

# Colonial commercial forest policy and tribal private forests in Madras Presidency: 1792–1881

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*The article attempts to highlight the colonial commercial forest policy vis-à-vis tribal private forests in the Kalrayan hills of Salem and Baramahal region of Madras Presidency during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1792–1881). Further, it analyses the different strategies employed by the colonial government to encroach upon private forests, disregarding the traditional rights of the tribals. It concludes that the British administration intruded into tribal areas merely to bring the abundant forest resources under its sole control to further commercial interests, and not to protect them from the contractors or preserve the environment.*

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## Introduction

Until independence, in fact, till the last quarter of the twentieth century, scholarly works were found wanting on issues concerning forests and forest-dwellers, as well as users. There were only narrative accounts of colonial forest officials, whose aim was to facilitate the extension of British control over forest resources and forest-dwellers so as to further imperial interests.<sup>1</sup> Forest officers, sent to assess

**Acknowledgements:** This is a part of my Ph.D. thesis, 'Economic Transformation of Tribals in Tamil Nadu since the Colonial Rule 1792–1991', submitted to the University of Hyderabad, Hyderabad and awarded for the same in 1996. I thank Professor M. Atchi Reddy, who gave valuable guidance and suggestions while preparing this article. However, only I am responsible for the end product.

<sup>1</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Colonialism and Forestry in India: Imagining the Past in Present Politics', *Comparative Studies in Society and History: An International Quarterly*, Vol. 35(1), 1995, p. 5.

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***The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 40, 4 (2003)**  
SAGE New Delhi/Thousand Oaks/London

the jungles, wrote dramatic reports predicting the imminent destruction of forests, soil erosion, landslides and desiccation of springs in the absence of conservation.<sup>2</sup> The rhetoric of conservation, environmental protection and sustainable development generated as part of the colonial project was to lay the foundation for state forest management.<sup>3</sup> The imperial forest historians have concluded that denudation of forests predated the commencement of colonialism.<sup>4</sup> According to Stebbing, a very large proportion of the forests, which originally covered vast tracks of the country, were destroyed during the period between the invasion of the Aryans and the advent of the English as rulers.<sup>5</sup> Imperial forest historians like him held the view that commercial exploitation of forests in the subcontinent was widespread even before the eighteenth century.

With the emergence of environmental movements in India and other parts of the world around the 1970s, scholarly debates were initiated during the last quarter of the twentieth century, particularly in the 1980s.<sup>6</sup> Initiating the debate, Ramachandra Guha argued that the British colonial government had presided over the unprecedented denudation of the vast forest cover to meet commercial as well as strategic needs of the empire, in utter disregard for the rights of forest-dwellers and users.<sup>7</sup> Indeed, the colonial forest policy had not only destroyed subsistence farming, but also made ineffective the traditional methods of managing forests.<sup>8</sup> In other words, the efforts aimed at conservation have failed to recognise the customary rights of the forest-dwellers, and it also becomes evident that the colonial administration had actively pushed forward commercialisation of forests.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 6.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 7.

<sup>4</sup> E.P. Stebbing, *The Forests of India*, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1982, p. 34.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>6</sup> Ramachandra Guha, 'Writing Environmental History in India', *Studies in History* (hereafter *SH*), n.s., Vol. 9(1), 1993, p. 122.

<sup>7</sup> Ramachandra Guha, 'Forestry in British and Post-British India: A Historical Analysis', *Economic and Political Weekly* (hereafter *EPW*), Vol. XVIII (44 and 45), 1983, pp. 1886 and 1892; Ramachandra Guha and Madhav Gadgil, 'State Forestry and Social Conflict in British India', *Past and Present*, No. 122, 1989, pp. 148–57.

<sup>8</sup> Marlene Buchy, 'British Colonial Forest Policy in South India: An Unscientific or Unadopted Policy', in Richar H. Grove, Satpal Sangwan and Vinita Damodaran, eds, *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1998, p. 669.

<sup>9</sup> Guha, 'Forestry in British and Post-British India', p. 1887; Guha and Gadgil, 'State Forestry and Social Conflict', p. 144; Ramachandra Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Western Himalayas*, Delhi, 1989, p. 185; Velayutham Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest, Environmental Negligence and Alienation of Tribal Rights in Madras Presidency: 1792–1882', *Indian Economic and Social History Review* (hereafter *IESHR*), Vol. 35(2), 1998, pp. 125–46; Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Pastoralists in a Colonial World', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 49–85; Chetan Singh, 'Forests, Pastoralists and Agrarian Society in Mughal India', in David Arnold and Ramachandra Guha, eds, *Nature, Culture, Imperialism: Essays on the Environmental History of South Asia*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 21–48.

Prior to the colonial regime, commercial exploitation of forest produce was largely restricted to the collection of spices such as pepper and cardamom, as well as that of ivory, particularly in those cases where extraction did not pose a serious threat to the ecology or customary use, thereby ensuring renewal and sustainability.<sup>10</sup> It was colonial land control and commercialisation of forests that had accentuated deforestation.<sup>11</sup> In the words of Padel, '(colonialism) works out how to create the maximum profit out of the earth and the raw materials extracted from it in the shortest possible time, with complete disregard for long term consequences'.<sup>12</sup>

Contending this, Grove argues that despite the use for strategic needs of the empire, conservation was given due importance through the steps initiated to preserve and protect the environment for agrarian prosperity and social stability.<sup>13</sup> He further claims that deforestation and displacement of forest-dwellers and users were primarily a part of pre-colonial history, and had not occurred during the British period. His reasoning: 'As Mughul control collapsed, the ascendancy of successor states and their attendant commercial elites caused dramatic rises in timber demand and the growing commodisation of forests for revenue and state needs long before the East India Company became a significant power in the land'.<sup>14</sup> He adds: 'These processes of forest annexation by pre-colonial states frequently involved the forced removal of peasant populations and the destruction of pre-existing customary forest-utilisation arrangements.'<sup>15</sup> Further, he takes into consideration the accounts of colonial medical practitioners, who have discussed the issues arising out of deforestation and its consequences on climate, rainfall decline, water supply, drought, famine, etc. In other words, 'widespread deforestation could cause fundamental climatic and therefore agrarian and economic change'.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, he concluded that the idea of forest conservation for environmental protection was concretely shaped in Madras Presidency particularly after the 1830s, and in Bombay Presidency in the 1850s.

Contesting Grove's thesis on pre-colonial deforestation, scholars have pointed out that the equilibrium of resources had, however, been maintained during that period.<sup>17</sup> They argue that the main objective of the colonial administration was

<sup>10</sup> Guha and Gadgil, 'State Forestry and Social Conflict', p. 147.

<sup>11</sup> Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*, p. 29; see also Satpal Sangwan, 'Making of a Popular Debate: The Indian Forester and the Emerging Agenda of State Forestry in India, 1878-1904', *IESHR*, Vol. 36(2), 1999, pp. 189 and 196.

<sup>12</sup> Felix Patel, *The Sacrifice of Human Being: British Rule and the Konds of Orissa*, Delhi, 1995, pp. 28-29.

<sup>13</sup> Richard H. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Edens, and the Origins of Environmentalism, 1600-1860*, Delhi, 1995, Ch. 8.

<sup>14</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 387.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>16</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 427.

<sup>17</sup> Madhav Gadgil, 'Towards an Ecological History of India', *EPW*, Vol. XX (45, 46 and 47), 1985, p. 1913; Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Protection, Desiccation and Forest Management in the Central Provinces 1850-1930', in Richard H. Grove, Satpal Sangwan and Vinita Damodaran, eds, *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1998, p. 589;

maximisation of commercialisation while ignoring the ecological and economic impact.<sup>18</sup> Grove's desiccation theory had been contested and disproved by scholars, who pointed out that the colonial administration and their medical practitioners, having discussed the importance of environmental protection during the early nineteenth century, had vigorously pursued commercialisation.<sup>19</sup> Skaria argues that the roots of conservation were influenced by the colonial traditions of timber conservancy in the early nineteenth century and desiccationism, though important, played only a part in the process of conservation from the mid-nineteenth century.<sup>20</sup>

Contesting the claims of early environmental historians about the autonomous premodern villages, scholars cite the numerous conflicts over land, pastures and forests, often appropriated by the more powerful strata in different parts of the country during the pre-colonial period.<sup>21</sup> However, Rangarajan argues that no ruler, prior to colonial intervention, had ever had a sustained policy of intrusive exploitation where forest tracts of the Central Provinces were concerned.<sup>22</sup> On the contrary, during the early colonial rule emphasis was laid on extending the area of cultivation into the forests, which led to the marginalisation of tribals.<sup>23</sup> The notable casualties of colonial forest policy were subsistence farming and the traditional methods of managing forests.<sup>24</sup> Sivaramakrishnan has traced the way the British penetrated into the forest areas of Bengal to establish their government and administrative mechanism through different modalities and strategies in different ecological zones during the Company Raj.<sup>25</sup> According to him, 'rhetoric of conservation, environmental protection, and sustainable development . . . was

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Vandana Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival: Conflicts over Natural Resources in India*, New Delhi, 1991, pp. 14–16.

<sup>18</sup> Shiva, *Ecology and the Politics of Survival*, p. 78.

<sup>19</sup> Velayutham Saravanan, 'Commercial Crops, Alienation of Common Property Resources and Change in Tribal Economy in the Sheravoy Hills of Madras Presidency during the Colonial Period', *Review of Development and Change* (hereafter *RDC*), Vol. 4(2), 1999, pp. 298–317; Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest', pp. 125–46; Saravanan, 'Tribal Land Alienation in Madras Presidency during the Colonial Period: 1792–1947', *RDC*, Vol. VI(1), 2001, pp. 73–104.

<sup>20</sup> Ajay Skaria, 'Timber Conservancy, Desiccationism and Scientific Forestry: The Dangs 1840s–1920s', in Richar H. Grove, Satpal Sangwan and Vinita Damodaran, eds, *Nature and the Orient: The Environmental History of South and Southeast Asia*, Delhi, 1998, p. 597.

<sup>21</sup> Sumit Guha, 'Forest Politics and Agrarian Empires: The Kandesh Bhills, c. 1700–1850', *IESHR*, Vol. 33(2), 1996, pp. 133–53; Sumit Guha, 'Claims on the Commons: Political Power and Natural Resources in Pre-Colonial India', *IESHR*, Vol. 39(2&3), 2002, pp. 181–96; Sumit Guha, *Environment and Ethnicity in India, 1200–1991*, Cambridge, 1999, Ch. 5; Aloka Parasher-Sen, 'Of Tribes, Hunters and Barbarians: Forest dwellers in the Mauryan Period', in *SH* (n.s.) Vol. 14(2), 1998, pp. 173–91; David Baker, 'State Polity, the Market Economy, and Tribal Decline: The Central Provinces, 1861–1920', *IESHR*, Vol. 28(4), 1991, pp. 341–70.

<sup>22</sup> Rangarajan, 'Protection, Desiccation and Forest Management', p. 589.

<sup>23</sup> Mahesh Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecology Change in India's Central Provinces 1860–1914*, Delhi, 1996; Rangarajan, 'Protection, Desiccation', p. 589.

<sup>24</sup> Buchy, 'British Colonial Forest Policy in South India', p. 669.

<sup>25</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, Delhi, 1999.

being generated in the colonial project and laying the foundation for state forest management.<sup>26</sup> Skaria has analysed how the tribal-managed forests were taken over by the colonial administration and curbs imposed on using forest resources along with the strategies adopted in western India, based on oral and archival sources.<sup>27</sup>

It is pertinent to note that the revenue needs, expansion of commercial crops, development of the mining industry and building of railways had accentuated deforestation in the nineteenth century.<sup>28</sup> Further, scholars have pointed out that environmental protection in India took effective shape only after the introduction of the Indian Forest Act 1878, and in the Madras Presidency more specifically after the introduction of the Madras Forest Act 1883. Any earlier attempt towards conservation was intended to meet the future requirements of the imperial power.<sup>29</sup>

In recent times, environmental historians have realised that this can be brought to light if the linkages between agrarian and environmental history were explored further.<sup>30</sup> A study of such a linkage pertaining to the hill areas of Madras Presidency shows that the colonial rulers had not paid any importance to the environment since garnering more revenue from the tribals was their overriding concern during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries.<sup>31</sup> However, these studies, with a few exceptions, are also centred more or less on regions other than the Madras Presidency.<sup>32</sup>

The debate on environmental history, with its focus on forests and pastorals, has ignored private forests until recently. The few studies on private forests are largely confined to the Himalayan region and Bengal, Central and Bombay Presidencies.<sup>33</sup>

<sup>26</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, 'Colonialism and Forestry in India', p. 7.

<sup>27</sup> Ajay Skaria, *Hybrid Histories: Forests, Frontiers and Wildness in Western India*, Delhi, 1999.

<sup>28</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, 'Colonialism and Forestry in India', p. 9.

<sup>29</sup> Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest', pp. 125–46.

<sup>30</sup> Neeladri Bhattacharya, 'Introduction', *SH*, Vol. 14(2), 1998, p. 165; Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Introduction: Agrarian Environs', in Arun Agrawal and K. Sivaramakrishnan, eds, *Social Nature: Resources, Representations, and Rule in India*, New Delhi, 2001, p. 4; Mahesh Rangarajan, 'Polity, Ecology and Landscape: New Writings on South Asia's Past', *SH*, (n.s.), Vol. 18(1), 2002, p. 138.

<sup>31</sup> Velayutham Saravanan, 'Colonial Agrarian Policy in Tribal Areas of Madras Presidency: 1792–1872', *Environment and History* (forthcoming).

<sup>32</sup> Baker, 'State Polity, the Market Economy, and Tribal Decline', pp. 341–370; K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'British Imperialism and Forest Zones of Anomaly in Bengal, 1767–1833', *IESHR*, Vol. 33(3), 1999, pp. 243–82; Guha, 'Forest Politics and Agrarian Empires', pp. 133–53; Sumit Guha, 'Kings, Commoners and Commons: Environment in Western India 1600–1900', *Working Paper*, No. XI, Calcutta, Centre for Development Studies, 1996; Ramachandra Guha, 'Forestry and Social Protest in British Kumaon, c. 1893–1921', in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1985, pp. 55–100; Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*, 1996; Richard Tucker, 'Forest Management and Imperial Politics: Dhana District, Bombay, 1823–1887', *IESHR*, Vol. 26(3), 1979, pp. 273–300.

<sup>33</sup> Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Skaria, 'Timber Conservancy, Desiccationism and Scientific Forestry'; Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest*; Rangarajan, 'Protection, Desiccation'; Sivaramakrishnan, 'Colonialism and Forestry in India'; Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*.

While suggesting that forests were denuded for the purposes of extending cultivation and commercial exploitation, literature on environmental history acknowledges the fact that tribals and pastoral communities were disturbed during the pre-colonial as well as colonial period in different parts of the country. Although this phenomenon was present in most of the regions, there were still some forest and hilly regions where neither the pre-colonial rulers nor the early colonial administration had intervened. The tribals themselves had, without any external intervention, managed themselves until the mid-nineteenth century. The tribals of Kalrayan hills in Salem and Baramahal regions of Madras Presidency enjoyed an autonomous system (see Section III) without paying any revenue to any ruler during the pre-colonial as well as the colonial period. The entire hill region, including all forest resources, was managed/controlled by the tribal headman, known as the *Jagirdar*. During the second half of the nineteenth century, the colonial administration had intruded into these hills mainly to obtain control of the tribal private forests. The article attempts to highlight the colonial forest policy vis-à-vis tribal private forests in the Kalrayan hills of Madras Presidency during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (1792–1881).

The important research questions here are: why had the colonial government not entered the hills during the early nineteenth century? What was the motive behind their intervention? Had the colonial government attempted to annex the tribal private forests for conservation or for commercialisation? How had the colonial government established control over hill areas and tribal private forests, and what were the strategies adopted? What kinds of interventions were made to dismantle the traditionally managed system, and how had that wrought havoc on the environment? Had it given any importance to environmental protection or merely expected more revenue? Had it disturbed the traditional tribal system itself? What were the changes effected in the colonial policy and the motives behind them? These questions might be helpful in understanding the colonial forest policy during the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Madras Presidency.

This article consists of six sections. The second section gives an account of private forests in Madras Presidency. The third section details the salient features of the autonomous tribal system and private forests in the Kalrayan hills till the early nineteenth century. The fourth section analyses the method the tribal headman employed to collect the revenue generated from their private forests. The fifth section discusses the intentions of the government behind encroaching upon tribal private forests and its impact; and the last section brings together the concluding observations.

### **Private Forests in Madras Presidency**

A sizeable extent of forests was privately managed in different parts of the country before the advent of colonialism and, in fact, this practice had continued till the

late twentieth century.<sup>34</sup> In British India, during the late nineteenth century, the colonial government had attempted to bring them under state control. Vast tracts of forests in various parts of the subcontinent were managed privately by both zamindars and tribals.<sup>35</sup> Different strategies like lease, purchase and contracts were employed to annex these forests. However, it had failed in imposing complete control over them. For example, right from the early twentieth century to the end of colonial rule, attempts to exert control over private forests in Bengal and Bihar have failed.<sup>36</sup> The zamindar-managed private forests came under state control only after independence, through separate private forests acts of the respective states.<sup>37</sup>

The pre-colonial rulers, both Hindu and Muslim, had control over certain trees and the remaining forest items were left unclaimed for the use of the common people. For example, Tipu Sultan had control only over sandalwood trees in the forest areas. Recognising this fact, the Proceedings of the Board of Revenue observed on 5 August 1871: 'There is scarcely a forest in the whole of the Presidency of Madras which is not within the limits of some village, and there is not one in which, so far as the Board can ascertain, the state asserted any rights of property, unless royalties in teak, sandalwood, cardamoms, and the like, can be considered as such, until very recently. All of them, without exception, are subject to tribal or communal rights which have existed from time immemorial, and which are as difficult to define and value as they are necessary to the rural population.' It further stated, '... the forests are, and always have been, common property, no restriction except that of taxes, like the Muturpha and Pulari,<sup>38</sup> was ever imposed on the people till the Forest Department was created, and such taxes no more indicate that the forests belong to the state'.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>34</sup> K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Landlords, Regional Development and National Forest Projects: Midnapore, 1830s–1960s', in Roger Jeffery and Nandini Sundar, eds, *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests: Discourse of Community and Participation*, New Delhi, 1999, p. 78; K. Sivaramakrishnan, 'Conservation and Production in Private Forests: Bengal, 1864–1914', *SH*, Vol. 14(2), n.s. 1998, pp. 237–64; Sumit Guha, 'Communities, Kings and Woodlands: Historical Reflections on Joint Forest Management', in Roger Jeffery and Nandini Sundar, eds, *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests: Discourse of Community and Participation*, New Delhi, 1999, p. 60; David Hardiman, 'Farming in the Forest: The Dangs 1830–1992', in Mark Poffenbeger and Betsy McGean, eds, *Village Voices, Forest Choices: Joint Forest Management in India*, Delhi, 1996, pp. 101–31; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Velayutham Saravanan, 'Economic Transformation of Tribals in Tamil Nadu since the Colonial Rule 1792–1991', unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Hyderabad, 1994; Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest, Environmental Negligence'.

<sup>35</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, 'Landlords, Regional Development and National Forest Projects', pp. 78–84; Skaria, *Hybrid Histories*; Saravanan, 'Commercialisation of Forest, Environmental Negligence'; Hardiman, 'Farming in the Forest'.

<sup>36</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, 'Landlords, Regional Development and National Forest Projects', p. 83.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 83–84.

<sup>38</sup> A tax on pasturage.

<sup>39</sup> Proceedings of the Board of Revenue (hereafter PBR), No. 3284, 5 August 1871, Tamil Nadu State Archives, Chennai (hereafter TNSA).

However, circumstances had changed over the period. In 1882, the committee appointed by the government to frame the Forest Bill did an about-turn, with far reaching consequences. They claimed that, '... there are no Communal Forests distinct from State Forests in the Presidency of Madras.'<sup>40</sup> Substantiating this claim, Brandis has said: 'The villagers are in the habit of collecting firewood, thorns for fences, and of pasturing their cattle on, driving them across, and themselves passing over waste lands, so long as these are not required by the Government for cultivation or other purposes; and to this extent they may be said to exercise rights of pasture or other rights of user in the waste and forest lands included in their village areas, but this is nothing else than what we find in public forests of all countries. Such rights of user are vastly different from proprietary rights, and their existence does not constitute the forests in which they are exercised Communal Forests.'<sup>41</sup> Despite stating that unclaimed areas of communal and proprietary forests belonged to the state, the government had recognised communal and proprietary forests within the actual revenue payment areas. In Madras Presidency, the common people have invariably collected forest produce from both the government and private forests without any restrictions till the establishment of the Forest Department.

There was a large extent of unoccupied land, consisting of forests and wastelands, in the different districts of Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century. In 1880–81, Brandis estimated the occupied and unoccupied lands of both government and others, that is, Zamindary, Shrotriom and Inam lands, in 18 districts of the Presidency. According to the estimate, the total area of the 18 districts was about 82,337,280 acres, of which Zamindary, Shrotriom and Inam lands accounted for 32,852,135 acres (39.9 per cent). Government-occupied dry and wetlands were to the extent of 14,973,099 acres (18.19 per cent); government-occupied wasteland was about 3,076,551 acres (3.74 per cent), and the remaining 31,435,495 acres (38.18 per cent) were unoccupied lands (Table 1). The total unoccupied and government-occupied wasteland was 34,512,046 acres, which formed about 41.92 per cent in the Presidency.<sup>42</sup> In 1880–81, Brandis estimated that about 20<sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> million acres of forests and wastelands in the 18 districts belonged to zamindars and other landholders. In other words, about 60 per cent of the forests and wastelands belonged to the category of private forests and wastes. In addition to this, over 4 million acres in Malabar, Nilgiris and South Canara districts were private forests. Thus, about 25 million acres of forest and wastes were under private control in Madras Presidency during the nineteenth century.

<sup>40</sup> Dietrich Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1883, p. 20.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> The details of occupied and unoccupied lands for the tributary states, i.e., Sandur, Banganapalli and Pudukotta and the districts of Malabar, Nilgiris and South Canara were not available.

**Table 1**  
**Occupied and Unoccupied Lands in Different Districts of Madras Presidency (in acres)**

Districts	Zamindari and Inam Lands	Government Lands			Total Area of Districts	
		Unoccupied	Wet	Occupied Dry		Waste
Ganjam	3,814,880	1,176,605	145,802	165,574	16,179	5,319,040
Vizagapatnam	8,159,503	2,879,256	23,169	52,617	8,655	11,123,200
Godavari	1,804,800	2,138,622	291,929	241,565	223,884	4,700,800
Kistna	1,758,080	1,886,173	186,133	1,239,324	351,730	5,421,440
Anantapur	662,028	1,888,771	61,113	762,258	132,710	3,466,880
Bellary	826,750	1,456,151	31,271	1,014,368	144,100	3,472,640
Sandur*						104,960
Karnool	1,038,408	2,820,589	21,684	865,865	74,754	4,821,120
Banganapalli*						163,200
Cuddapah	772,480	3,658,658	100,749	910,886	149,547	5,592,320
Nellore	3,136,640	1,486,668	171,848	578,103	219,701	5,592,960
North Arcot	2,308,210	1,731,886	196,633	353,413	79,298	4,669,440
Chingleput	518,670	760,348	283,988	143,462	112,412	1,818,880
Salem	1,390,912	2,557,781	83,824	810,325	83,718	4,946,560
South Arcot	176,129	1,734,728	258,106	812,985	136,772	3,118,720
Trichinopoly	641,920	508,856	126,353	664,338	178,213	2,119,680
Tanjore	628,480	649,881	703,889	219,433	136,877	2,338,560
Puducotta*						704,640
Madura	3,774,835	803,448	127,982	530,835	139,510	5,376,640
Tinnevely	1,127,672	928,542	177,022	811,852	398,752	3,413,840
Coimbatore	351,738	2,348,532	81,510	1,722,891	489,889	4,994,560
Malabar		Correct details for this district not available				
Nilgiris		Correct details for this district not available				
South Canara		Correct details for this district not available				
Madras			17,280			17,280
<b>Total</b>	<b>32,852,135</b>	<b>31,435,495</b>	<b>3,073,005</b>	<b>11,900,094</b>	<b>3,076,551</b>	<b>90,125,440</b>

**Notes:** \* These are the tributary states, the details not available.

Figures in col. 3 are the difference between the total areas and government occupied lands, Zamindari, Shrotriom, Inam lands.

**Source:** Dietrich Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1883, p. 272.

The unoccupied lands were largely found in the northern districts of the Madras Presidency, viz., Vizagapatnam, Godavari, Kistna, Anantapur, Karnool and Cuddappa. In other words, about 19,391,493 acres (61.69 per cent) of the unoccupied land was spread over the northern districts, whereas the southern districts had only about 12,044,002 acres (38.31 per cent). Salem, Coimbatore, South Arcot and North Arcot districts accounted for a large chunk of them. In fact, about 2,577,781 acres or 21.4 per cent of the unoccupied lands in the southern districts were found in Salem district.<sup>43</sup> Of the total area in Salem district (4,946,560), about 2,557,781 acres (51.71 per cent) were unoccupied. Distribution of a small

<sup>43</sup> Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration*, p. 172.

extent of unoccupied land was also found in the other southern districts like Chengalput, Tiruchinopoly, Tanjore, Madura and Tinnevely. It shows that even before the Forest Department came into existence, a vast area of forest cover was under private control in different parts of the Presidency. One can safely assume that most of the private forests and hills were controlled/managed by the tribals.

The private forests in different parts of the country were exploited extensively for commercial purposes during the second half of the nineteenth century. Establishment of the railway network in the subcontinent gave a new thrust to deforestation, carried out on a large scale for fuel-wood and construction of timber-sleepers.<sup>44</sup> In fact, the Indian Forest Act 1865 was enacted to fulfil the requirements of the railway supplies.<sup>45</sup> Indiscriminate felling continued unabated in private forests in various parts of the Presidency to meet the fuel-wood demand of the Madras Railway during the third quarter of the nineteenth century. For example, in 1880–81, about 68,420 tons of fuel-wood was supplied to the Madras Railways. Of this, about 55,760 tons (81.49 per cent) came from the private forests and the remaining 12,660 tons (18.51 per cent) was drawn from the government forests.<sup>46</sup> Among the private forests which supplied fuel to the railways, North Arcot district provided the lion's share of about 23,440 tons, half of which came from Kalahastri and Karvetnagar, while 7,200 tons came from the Kangundi Zamindari. In Salem district, the total fuel supply was about 11,400 tons, of which 10,750 tons or 94.3 per cent were from the lands of *mittadars*<sup>47</sup> between Mallapuram and Jolarpet. Only 650 tons came from the government forests (Table 2). The hills in the Kadatur *mitta* in Uttankarai taluk had been almost completely denuded because of indiscriminate felling for fuel for the Madras Railways.<sup>48</sup> Out of the government supply, the forests of the Cuddapah district yielded about 8,860 tons. Here, it becomes evident that the private forests were denuded to meet the fuel-wood demand of the Madras Railways.

### Tribal Private Forests in Early Nineteenth Century

Forests were owned privately not only by plains people, but also by the hill people. Until the early nineteenth century, the Kalrayan hills of Salem and Baramahal regions had an autonomous tribal system under which the entire forest was controlled. The Kalrayan hill range is spread over an area of 600 sq. km. with an elevation ranging from approximately 2,700 ft to 4,576 ft above sea level. It lies between 8° 27' 30" and 11° 19' 45" Northern Latitude, and between 78° 42' and 80° 2' Eastern Longitude. It was endowed with a number of plant species and

<sup>44</sup> Guha, 'Forestry in British and Post-British India', pp. 1883–84; Guha, 'An Early Environmental Debate', p. 66; Guha and Gadgil, 'State Forestry and Social Conflict', p. 145; Guha, *The Unquiet Woods*, p. 37; Gadgil and Guha, *The Fissured Land*, p. 120.

<sup>45</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>46</sup> Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration*, p. 40.

<sup>47</sup> Owner of the *Mitta*.

<sup>48</sup> Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration*, p. 175.

Table 2  
Sources of Fuel Supply to Madras Railways (in Tons)

Districts	Government	Private	Total
Nizam's Dominions	—	2,550	2,550
Bellary	—	1,120	1,120
Cuddapa	8,860	1,800	10,660
North Arcot	2,750	23,440	26,190
Mysore	—	850	850
Salem	650	10,750	11,400
Coimbatore	400	—	400
Malabar	—	15,250	15,250
<b>Total</b>	<b>12,660</b>	<b>55,760</b>	<b>68,420</b>

Source: Dietrich Brandis, *Suggestions regarding Forest Administration in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1883, p. 40.

fauna, as well as a large variety of trees with great commercial value like sandalwood and teak and several medicinal plants and herbs.<sup>49</sup> The Kalrayan hills were divided into five *Jagirs*,<sup>50</sup> viz., Periya-Kalrayan, Chinna-Kalrayan, Ariyakavundan, Kurumbakavundan and Jadayakavundan *Jagirs/Poliaputs*. Of these, the first two *Jagirs* came under the Salem and Baramahal region, the area of the present study, while the remaining belonged to the South Arcot district.<sup>51</sup>

The Malaiyali tribes were the original inhabitants of the Kalrayan hills. In Tamil, Malaiyali means 'inhabitants of the hills'; while 'malai' means hill or mountain, 'yali' connotes ruler or inhabitant. However, unlike the tribals of the Nilgiris they were not considered as one among the ancient hill tribes of Salem and Baramahal, for different opinions exist about the origin of the Kalrayan hills' inhabitants. According to the Manuals, Gazetteers and Government Reports they are Tamil-speaking people who have migrated from the plains in comparatively recent times.<sup>52</sup> However, these people are quite different from the Malayalam-speaking people of Kerala, although both are called by the same name.<sup>53</sup> They are not treated as untouchables either by the plains people or by the hill inhabitants. For example, the Kotas tribe in the Nilgiris are treated as untouchable by the Todas who, unlike the Malaiyali, still follow a pastoral economy.

There are different versions of the origin of the Malaiyalis in the Kalrayan hills.<sup>54</sup> The Baramahal Records do not give any account of their origin except this

<sup>49</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 173–75.

<sup>50</sup> A tenure common under the Muslim government, in which the public revenues of a given tract of land were made over to a servant of the state, together with the power requisite to enable him to collect and appropriate such revenue, and administer the general government of the district/hills.

<sup>51</sup> F.J. Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers, Salem*, Vol. I, Part II, Madras, 1918, p. 299.

<sup>52</sup> Edgar Thurston and K. Rangachari, *Castes and Tribes in Southern India*, Delhi, 1909, p. 406.

<sup>53</sup> Francis Buchanan, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, London, 1807, p. 197.

<sup>54</sup> Saravanan, *Economic Transformation of Tribals in Tamil Nadu*, Ch. 2.

tiny note: 'no tradition'.<sup>55</sup> According to the Periya-Kalrayan hill inscriptions, these people have been residing there right from the beginning of the eleventh century.<sup>56</sup>

The Malaiyali tribes have different names in different hill groups. In the Baramahal Records,<sup>57</sup> they are known as 'Malaiyandi Vellallu'.<sup>58</sup> Their other nomenclature includes Malai Vellalar, Kongu Vellalar, Kanchimandalathar, Malaikkaran, Malai Kavundan, Mala Nayakkan, Malayala, Malaiyalan, Karaikat Vellalas, Karala Vellalas, Kanchimandala Vellalas, and Karalan.<sup>59</sup> Interestingly, all have 'Kavundan' as their second name, universally used while hailing them. In spite of having different names, they are not distinct from each other as they are apparently ordinary Tamil-speaking people who, after migrating to the hills, have developed some local customs peculiar to themselves.<sup>60</sup>

The Kalrayan hills was divided into two *Jagirs*—Periya-Kalrayan and Chinna-Kalrayan. The former was sub-divided into Keel Nadu and Mel Nadu, comprising 19 and 17 villages respectively. The latter, consisting of 45 villages, was divided into Vada Nadu and Then Nadu.<sup>61</sup>

Private forests here are the ones controlled by the tribal headman/*Jagirdar*. For administrative purposes, Kalrayan hill was divided into *Jagirs*<sup>62</sup>/*Nadus*,<sup>63</sup> which consisted of many villages or hamlets. Each *nadu* had a four-tier administrative set-up: *Pattakaran*<sup>64</sup> or headman, *Maniakaran*,<sup>65</sup> *Ur-Kavundan* or *Moopan*,<sup>66</sup> and *Kangani*. The *Pattakaran*, chieftain of each *nadu*, had diverse functions, both religious as well as judicial (according to local laws), and enjoyed the revenue collected from the estate after giving a portion to the local deity. To meet the expenses of such requirements, he decided the amount of tax to be collected from the tribals. The rate of tax was not always consistent as the assessment was adjusted according to the situation prevailing at that time.<sup>67</sup> The *Maniakaran* assisted the *Pattakaran* with these duties.<sup>68</sup> If the *Ur-Kavundan* failed to settle any dispute, it

<sup>55</sup> Baramahal Records, Section III, *Inhabitants*, TNSA (year is not mentioned).

<sup>56</sup> Collector's letter to the Board of Revenue, dated 31 Oct. 1867, TNSA.

<sup>57</sup> The earliest records in Salem and Baramahal districts consist of 22 sections. These records give detailed information about Salem and Baramahal districts during the pre-colonial period.

<sup>58</sup> Baramahal Records (n.d.), *Inhabitants*, p. 123, TNSA.

<sup>59</sup> A. Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-Economic Conditions of the Aboriginal Tribes of the Province of Madras*, Madras, 1948, p. 140.

<sup>60</sup> Census of India 1901, *Report*, Madras, 1902, p. 166.

<sup>61</sup> Integrated Tribal Development Project Report, *Kalrayan Hills*, 1976-77, pp. 3-4.

<sup>62</sup> A tenure common under the Muslim government, in which the public revenue of a given tract of land was made over to a servant of the state. The Kalrayan hills were administered by the *Jagir*.

<sup>63</sup> A division of the country. A division of the hills also called a *nadu*.

<sup>64</sup> The headman of the estate or hills. He is the chief administrative and judicial officer of the estates or *nadus*.

<sup>65</sup> A subordinate native revenue officer employed in the collection and management of the revenue under the *Pattakaran*, by whom he is appointed, and to whom he is responsible. All *Moopans* were controlled by the *Pattakaran* with the help of *Maniakaran*.

<sup>66</sup> The headman of the hill village.

<sup>67</sup> Aiyappan, *Report on the Socio-economic Conditions*, p. 143.

<sup>68</sup> Board of Revenue (hereafter BOR), Vol. 1769, 23 Sept. 1841, p. 12109, TNSA.

would be left to the *Pattakaran*, who was treated as the chief guest at harvest and wedding celebrations. Further, he controlled all the *Ur-Kavundans*.

The *Ur-Kavundan* administered the tribals directly with the help of the *Kanganies*, who also functioned like the police. Each and every transaction, viz., marriage, divorce, harvest and festivals, were held in the presence of the *Ur-Kavundan*. When disputes like the partition of property between brothers or divorce were brought to his notice, he summoned the *panchayat*, consisting of the elected members of the clans or family groups, for consultation and then announced his decision. Penalties were imposed according to the nature of the offence or dispute.<sup>69</sup> The main duties of the *Kanganis* were guarding houses and crops, assisting in revenue collection, keeping an eye on strangers and thieves, and recovering stolen property.<sup>70</sup> Further, he had to collect information about every incident in the villages, and passed them on to the *Ur-Kavundan* who took the necessary action. This shows that the tribals had a well-established administrative system during the pre-colonial period.

The Kalrayan hill tribes had an autonomous system. There are no records throwing light on any formal land/forest grants ever being made either by the colonial rulers or by the previous rulers in/of Kalrayan hills.<sup>71</sup> In fact, the colonial rulers were under the impression that a separate ruler administered the Kalrayan range,<sup>72</sup> since the hill inhabitants and headman there had not paid any revenue to the rulers of the plains during the pre-colonial period. All that they paid as tax was a certain fee to their chiefs for the maintenance of a proper state and dignity, and a portion of this fee was used by the *Jagirdar* to perform ceremonies at the temples, sacred to the Tirular deities.<sup>73</sup> The hill inhabitants did not pay any tax to the colonial government or Hindu rulers,<sup>74</sup> and they had been left entirely unto themselves.<sup>75</sup> There is no revenue account for the Kalrayan hills in the records for the nineteenth century. At the time of colonial intervention, the government collected leases from leaseholders who had exclusive rights to purchase goods and articles from the Kalrayan hills. In other words, the only mode of drawing revenue from this hill range was by selling this exclusive privilege. In 1793, 40 *Star Pagodas*,<sup>76</sup> 13 *fanam*<sup>77</sup> and 64 *cash* were collected by leasing out these rights.<sup>78</sup> According to official reports, the existence of the hills came to the notice of the

<sup>69</sup> Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer*, Vol. I, P. II, p. 154.

<sup>70</sup> Their role is like the traditional police, namely the *Taliaris* and the *Kavalkars* in south India.

<sup>71</sup> Board Petition, No. 148 of 1871, TNSA.

<sup>72</sup> R.K. Puckle [epitomised and annotated], *Colonel Read's Report on the Original Settlement of Salem in 1791-1796*, Salem, 1868, p. 13.

<sup>73</sup> Board Petition, No. 148 of 1871, TNSA.

<sup>74</sup> Richards, *Madras District Gazetteers, Salem*, Vol. I, Part I, p. 301.

<sup>75</sup> Government Order (hereafter G.O.) No. 1028, Revenue, 10 June 1871, TNSA.

<sup>76</sup> A money measurement prevailed in the Madras Presidency during the early colonial period. One Star Pagodas was equal to 45 *fanams* or 3,600 cash.

<sup>77</sup> Eighty cash equal to 1 *fanam*; 45 *fanams* equal to one Star Pagodas.

<sup>78</sup> Baramahal Records (n.d.), *Imposts*, Chennai, p. 44, TNSA.

colonial administration only in 1838.<sup>79</sup> But this was not true as Colonel Alexander Read, who had been aware of the hills, thought that they were independent.<sup>80</sup>

Even after 1838, the hill range was not brought under the colonial government, and it was never mentioned in the official records pertaining to the different revenue periods. In fact, it was neither surveyed nor assessed either during the Read settlement (1792–97) or during the permanent settlement (1802–3). It was left out even in the annual settlements since 1819–20, and during the direct management of different hills between 1829–30 and 1854–55. It was further substantiated by the Inam Commission Report, which stated that the hills ‘... were never surveyed owing to their unhealthy climate and they were not included in the jamabandi<sup>81</sup> (jummabandy) returns, nor is any information to be gathered regarding them in the records’.<sup>82</sup> The Periya-Kalrayan *Jagirdar* further strengthened it in 1838, ‘... he (Jagirdar) and his ancestors have been the hereditary poligars of the Malaiyalis of the Periya-Kalrayan hills. That they (Jagirdars) exercised amongst them the functions or religious, justice according to their laws; that he has been ruling the land as a duly installed chief and has enjoyed the revenues of the state himself, giving a portion to the deity.’<sup>83</sup>

The *Jagirdars* collected many taxes, viz., taxes on ploughs, hoes, poll-tax, tree-tax and forest rent during the early nineteenth century. In fact, the hill chieftains had also collected widow-tax,<sup>84</sup> kavali-tax or taxes on unmarried persons. These taxes were collected not only with an eye to revenue but also to maintain discipline within the community. Apart from these regular collections, the headmen or chiefs extracted goods and services from the tribals on an ad hoc basis during festivals and other emergencies. From the Inam Commission Report (1838), we learn that the *Jagirdars* collected at the rate of Rs 1–2–0 per plough and 10 *annas* per hoe. They also imposed some *kaval*<sup>85</sup> fees. Consequently there was an increased incidence of cess on ploughs to Rs 2–4–0 and Rs 1–4–0 per hoe. The poll-tax was Rs 2–4–0 on each married couple and Rs 1–2–0 on each widower, while that of unmarried children and widows went unassessed.<sup>86</sup> The *Jagirdars* utilised the revenue for the maintenance of temples and festival celebrations, and never remitted any tax to the colonial government.

<sup>79</sup> Letter from G.J. Longly, Collector of Salem to the Secretary to the Board of Revenue (hereafter BOR), dated 31 Oct. 1871, No. 3146, Salem, TNSA.

<sup>80</sup> Colonel Alexander Read, *General Report on Salem*, 1800, para. 247, TNSA.

<sup>81</sup> This is a settlement of the amount of revenue assessed upon an estate, a village; a statement exhibiting the particulars of the public revenue; its amount, and how it is assessed. In other words, annual settlement of revenue with the cultivators or *ryotwary* settlement.

<sup>82</sup> *A Collection of Papers relating to the Inam Settlement in the Madras Presidency*, Madras, 1948, pp. 240–47.

<sup>83</sup> Board Petition, No. 148 of 1871, TNSA.

<sup>84</sup> It shows that the earlier practices of widow remarriage, even before disposing the corpse had disappeared in the hill areas of Salem district at the time of the colonial intervention.

<sup>85</sup> The duty of the village watch.

<sup>86</sup> Richards, *Madras District Gazetteer*, 1918, Vol. I, Part II, p. 302.

The Inam Commission Report (1838) also confirms the fact that the colonial administration had not collected any revenue from the tribals.<sup>87</sup> In 1841, the total revenue collected from the Periya-Kalrayan hills was Rs 972 on ploughs and hoes, tax on bamboo-cutters and rent on tamarind, besides Rs 372 for the *Devastanam*s and *Kaliammal*. From Rs 600 in 1838 it had increased to Rs 972 in 1841, and the *Pattadar* stated in 1867 that his income stood at Rs 1,100 per annum.<sup>88</sup> In 1869–70, revenue collection had increased to Rs 2,614, of which Rs 536 was from the forests and Rs 2,078 from land revenues.<sup>89</sup> A large amount of revenue was obtained through forest products in the Periya-Kalrayan hills. For example, from April to December in 1870, Rs 561–15–6 was received. Out of this, timber accounted for Rs 106–6–0, Rs 136 came from bamboos, Rs 13–14–0 from firewood, Rs 68–14–0 from charcoal, and Rs 170 from tamarind and *kuplidye*.<sup>90</sup> However, revenue collection continued to fluctuate every year. Revenue from the Chinna-Kalrayan hills in 1869–70 was estimated as Rs 2,213, including Rs 1,513 through land revenue and Rs 700 from the forest.<sup>91</sup> It categorically shows that the Kalrayan hills inhabitants had their own autonomous system until the early nineteenth century. Even later, they did not pay anything as tax to the colonial government.

The Kalrayan hills *Jagirdars* not only had an autonomous system, but also effectively exercised control over the forests in the hills. They even had the right to collect revenue from the *kombe* or adjoining villages of the hills.<sup>92</sup> In even the Kalrayan hills of South Arcot, the *Jagirdars* had control over the slopes as well as the areas contiguous to the foothills. The Collector of South Arcot says: ‘... for certainly up to this time both the slopes and lands at the foot have been enjoyed by him without let or hindrance, and until the organisation of the Forest Department, such right had never been questioned, and so far as I can ascertain from my records, the revenue authorities of the district have always recognized the right of the *Poligar* to the slopes and the lands at their immediate foot’.<sup>93</sup> The Kolli hills of Salem and Baramahal regions offer further substantiation. The tribals there controlled the *kombe* villages. Towards the close of the eighteenth century, granting independent status to the *kombes* while the survey and settlement were introduced resulted in conflicts between the tribals and colonial administration.<sup>94</sup> The *Jagirdars* had traditionally controlled the entire hills, including the slopes. In the early nineteenth century, the rights over the revenue collection of the *kombes* of the Kalrayan hills were handed over to the *kombe* villages. The *Jagirdars*, considering

<sup>87</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>88</sup> G.O. No. 654, Revenue, 13 May 1900, TNSA.

<sup>89</sup> BOR, Nos 63–64, 4 Feb. 1875, TNSA.

<sup>90</sup> BOR, No. 2191, 1871, 3932, TNSA.

<sup>91</sup> BOR, Nos 63–64, 4 Feb. 1875, TNSA.

<sup>92</sup> G.O. No. 1028, Revenue, 10 June 1871, TNSA.

<sup>93</sup> G.O. No. 185, Revenue, 30 Jan. 1872, TNSA.

<sup>94</sup> Velayutham Saravanan, ‘Tribal Revolts in India with reference to Salem and Baramahal Districts of Madras Presidency during the late 18th Century’, *Artha Vijnana*, Vol. XLI (1), 1999, pp. 67–81.

the hardships involved, might have conceded the revenue collection rights to the headman of the *kombes*. However, the right over the slopes of the hills was retained by the Kalrayan hills *Jagirdars*.

Till 1868, only the *Jagirdars* controlled the Kalrayan hills and their slopes. When the survey activities for the first settlement (1871–72) of Salem district began in 1859, the government did not lay any claim to the Kalrayan range and its slopes. The Collector's letter of 1868 stated, '... the survey department placed their marks near the foot of the slopes, the opinion was entertained that, beyond these boundaries, towards the Kalrayan hills at least, the Government did not make any claim'.<sup>95</sup> In short, the tribals owned the land not only on the top of the hills, but also in the slopes. Their subsistence needs centred on forest produce, the collection of which was never restricted or curbed.

### Management of Tribal Private Forests

Though the *Jairdars* controlled and managed the private forests, they did not collect any revenue from the tribals/forests during the pre- and early colonial period. The tribal private forests were left free for the use of tribals. Only a nominal amount was collected on the number of instruments, for example, the *koduval* used for cutting forest produce. Even this was collected on a yearly basis. According to the records, until the middle of the nineteenth century forest resources were utilised only by the tribals and were not subjected to commercial exploitation. Later on the *Jagirdars* leased out the forests for commercial exploitation to the contractors. Despite being leased out, the forests were never out of bounds for the tribals.

Even the colonial administration took into consideration and recognised the distinctive characteristics of the tribal private forests. During the 1850s and 1860s, there were attempts to take over the tribal private forests on rent/lease by all possible means; however, the *Jagirdars* refused to budge. The Collector in his letter states: '... (on) enquiries made, from time to time during the last two years, I am quite sure the Jaghiredar is not willing to rent his estate to Government; all endeavours made both by myself and my predecessor to communicate with the Jaghiredar having failed'.<sup>96</sup> The *Jagirdars* were reluctant since they feared that the government might not return the properties.

On the other hand, the *Jagirdars* were interested in leasing the forests out to the contractors/middlemen so that they could get their forests back without any inconvenience. In 1863, the *Jagirdars* of Kalrayan hills leased out the hill forests to contractors from the plains. The Periya-Kalrayan hills forest was leased out for 20 years at the rate of Rs 100 per annum and the Chinna-Kalrayan hills for five years at the rate of Rs 120 per annum.<sup>97</sup> Both the tribal private forests were leased

<sup>95</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 1 Sept. 1868, in G.O. No. 2821, Revenue, 11 Nov. 1868, TNSA.

<sup>96</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 12 Mar. 1873, in G.O. No. 548, Revenue, 29 May 1873, TNSA.

<sup>97</sup> G.O. No. 2977, Revenue, 14 Dec. 1867, TNSA.

out to the same contractor and the lease agreements exchanged. The contractor had earned about Rs 1,000 per annum by drastically cutting timber and firewood within a span of four years (1865–69).<sup>98</sup> However, even after the private forests were leased out, there was no restriction on the tribals using the forests and forest produce.

### Colonial Policy on Tribal Private Forests

Till the early half of the nineteenth century, the colonial government did not disturb the Kalrayan hills in general and the tribal private forests in particular. Conservation of forest cover was not a priority in Madras Presidency even after the establishment of the Forest Department. However, the Conservator of Forest tried to bring more forest land under government control. In the process, the Conservator claimed that the slopes of the hill forests belonged to the government, stating that the lease agreements between the contractors and *Jagirdars* did not mention these slopes specifically. Of course, the copy of the lease document contained no separate clause regarding the slopes.<sup>99</sup> It is interesting to note that the colonial government had no documentary evidence to claim that previous rulers had managed these hills. In the end, the government managed to extend its authority to the slopes of the Kalrayan range. In 1867, the Deputy Conservator of Forests said, ‘ . . . the timber growing on the slopes of the hills belonged to the Government and were not even claimed by the Puttagars was being cut.’<sup>100</sup> Despite the government’s claim over the slopes, the contractors had gone to the extent of felling trees in the forests controlled by the former.<sup>101</sup> This prompted the government to take over the control of the tribal private forests.

In the absence of any evidence of deforestation to justify the takeover, the government decided to control the tribal private forests through a lease. In fact, expecting huge revenues from the forest, the government had forced the tribal headman to accept the lease on its terms. This was because the Kalrayan hills had an abundance of commercially valuable trees that had not only an Indian market but also an export market. In the Periya-Kalrayan hills, about 25 *kandagams*<sup>102</sup> of kupli dye were procured annually, since there was a heavy demand for this in England and it also fetched a good price.<sup>103</sup> Besides the constant pressure, the *Jagirdars* were threatened to accept the lease. In 1868, the Periya-Kalrayan *Jagirdar* agreed to lease out the forests to the government at the rate of Rs 1,500 per annum with a stipulation of 90 acres of rent free in three villages.<sup>104</sup> Although

<sup>98</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 21 Apr. 1869, in G.O. No. 2942, 10 Nov. 1869, TNSA.

<sup>99</sup> G.O. No. 2826, Revenue (Press), 11 Nov. 1869, TNSA.

<sup>100</sup> Letter from the Acting Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 26 Apr. 1880, in PBR, 13 May 1880, TNSA.

<sup>101</sup> G.O. No. 2166, Revenue, 14 Aug. 1868, TNSA.

<sup>102</sup> A dry grains measurement. One *Kandagam* is equal to 40 *bullas* or *Puddies* or 7,248 cubical inches.

<sup>103</sup> G.O. No. 2942, Revenue, 10 Nov. 1869, TNSA.

<sup>104</sup> *Ibid.*

the *Jagirdar* had agreed to lease out his forests to the government, the contractors refused to give up their agreement, which would have continued for 17 more years (up to 6 August 1885). A contractor had even filed a suit against the colonial government;<sup>105</sup> however, he was forced to accept the lease agreement. A compromise was finally reached with the government offering him Rs 5,600.

On the contrary, the *Jagirdar* of Chinna-Kalrayan hills was not in favour of leasing their forest to the government, and even avoided meeting the government officers. Despite adopting various strategies, the officers could not establish any communication with the *Jagirdar*. All their attempts to persuade him to accept the terms of lease proved futile.<sup>106</sup> The Collector said, '... the late Collector proceeded to the Kalrayans, and endeavoured to obtain an interview with Puttagar, but failed in doing so as the Puttagar fled from the hills as soon as he heard that Collector had come up. Attempts were also made in vain subsequently to see the Puttagar, and arrange about renting his *Jaghir*. He is very averse to give the *Jaghir* on lease, and he therefore keeps away from officials.'<sup>107</sup> The above statement clearly indicates the colonial administration's determination to take over the forests at any cost. In 1873, the government ordered: 'Further endeavours should be made to induce him to rent the estate to Government on similar terms to those which were accepted by the Periya-Kalrayan *Jagirdar*, or, at any rate, an effort should be made to obtain the lease of the forests from the contractor, if he has obtained it on favourable terms, and is willing to transfer it for a moderate sum.'<sup>108</sup> To take over the tribal private forests, the colonial administration misused their power to the maximum extent. Finally, two Civil and Magistrate summons were issued against the Chinna-Kalrayan *Jagirdar*. After arresting and detaining him under the custody of the Magistrate, he was forced to sign the agreement. Thus the *Jagir* was brought under British control.<sup>109</sup> The government offered to pay him Rs 2,000 per annum apart from 90 acres of rent-free land in three villages.<sup>110</sup> The contractor was given a compensation of Rs 12,500.<sup>111</sup> This was a classic instance and it exposed the strategies adopted by the colonial government to encroach upon the hill areas during the late nineteenth century.

The government took control of these hills apparently to protect the forests from the illicit felling the contractors resorted to. It subsequently imposed several curbs on the tribal's traditional use of forest resources, restricting among other things, clearance of even the old *Ponakkadu*<sup>112</sup> lands and the use of wood for

<sup>105</sup> Revenue, Nos 172-74, 22 Nov. 1872, TNSA.

<sup>106</sup> G.O. No. 548, Revenue, 29 May 1873, TNSA.

<sup>107</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the Officiating Inspector of Forests, Salem, dated 7 Oct. 1872, in G.O. No. 1609, Revenue, 22 Nov. 1872, TNSA.

<sup>108</sup> G.O. No. 548, Revenue, 29 May 1873, TNSA.

<sup>109</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>110</sup> G.O. No. 77, Revenue (Press), 14 Jan. 1875, TNSA.

<sup>111</sup> G.O. No. 389, Revenue, 9 Mar. 1875, TNSA.

<sup>112</sup> *Ponakkadu* means the lands cleared, cultivated for a few years and abandoned, and covered with a fresh growth of jungle. In other words, a land in the hill areas capable of cultivation after long intervals with particular kinds of grain sown in holes dug with a spade.

implements. This was despite the Deputy Conservator of Forests himself admitting that ‘ . . . the felling of timber and bamboos by the tribals on the plateau for their own use cannot do any serious harm and that no restrictions are necessary so long as nothing is allowed to be brought down to the plains.’<sup>113</sup> Cattle grazing was also brought under government control: the tribals were not allowed to graze their cattle without permission from the government. In the process the government introduced the free pass system in 1881, under which the tribals had to collect a pass from the Tahsildar and hand it over to the forest authorities. These practices made life very difficult for the hapless tribals. Strokes, Acting Collector of Salem (1880), had stated: ‘These processes are probably regarded by the Malaialies as inconvenient interference, and the rules must operate in practice as a considerable, if not complete, restriction on the freedom of helping themselves as, and how, they pleased which the Malaialies formerly enjoyed.’<sup>114</sup> The government had issued yet another order which stated that the tribals could use the inferior forest produce for building purposes, agricultural implements and fuel, while certain superior classes of trees remained reserved, with payment required for their use.<sup>115</sup>

After taking over the private forests, the Forest Department had imposed several conditions on their customary use. The colonial administration also threatened the *Jagirdars* with attacks on their property in the event of any violation on the part of the tribals.<sup>116</sup> Unable to comply with these restrictions, the Periya-Kalrayan *Jagirdar* filed a suit against the government so as to retain the estate. In his suit, he had complained about certain grievances such as, ‘ . . . the constant interference by Forest peons with the Malaialies, who cannot get wood for implements, & c., and are strictly prevented from clearing even old *ponakkad* lands; the insufficiency of the tract (90 acres) assigned to him rent free; the farming of the collection of the *kapilapodi*<sup>117</sup> outsiders; and the loss of dignity which he suffers as the chiefs of the other hill nadus<sup>118</sup> will not now admit him equally with them.’<sup>119</sup>

The Chinna-Kalrayan hill *Jagirdar* also filed a suit against the government. He stated that ‘ . . . the document was not executed of his own free will, but was obtained from him under arrest, he was in custody under a magisterial warrant’. He further adds, ‘ . . . the estate is the ancestral and common property of themselves, and the Pattagar who are members of an undivided family, and that the Pattagar was not competent to alienate it without their consent to the prejudice of the family and for illegal consideration.’<sup>120</sup>

<sup>113</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 16 Nov. 1880, in PBR No. 1791, 24 Nov. 1880, TNSA.

<sup>114</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 20 Oct. 1880, in G.O. No. 150, Revenue, 18 Jan. 1881, TNSA.

<sup>115</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>116</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 16 Nov. 1880, in PBR No. 1791, 24 Nov. 1880, TNSA.

<sup>117</sup> A forest product. It is used for dyeing purposes.

<sup>118</sup> A division of the country or province or hills.

<sup>119</sup> Letter from the Acting Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 28 June 1880, in PBR No. 919, 7 July 1880, TNSA.

<sup>120</sup> PBR. No. 1015, 3 Mar. 1877, TNSA.

Actually the Forest Department, which expected a large income from the tribal private forests of Kalrayan hills, had failed to realise the expected revenue. The arrears had also mounted. For example, during 1876–77, the total demand made by the government in the Chinna-Kalrayan hills was Rs 3,704–12–0, of which the total collection was Rs 2,279–0–2 or about 62 per cent. The remaining Rs 1,425–11–10 or about 38.49 per cent was the balance. The establishment charges were Rs 272–14–9 or 7.37 per cent; and the net revenue was Rs 2,006–1–5 or about 54.14 per cent.<sup>121</sup> The net revenue from the Chinna-Kalrayan hills was negligible and even negative during the period 1877–78. The total revenue demand was Rs 3,191–12–8, of which only Rs 208–2–0 or about 6.52 per cent was the collection, with the remaining Rs 2,983–10–8 or about 93.48 per cent being the balance. The establishment charges were more than the collections. The net revenue was –4.11 per cent.<sup>122</sup>

Due to the loss incurred in the Chinna-Kalrayan private forests, the Forest Department had no hesitation in returning them to their owners. The Collector had stated, ‘ . . . the revenue to government from felling forest timber has been only rupees 43—the lease will relieve us not only from this unprofitable speculation, but from further disputes arising on account of *kapilapodi*.’<sup>123</sup> This clearly reveals the real intention of the colonial government—extracting more revenue from the tribal private forests, and not protecting the environment from the contractors as claimed earlier. After getting the forests back, the *Jagirdars* revived the old agreements with the contractors. The contractors of the Chinna-Kalrayan executed a bond to the government, agreeing to repay Rs 12,500 with interest at 6 per cent per annum within nine months.<sup>124</sup> This forest continued to remain under the control of the contractors.

Though the income from Periya-Kalrayan hills was profitable, the colonial government returned the private forests to the contractors on the reasoning that ‘ . . . the court would hold that the lease was for the family advantage and can be upheld on that ground.’<sup>125</sup> It becomes clear that the colonial government’s intrusion into the forest areas to protect the environment was a mere pretext, as the real objective was to generate more revenue through further exploitation of the forests.

### Conclusion

During the pre-colonial period, forests in Madras Presidency were controlled both privately and by the rulers. Similarly, in the hills, the tribals controlled the forests privately. The rulers of the plains had never attempted to encroach upon the tribal

<sup>121</sup> Letter from the Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 20 Oct. 1877, in PBR No. 4895, 1 Nov. 1877, TNSA.

<sup>122</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>123</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>124</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>125</sup> Letter from the Acting Collector, Salem to the BOR, dated 26 Apr. 1880, in PBR No. 654, 15 May 1880, TNSA.

private forests during the pre-colonial period. After colonial intervention, the British government adopted different methods to encroach upon private forests with the sole intention of extracting revenue. To ensure their control over the forests, the colonial administration had trampled upon the traditional rights over forests, and other common property rights. The legitimacy of these age-old rights was questioned and, ironically, evidence was sought to prove them. How could the unlettered tribals be expected to possess written documents?

Colonial intrusion into tribal areas was accompanied by the imposition of several restrictions which were in utter disregard of the inconveniences and difficulties they posed to the hill inhabitants. It was mere aggrandisement, and in the process both common property and occupational rights were usurped, and traditional rights ignored. The main aim of the colonial government was neither the protection of forests from illicit felling by greedy contractors, nor protection of the tribals from exploitation at the hands of these contractors. Direct control of the forests and forest resources was only to extract more revenue. This being its prime concern, the colonial government tried to bring the tribal private forests under its ambit through every conceivable irregularity. The hill chieftains were detained in custody, their legitimate claims were disregarded, and divisions created between them. Ultimately the tribal private forests were brought under the total control of the government through leases. But when the expected revenue was not realised, the forests were returned to the *Jagirdars*. In short, the British administration intruded into tribal areas to control forest resources mainly for commercial purposes and not to protect them from the contractors.