



## **Colonial tribal forest policy in madras presidency**

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### **Abstract**

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.

**Keywords:** private forests, tribal private forest, management, colonial policy

### **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.' Forest officers, sent to assess the jungles, wrote dramatic reports predicting the imminent destruction of forests, soil erosion, landslides and desiccation of springs in the absence of conservation. 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. The imperial forest historians have concluded that denudation of forests predated the commencement of colonialism.' 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. 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. 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.' Indeed, the colonial forest policy had not only destroyed subsistence farming, but also made ineffective the traditional methods of managing forests.' 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.

### **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. '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. '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. The zamindar-managed private forests came under state control only after independence, through separate private forests acts of the respective states.

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, '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'.

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.’ & dquo; 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. 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. In 1880-81, Brandis estimated that about 203/4 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.

### **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’ and 11° 19’ 45&dquo; Northern Latitude, and between 78° 42’ and 80° 2’ Eastern Longitude. It was endowed with a number of plant species and fauna, as well as a large variety of trees with great commercial value like sandalwood and teak and several medicinal plants and herbs. The Kalrayan hills were

divided into five Jagirs, viz., Periya-Kalrayan, Chinna-Kalrayan, Ariyakavundan, Kurumbakavundan and Jadayakavundan JagirslPoliaputs. 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.

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. However, these people are quite different from the Malayalam-speaking people of Kerala, although both are called by the same name. 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. The Baramahal Records do not give any account of their origin except this tiny note: ‘no tradition’. According to the Periya-Kalrayan hill inscriptions, these people have been residing there right from the beginning of the eleventh century.

The Malaiyali tribes have different names in different hill groups. In the Baramahal Records, & dquo; they are known as ‘Malaiyandi Vellallu’. Their other nomenclature includes Malai Vellalar, Kongu Vellalar, Kanchimandalathar, Malaikkaran, Malai Kavundan, Mala Nayakkan, Malayala, Malaiyalan, Karaikat Vellalas, Karala Vellalas, Kanchimandala Vellalas, and Karalan. 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.’ 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.

Private forests here are the ones controlled by the tribal headmanl Jagirdar. For administrative purposes, Kalrayan hill was divided into Jagirs/Nadus, which consisted of many villages or hamlets. Each nadu had a four-tier administrative set-up: Pattakaran or headman, Maniakaran, Ur-Kavundan or Moopan, 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. The Maniakaran assisted the Pattakaran with these duties. If the Ur-Kavundan failed to settle any dispute, it would be left to

the Pattakaran, who was treated as the chief guest at harvest and wedding celebrations. Further, he controlled all the Ur-Kcivundciiis.

The Ur-Kcivuidttn 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 UrKavundan. 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. 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. 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. & dquo; In fact, the colonial rulers were under the impression that a separate ruler administered the Kalrayan range,' - 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. The hill inhabitants did not pay any tax to the colonial government or Hindu rulers and they had been left entirely unto themselves. 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, Star Pagodas, fanam and cash were collected by leasing out these rights. According to official reports, the existence of the hills came to the notice of the colonial administration only in 1838. But this was not true as Colonel Alexander Read, who had been aware of the hills, thought that they were independent.

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'. 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.'

The Jagirdars collected many taxes, viz., taxes on ploughs, hoes, poll-tax, treetax and forest rent during the early nineteenth century. In fact, the hill chieftains had also collected widow-tax, 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 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. The Jagirdars utilised the revenue for the maintenance of temples and festival celebrations, and never remitted any tax to the colonial government.

#### **Management of tribal private forests**

Though the lairdars 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 rentlease 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'. The Jagirdars were reluctant since they feared that the government might not return the properties.

On the other hand, the Jukirdccrs 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 Jtigirdars 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. Both the tribal private forests were leased 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). 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? 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. 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.' 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 kandigan of kupli dye were procured annually, since there was a heavy demand for this in England and it also fetched a good price. Besides the constant pressure, the lagirdars were threatened to accept the lease. In 1868, the Periya-Kalrayan lagirdar 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. Although the lagirdar 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; 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 lagirdar 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 lagirdar. All their attempts to persuade him to accept the terms of lease proved futile. [XI 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 Jfighir. He is very averse to give the Jccghir on lease, and he therefore keeps away from officials. & dquo; & dquo; 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 laghirdar, 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. 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 Jfi girdan 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. The government offered to pay him Rs 2,000 per annum apart from 90 acres of rent-free land in three villages. & dquo;o The contractor was given a compensation of Rs 12,500. 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 Ponakkadul lands and the use of wood for 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. 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.' ~ 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.

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. Unable to comply with these restrictions, the Periya-Kalrayan Jllgirdar 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 Malaiialies, who cannot get wood for implements, & c., and are strictly prevented from clearing even old potiakkad lands; the insufficiency of the tract (90 acres) assigned to him rent free; the farming of the collection of the kapilapodil outsiders; and the loss of dignity which he suffers as the chiefs of the other hill nadus<sup>11</sup>!! will not now admit him equally with them.

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.’”

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>12</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.

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. 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. 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. 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 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.

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