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Plantations: The Establishment of Colonial Monoculture and Its Impacts-A Historical Gaze

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Introduction

The plantation has been giving employment opportunities to a large number of people both directly and indirectly and as such it had a great role in the economic development of the area. It is the best example of an institution started by the colonial government in Malabar area. It is also an example for an institution in manifesting aspects of colonial rule. It attracted peoples from other areas and from nearby states and thus has been a cause for social mobility and changes in human ecology. The development of the plantations came of the destruction of the forest in the area and thereby affected the ecology. History is no longer confined to that of kings, countries, nations, social and economic movements etc., alone. It has become inter disciplinary and works have been appearing on non-conventional topics. The present attempt, it is hoped will contribute to such a historiography. The estates and plantation are treated not in their own right. But because of the amending effects it created in life and culture of the locality near the estate and thus much familiar with it and its surrounding. In the general study of the Malabar and the state aspects like those of a plantation are often left unnoticed because in a grand narrative there is little for the history of a micro aspect.

Beginning of Plantations

The first step towards forest conservation was an order issued by the Bombay Bengal Joint Commission appointed to inquire into the internal circumstances of Malabar. It was in 1805 that a committee was appointed to look into the matters of forests in India.[1] The Indian Teak played a major role in saving England in her time of peril and helped her

achieve supremacy in the high seas. Teak trees from India were used not only for building ships but for many other purposes as well. Railroad development in India was largely dependent upon the teak wealth of India. It was also used for the construction of buildings and bridges during the nineteenth century.

The plantations were started with two colonial perspectives. First, it started as a part of colonial strategy to protect the forest in a scientific manner. Second, the colonial rulers wanted to expand agriculture in more areas and to acquire maximum revenue. The plantations were mainly belonged into two categories. They were, tree plantations and agricultural plantations. The British started plantations of mahagony, teak, and cinchona in various parts of Malabar. The availability of land and scarcity of wood prompted them to start plantations. In 1840's the demand of timber increased and its availability was short. The planting of teak in Malabar was mainly started for the marine industry, railway, mines, and public works. For plantations government leased land for a long period without interest. During the colonial period south India was the important centre of European plantations. First half of the nineteenth century witnessed the beginning of the mono crop estates of coffee, tea, cinchona and cardamom, in different parts of the Madras presidency. In wynad the coffee plantation was started by Europeans, established a new crop cultivation and the first organized coffee estate was made by Mr. King of Messrs. Parry & Co. in Mananthavady in 1820s. It was a 75 acres estate but this experiment did not produce desired result.[2]The immediate result was that the sudden and intensive forest clearance. It became more wide in 1830s with the growth of plantation crops. Mr. Pew established a Tea estate in Mananthavady in 1935 and it has become a well maintained estate in Malabar. With the success of this estate a number of European investors secured land and cleared forests in Wayanad for beginning of large scale plantations. The planters obtained land for raising plantations in many ways. In north Wayanad government supplied land for the English planters considering their application for land. The forest authorities received numerous applications for land in Wayanad and government distributed land outside teak belt in north Wayanad.[3]By 1940, the demand for land increased and the Madras government

determined to increase revenue by selling wasteland for new cultivation, found ready buyers in the first coffee planters.[4]

Both the Portuguese and Dutch introduced significant innovations in the economy of Kerala by the innovation of new products and scientific cultivation. The British also bestowed their attention on the improvement of Kerala after their hold over the country. Their immediate concern was the forest wealth of Kerala as well as a cultivated of spices.[5] The government and British officers extended patronage to the owners of plantation in Britain. The emergence of labour problems and working class movement in Britain made the capitalist a reluctant in making investment there. The policy of Leissezfare followed by the British Government made the capitalists sufficiently free to invest their money in manner they liked. Thus the capitalists reached the colonies for investments. They found plantations to be a suitable area of investments. Contemporary literature refers to plantations economy.[6] One of the important features of colonial economy in Kerala has been the development of plantations – tea, rubber, coffee etc.

A plantation is an artificial (Man made) strand of a woody perennial crops which may be harvested from time to time. The harvests may be fruit or any other production of the tree or the tree itself as in the case of timber yielding crops.[7] According to another definition plantations are large scale agricultural enterprises mostly specialised in one particular crop meant for distant markets and employing large number of labourers who work under close supervision in a strictly hierarchical ogranisation.[8] From the above definition, we get the features of a plantation – it yields a perennial crop which is harvested from time to time. The crop can be products from the plant or the plant itself. For example leaves in the case of tea, latex in the case of rubber seeds in the case of coffee and timber in the case of teak plantations. It is a large scale enterprise. It is specialised in one particular crop. In a plantation there will be large number of labourers. These laboures will be strictly supervised. The supervisory body will be hirarchical. Contemporary literature refers to the relation between the labourers and supervisors, the hardships of labourers etc.[9]

The planters, from the very beginning have been Europeans. Plantations have been one of the agents for the exploitation of natives.[10] Plantation marks the beginning of the European exploitation of the natural resources of Kerala.

The emergence of plantation economy was the beginning of capitalist in agricultural sector. It also brought certain changes in the social hierarchy. It even helped the emergence of new political ideas. It affected eco system also. It led to deforestation and there by a decline in the livestock population.[11] It also affected paddy cultivation. The large scale cultivation of cash crops led to a decline in paddy cultivation. The industrialization of India was outside the Imperial agenda and so the major area of investment was the plantation of cash crops. The forest clad hills of India especially the north Eastern and South western regions represents the ideal agromatic zones for the profitable cultivation of such crops. Thus the high land forest became the targets of Western capital investment. The colonial government, which among other things championed the cause of capitalist planters, used the political influence to help the extension of plantations.[12]

The prospects of high profits availability of cheap labour and raw materials and ready markets were some of the factors that attracted foreign capital to India. There was a steady demand for Indian agrarian products in the west. Above all the colonial government encouraged colonial investment for profit motive in India.

Plantations in Kerala were very much in accordance with the definition of plantation. They have been more so with regard to Kerala Estate, the theme of the present dissertation. Plantations were very important in contemporary Indian economy with their high levels of productivity, employment opportunity and foreign exchange earnings. Plantations can be considered as enclaves. They are characterized by a clearly demarcated territory, isolated labour force which lived in plantation land and market abroad.[13] Attached to the plantations were companies which handled the manufacturing, transport and marketing of plantation crops. It has been argued that in many a third world country the efficiency of the plantation estate was often in sharp contrast with the

inefficiency with the surrounding agriculture economy. Plantation brought to agriculture the skills of mechanization and disturbance to the equilibrium. Plantation means a mono culture. It affects eco system. It affected the production of staple crops like paddy. AmalenduGuha highlights this factor[14]. The plantation sector was at the expense of the other agrarian sectors. Good quality land was reserved for plantation agriculture. There have been cases when peasants were forcibly removed from their lands for giving the land for plantations.[15]

Diversity of crops and heterogeneity of cultivation are the key note of agriculture in Kerala.[16] Apart from regions directly under British control the princely state also where prevailed upon by the British Government to make forest land available to the planters at very low prices and under favorable tenurial conditions. The waste land proclamation issued by the king of Travancore in 1865 and the consequent large scale opening up of the forest tracts for plantations in the high ranges is a telling example of this process in Kerala.[17]

In 1799, the English East India Company set up a spice plantation at Anjarakandi, coffee, cinnamon, nutmeg, pepper etc., were cultivated here. It was from here that coffee was introduced into Wyanad. The plantation at Anjarakandi continues to this day, though cinnamon alone to cultivate.[18]

Rubber Hevea Brassilensis is commercially the most important source of natural rubber. It was brought from Brazil by Henry Wickham to Kew gardens and in 1876, it was introduced in Tropical Asia. From the original plantings in Srilanka, the cultivation of rubber spread in later years to Kerala. Until the end of 19th century rubber cultivation in the state had been little more than experimental. The first tree planted in South India, was some cera plants sent from Kew gardens to the Nilambur teak plantations in 1878.[19]

The pioneers among the planters in Kerala were P.D. Devasahayam and some European planters cum missionaries like John cox. These persons started plantations in the Ashamboo Hills in southern Travancore. Plantations started in the 'Peermade' range were during the period of John Grant and John Daniel Munro. It was almost at the same

time that the high ranges of the Idukki District came to be cultivated extensively with tea.[20] The plantation areas known as Kannam Devan Hills had their formal origin in 1897, when the Punjar Raja sold a tract of land to J.D. Munro, Henry Gribble Tamer and A.V. Turner who together began the tea plantations.[21]The Arthala Tea Estate at Karuvarkundu in Malappuram district started in 1908 is the first and only tea estates in the district. Cardamom, coffee, cinnamon and Rubber were the other important plantation crops being started by the colonial powers apart from tea. Like tea, all these plants heeded certain peculiar climatical conditions. Different parts of Kerala were very conducive to these plantations. The colonial masters made large scale investment in the crops of tea and rubber. The other plantations investments were comparatively low when compared to these two plantations. The North Malabar region, especially Wyand and Tellichery were very conducive to the tea and coffee plantations. There was a direct colonial interest behind the policy for starting plantations on a large scale basis.[22] Nevertheless, it is seen that in Malabar District which was directly under the British colonial plantations developed at a lower rate as compared to Travancore.

By the dawn of the 20th century the combined appearance of coffee and tea had transformed large areas of Keraia's forest into plantation monocrops. The 20th century also witnessed the spread of a third major plantation crop namely rubber. The role of rubber shrinking natural forest would be as big as coffee and tea. Rubber also is a perennial crop. But unlike coffee and tea it can also tolerate the low cultivation hills. From virtually sea level to 3000 feet uniform strands of rubber trees replaced natural forests.[23]

The colonial masters found that rubber also can be cultivated on large scale basis for commercial purposes. The growth of rubber as a major plantation crop was an outstanding features of the colonial economy of Kerala. Rubber plantations received governmental aid and support in the form of grant and rent free lands.[24]

The rubber trees grow only within a well-defined area of the tropics about 10° North or South of the equator and in most types of soil. Heavy annual rainfall about 100 inches is

essential with emphasis on a wet spring. South East Asia is famous for rubber cultivation or culture.[25]

The appearance of bicycles in the 1870s and the demand for rubber as raw material for manufacturing, rubber tyre, led many tropical botanists to the study of several species of tree which would yield rubbery latex. Kerala had an indigenous variety of rubber. But it did not possess the qualities of Brazils Hevea Brazilians (called 'Para' from the Amazonian District form which is came), which emerged as a dominant producer of natural rubber for industrial purpose. Two other species were ManohotGlaziovia ('cera' so called after the province of Brazil where it flourished) and CastillaoEalstica, also a South American tree.[26]

The natural rubber Hevea Brassilensis was brought by Henry Wickham from Brazil to Kew garden and from where to Tropical Asia in the year 1876. Some para and Castillao plants were planted in the next years at plantations house in Calicut. Some specimens of all three varieties were planted. In 1882 an attempt was made to open experimental plantation of Castillao at Injapuzha at the foot of Thamarasserighat. But this under taking was abandoned owing to difficulties about the tittle to the land.[27] Some of the Wynad planters following the method of Ceylon tried 'Cera' in small plots or as shade amongst coffee. But it was failure. Reports of unfavorable results from Ceylon and the ignorance of the best methods of taping together led to the neglect of the experiment from the time being.

The interest in rubber plantations was revived by the beginning of the 20th Century. There emerged small patches of 'para' rubber in some estates including other crops. Plantations of rubber were opened in Nilambur valley, on the scopes of the neighboring hills and near Puthupadi in the Calicut. The first rubber estate of Nilambur was owned by the Vaniyamkulam Rubber owners.[28]

The 20th Century witnessed the increase in the plantation of rubber in India on a commercial scale and it may be said to have commenced by 1902.[29] In the beginning of the 20th C rubber plantation began in Travancore. The pioneers among the rubber

planters were J.J. Murphy, J.A. Hunter, K.E. Nicoll and C.M. Ross. All were Europeans. They opened Periyar Estate at Thattakkad near Aluva.[30] It was not till 1902 that Periyar Estate at Thattakkad was opened and within use next fifteen years a considerable position of the present rubber yielding area in the district was planted.[31]

The Aspinwall Company was one of the major colonial enterprises which had interest in plantations in Malabar. John H. Aspinwall, one of the few enterprising men was the founder of this company. Later he handed over the enterprise to the Black brothers. They consolidated and expanded the Aspinwall enterprises. The present Pullangode Rubber and Producing Company was owned by them. They successfully handled the floatation of planting companies like the Travancore Rubber and Tea Company limited.The Kerala Calicut Rubber Estate limited at Kerala near Karuvarakundu was started by a European company owned by Lional Edward Kirwan in 1908. Within a short period of time, the Pierce Leslie Company Limited brought the Kerala Calicut Rubber Estate Limited.

By 1910 the area under rubber in Kerala had increased to 29,500 acres and to about 46,000 by 1914.[32] At the heights of the First World War there was a further increase in the demand for rubber. In Malabar there were about 61 Estates in 1930. At first rubber production was entirely for Europeans aiming at automotive transport and other industrial demands. The rubber plantations were entirely owned by the British firms, till in 1947.[33]

The manufacturing, transporting and marketing of plantation crops were handled by the plantation companies. The planters spent their own funds to construct roads and bridges and embankments in Malabar area. The estates were commercial enterprises. They were sources of wealth and prestige. Group activity, bonded labour and state aid were of importance to the planters.

In 1934 an international Rubber Regulation Agreement came into being where by production and new planting of rubber were restricted and regulated.[34] As a result prices of rubber began to increase. The migration of farmers from Travancore to Malabr

in 1930s and 1940s helped further expansion of commercial cultivation in Malabar.[35] At present Kerala holds almost complete monopoly in the sphere of rubber production in India.[36]

Although rubber cultivation had its beginning a plantation by British planters the greater part of increase in the area under rubber cultivation is attributable to the enterprise of a large number of Indian proprietary planters, predominantly small holders who came into field later during and after second world war.

In the year 1947 Rubber Act and Rubber Board emerged. It is a statutory board working with the Ministry of Commerce, government of India. The important function of Rubber Board is to promote by "such measures as it things fit" for the development of rubber industry in India.[37]

Conclusion

The introduction of colonial model of plantations and its integration of knowledge and power brought drastic changes and impact on every aspects of life. The introduction of commercial rubber cultivation during the 19th century marked the beginning of a shift from the traditional peasant agriculture to a large scale mono culture. Thus the colonial plantations in general and rubber plantations in particular became the centre of socio-economic architecture of the everyday life of the people in the pre and post colonial period.

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