in Malabar with 52,964.97 acres; Nilgiris with 35,128 acres and Salem with 10,769 acres. In the remaining districts it was considerably less. Large-sized coffee plantations were found only in the Nilgiris and Malabar districts whereas the smaller ones were found in Madura district. During the nineteenth century, increase in coffee cultivation prevailed in Malabar, Nilgiris and Salem districts. In 1885, of about 108,358.77 acres under coffee in Madras Presidency, 53,917.724 acres (49 per cent) were under mature coffee plants

⁷⁸ C.D. Maclean, *Manual of the Administration of the Madras Presidency*, Vol. I, Madras, 1885, p. 290.

⁷⁹ *Papers Relating to the Coffee Districts of the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1859, pp. 1 and 4.

and 9,208.996 acres (8.49 per cent) under immature plants. The rest—45,232.05 acres (41.74 per cent)—were taken up for planting which had to commence yet.⁸⁰ In the second-half of the nineteenth century only a large tract of hill lands with dense forest were chosen for coffee cultivation in the Madras Presidency.

In Salem and Baramahal region, coffee introduced by Col Read in 1795 did not succeed.⁸¹ In 1825, plantations were established in the Shervaroys with about 10 European colonists being engaged in that business at the end of the first-half of nineteenth century.⁸² According to John Shortt (1864), of the 27 planters involved in cultivating coffee in the Shervaroys, 25 were British colonists, the remaining two being Indians from the plains.⁸³ In 1885, there were 331 coffee plantations covering about 10,769 acres; of this, 4,440 acres or about 41 per cent was with mature plants; 1,649 acres or 15.31 per cent with immature plants, and the remaining 4,680 acres or 43.46 per cent taken up for planting which was yet to be planted.⁸⁴ In the Salem and Baramahal region, coffee plantations mainly belonged to the British and large tracts of land were cleared for coffee cultivation during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. This resulted in the denudation of dense forests in the highlands due to the introduction of commercial crops in the hills of the Madras Presidency.

VII

Tribals and Forest Act

While non-tribals were behind the large-scale destruction of forests, it was accentuated by the colonial commercial forest policy during the early period of the nineteenth century. Instead of restricting the non-tribals, the colonial government imposed several conditions on the tribals through the Madras Forest Act (1882). The forest-oriented tribal economy was disrupted by these conditions, which deprived them of their common property rights. Their mode of production was disturbed and their economic conditions deteriorated over the period.

With establishment of the Forest Department in 1856, the first Indian Forest Act came into effect in 1865. The Madras Forest Act, 1882 (Madras Act No. V of 1882) was the first Forest Act in the Presidency. This restricted the unlimited access the tribals had over the forest. The tribals could claim only a right of way, watercourses, pasture and forest produce (Section 10). These also were not, wholly or partly, allowed by the Forest

⁸⁰ Maclean, *Manual of the Administration*, Vol. II, p. 403.

⁸¹ *Papers relating to Coffee Districts*, p. 1.

⁸² *Ibid.*

⁸³ John Shortt, *A Hand-book to Coffee Planting*, Madras, 1864, p. 104.

⁸⁴ Maclean, *Manual of the Administration*, Vol. II, p. 403.

Department (Section 11). Furthermore, these rights were granted intermittently, and with quantitative restrictions (Section 12). Fresh clearings for cultivation or for any other purpose were also curbed (Section 7). If prohibited items were used by the tribals, they were liable for imprisonment for a period of six months or a fine of about Rs 500, or both (Section 21). Grazing rights on the forest land were limited and liable for suspension (Section 22). If the tribals grazed their cattle in the closed land, they would be imprisoned for a month or fined Rs 200, or both (Section 28). Apart from these, the tribals were forced to render free services for the Forest and Police Officers.

VIII

Impact on the Tribals

The first notification of forest reserve was published in 1883, which covered an area of 550,614 acres or 222,830.43 hectares in Salem and Baramahal regions.⁸⁵ Subsequently, a large extent of the hills were notified as Reserve Forest. Coupled with this, many restrictions were clamped on the tribals for using the forest and forest produce.

The Forest Department extended the Reserve Forest in the Kalroyan hills without considering the interests of the hill inhabitants viz., Malaiyalis ('malai' in Tamil means hill or mountain, and 'yali' means inhabitants or rulers). For instance, in the Kalroyan hills, the public worship and car festival of Kariyasamy temple⁸⁶ was stopped, following the inclusion of the temple and surrounding *inam* lands within the reserve and forest extension.⁸⁷ Some *inam* lands of jagirdars were also included in the Reserve Forest. A jagirdar stated that the Reserve Forests were demarcated without considering the interest of memorialists; nor were they consulted in extending the forest, which resulted in a lot of lands belonging to the memorialists, including *inam* lands, being taken away. The memorialists were put to great hardship, loss and inconvenience.⁸⁸ As the tribals faced a lot of problem, they did not celebrate the festival because the forest boundary ran only a few chains from the Kariyasamy temple. This hardly left any place for such a large festive gathering.⁸⁹ This was one of the many instances of how the Forest Department restricted the tribals' rights.

The government came forward to reformulate the boundary line regarding the temple. But the Collector objected to the exclusion of the *inam*

⁸⁵ M. Harikrishnan, *Working Plan for the Salem Forest Division, 1967/68-1976/77*, Salem, 1977, p. 29.

⁸⁶ At the time of festivals, more than 10,000 people attended the temple daily.

⁸⁷ G.O. No. 996, Revenue [Misc.], 22 August 1906, TNSA.

⁸⁸ Board Petition, No. 442, 1905, TNSA.

⁸⁹ *Ibid.*

lands. He said, '... even if the fields were cultivated, it is doubtful that the revenue would come to the Government, instead of the *poligar*, as *ryots* of the *poligar* villages only would cultivate them'.⁹⁰ The Collector stated categorically that no income would come to the government, if jagirdar's *inams* were excluded from the Reserve Forest.

The unrestricted rights of the tribals over forests were curtailed by the Forest Department in manifold ways from time to time. For example, the Shervaroy hill inhabitants were allowed to cut only small quantities of firewood, wood for housing and agricultural purposes. Certain trees were prohibited from being cut down.⁹¹ The Forest Department also restricted cutting a maximum of three bandy-loads a month. To take away wood from the hills, a person was required to obtain a free pass from the tahsildars. For the prohibited trees, three annas were collected per head-load.⁹² These restrictions were opposed by the people of Shervaroy hills. To contain the resentment, the government issued an order in 1870 stating that the Malaiyalis, '... can obtain free passes for firewood and timber for their own requirements on application to the Deputy tahsildar'.⁹³ As per the order, the hill inhabitants could collect the required material without any limitation. The Kalroyan hill Malaiyalis were also asked to collect the free passes from the tahsildar for using the forest produce and for grazing their cattle. Jagirdars and inhabitants of the Kalroyan hills raised their voice against these formalities. In response, the government ordered, in 1881, allowing, '... free use, with reasonable facilities, of the village jungle for procuring what they require for building purpose, for agricultural implements and for fuel; certain classes of trees of a superior description being restricted and payment required for their use for such purposes'.⁹⁴

Considering the revenue, the colonial administration tried to bring the tribal private forests under government control. Towards achieving this, the government followed all possible irregularities. The hill chieftains were brought under custody and divisions were created among them. Ultimately, the tribal private forest was brought under government control through lease. Failing to realise the expected revenue from the private forests, the government finally returned them to the hill jagirdars.⁹⁵

Alienation of some traditional rights was the direct impact of the introduction of commercial crops into the hill areas. Most of the rights, like common property resources, were indirectly alienated attendant to the introduction of coffee plantations in the Shervaroy hills of Salem and

⁹⁰ G.O. No. 996, Revenue [Misc.], 22 August 1906, TNSA.

⁹¹ G.O. No. 2027 Revenue, 14 December 1870, TNSA.

⁹² *Ibid.*

⁹³ *Ibid.*

⁹⁴ G.O. No. 150, Revenue, 18 January 1881, TNSA.

⁹⁵ For details, see V. Saravanan, 'Colonial Commercial Forest Policy and Tribal Private rest in Madras Presidency, 1792-1881' (unpublished).

Baramahal region during the nineteenth century as well as early twentieth century.

Land was granted to the British settlers for coffee cultivation under the Government Order of 7 April 1833.⁹⁶ Under this, a lease agreement was made between British settlers and the government for 21 years. Some more concessions were provided to them to extend coffee cultivation: first, the land was given rent-free for the initial five years; second, the land rent was low, i.e., rupee one per acre per annum for the remaining 16 years of the lease period.⁹⁷ In this way, the colonial government paved the way for tribal land alienation in the Shervaroy hills.

Due to the encouragement and concessions given to them, the British settlers desired to establish more coffee plantations in the Shervaroys. A large extent of the land was purchased from the native tribals for a meagre price. In addition, the British settlers tried to use some unoccupied lands and forests, which were used by the tribals as common property rights without any restriction. The government nevertheless claimed that the tribals were consulted and their assent was obtained before the lands were taken up for coffee cultivation.⁹⁸ Actually, the tribals were not aware of all the formalities entered into by the colonial government. Till 1841, the government did not initiate any measure to protect the tribals from the planters. As a result, ' . . . most of the old planters obtained their lands from the Malaiyalis and received *pattas* for them prior to the circulation of the government rules'.⁹⁹ In 1842, the government ordered that the land should not be taken by the settlers in such localities so as to cause an inconvenience to the inhabitants, i.e., Malaiyalis, or those lands which the latter might be willing to occupy.¹⁰⁰ Though certain areas of land were reserved for the Malaiyalis under this Act, the planters, however, had obtained these lands wherever they were fertile and conveniently located.

It was not the British planters alone who had taken away tribal lands; the colonial administrators including Collectors and Judges took possession of them. Mr Cockburn, Collector of Salem, had taken land by force, seized and appropriated all the best lands of the chief village of the Mootoo Nadu, and expelled the proprietors thereof. Mr Neave, Judge of Salem, got possession of more than 400 or 500 acres land between 1838–41 under not very dissimilar circumstances.¹⁰¹ The colonial government not only encouraged the British planters to settle in the hills but also could not prevent its officers from misusing their power to occupy tribal lands in the Shervaroy hills to further their private interests.

⁹⁶ BOR, Vol. 1886, 30 October 1843, p. 1614, TNSA.

⁹⁷ G.O. No. 1793, Revenue, 17 August 1936, p. 42, TNSA.

⁹⁸ BOR, Vol. 2005, 5 January 1846, pp. 170–71, TNSA.

⁹⁹ BOR, Vol. 2310, 11 December 1851, p. 16470, TNSA.

¹⁰⁰ Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers*, p. 47.

¹⁰¹ BOR, Vol. 1838, 15 December 1842, p. 16685, TNSA.

In order to grab tribal lands, the British planters created many problems to the Malaiyali inhabitants. To cite one instance, in 1864, Hunter, a British planter, tried to obtain the Malaiyali lands in the village of Pattapadi and Kurdyoor. But the Malaiyalis refused to sell their lands. He then attempted to drive them out through every possible means and pressed the other planters to do likewise. Besides closing every public path of Malaiyalis running through his land, the planter also shot down their cattle. The British planters also used colonial officers to threaten the Malaiyalis, to obtain their land.¹⁰² While ignorant tribals badly suffered at the hands of British planters, the colonial administrators always acted in favour of the British planters. The officialdom was never seriously concerned about the plight of the tribals or the threat to the ecology and environment. In short, due to the introduction of commercial crops in the hill areas, tribal rights, to some extent, were alienated directly, while most of their rights on common property resources were indirectly alienated as in the case of coffee plantations in the Shervaroys of Salem and Baramahal region during the nineteenth century.

IX

Conclusion

The forest and its produce had been used as a common property rights by the highland people as well as those of the neighbourhood plains. The right over the forest was never a big question which fulfilled their requirements. It indeed became a question, when it was denuded for commercial purposes. During the pre-colonial period, felling was there to some extent, to meet the demand of the traditional industries as well as the needs of neighbourhood towns. After colonial intervention, the government did not pay any attention to protect the environment and maintain ecological balance. Instead large tracts of prime forests were denuded by the middlemen/contractors/government for exports and further by the British iron-making industries and Madras Railways besides the introduction of commercial crops. Instead of restricting this commercial exploitation, the colonial government, without initiating any development/welfare measures, curbed the tribals' common property rights through the Madras Forest Act. In other words, denudation of forest was the fruit of the colonial forest policy during the nineteenth century. The idea of forest conservation for environmental protection was not only ignored during the pre-Forest Department period in the Madras Presidency but also after that, until the introduction of the Madras Forest Act 1882, during which commercialisation of forests was predominantly practised by the colonial government.

¹⁰² Letter from Arbuthnot to the BOR, 23 May 1866, TNSA.