

Concluding Analysis

When and at what point of time in the history of Travancore, a structural change in the pattern of timber trade had occurred is an interesting problem for a historical research. It is not because of the huge quantity of timber extracted for export and other industrial requirements of the empire, but for the changes in a deeper level where the notions of the native state towards its own forests underwent, due to the imposition of the colonial rationality in considering forested sites as sites of wealth which were wanting for scientific management. Most critical was the period from the late 18th century onwards, when the hitherto unexplored and therefore under utilised forest resources of the Travancore state were brought under the scientific rationality and administrative scheme of the coloniser which resulted in the creation of a welter of institutions and systems that facilitated ultimately the transformation of the native forests into modern forests. The thesis in the forgone pages was trying to historically locate the spatial and temporal dimensions of the transformation mentioned above through critically analysing the evolution, growth and patterns of timber trade arising out of the visibility gained through a forest epistemology of the native state under colonial surveillance and administrative genius.

European understanding of the forests of Travancore was made through a strategic programme which was spread out in three stages; 1. Exploration, 2. Surveys and 3. Documentation and report making, carried out by military personnel, ordinary travellers, botanists and medical officers in the latter half of the eighteenth century and throughout the nineteenth century. Apart from reporting on the plant species, the gaze of the Europeans also fell on factors like the fertility of the soil and climatic conditions of the regions explored. What had emerged out of this explorative drive was the creation of a knowledge base that proved vital in converting these wild spaces into catchment areas for timber and other forest products. It needs to be emphasised at this point that the drive of the coloniser is not to be narrowed down to the creation of timber sites; instead they located the forest sites in all its entirety for completely exploiting the resources it contained. The knowledge thus generated was the result of a scientific gaze of the Empire in

its historical context of colonialism and imperialism, and therefore bound to make a paradigm shift in the mode of resource use wherein timber of Travancore became a focal point of reference in the global timber market.

The Trigonometrical Survey Report of Ward and Conner and the extensive report on the forests of Travancore by T.F Bourdillion are best examples of this scrutinising gaze; the first is a general geographic survey of Travancore and Cochin and the second is a succinctly interesting narrative of Travancorean forests in its entirety and became a must reference point in commercialisation of timber resources. Bourdillion in his report had systematically brought a detailed picture of the hitherto unexplored forest wealth of the native land on each river base, the geography, the climate, the soil conditions, and the people living in each forest tracts. He had then proceeded in detail about the utility, marketability and economic value of every timber tree. Based on the availability and abundance of teak trees, forest expanses were suggested for reservation. Then he criticised the past management system and suggested remedies and better management for the future. All this explicitly implicate the colonial agenda of knowledge making and its documentation for easily locating and extracting forest resources. Bourdillion's report became a spring board in effecting sweeping reforms in forest management, if not its conservation.

Colonial law regarding the use of forests took its course in the succeeding years, where the focus was on bringing the sylvan resources under a hierarchically structured bureaucracy who were empowered to interpret any activity inside the woods for the benefit of the colonial power and for dismissing any kind of restraint that may prop up in future. A series of acts and proclamations and later amendments to get rid of any hurdle that came in the way of an uninterrupted extraction of timber resource, were legislated under the pretext of scientific forestry. The main clause of the first forest act which was passed in 1887 was the reservation of certain forest tracts which were mainly confined to the major teak forests of the state. This clearly brings to limelight the agenda of the empire for reservation. During the time of reservation of forest tracts the Forest Department successfully absorbed the forest dwellers and cultivators as watchers and guards in

the department. This was mainly used to win over a section of the forest people with the department and thereby making them stakeholders in scientific forestry practices which were in reality aimed at dismantling any objection to the idea of reservation from the side of the tribals. Many departments and posts, created during this period like the Timber Munitions Board, the Timber Advisory Officer in the railways, the Forest Utilization Branch, and the Forest Utilisation Officer, all pointed to the most regimented functioning of the Forest Department to serve imperial timber requirements reinforcing the highly utilitarian aspect of the colonial forest policies. The exhibition of the forest resources especially the different species of timber trees in different places at different times was aimed at familiarising Travancore timber to the world market. The end result of all these managerial and advertising strategies was the commoditisation of Travancore timber in the international market and the emergence of the timber trading network, especially in teak, controlled by the EIC and the merchant capitalists of Travancore, both European and the native.

Working plans for the forests introduced in Travancore, were blue prints for the working of a particular forest for a period of ten years in extracting timber resources and at the same time allowing conservation of timber species in attaining full growth. In many instances the Forest Department in the state was found overruling the working plans conceding to the demands of timber contractors who wanted to have a speedier extraction of good quality timber from the forests of their choice. Why the state was entertaining such requests from these merchant capitalists when the declared objective of the state was scientific forest management, is a crucial question that becomes an answer in itself, pointing to the commercialisation of forest resources and its impact on the forestry practices under the pretext of conservation. Thus becomes visible the pretext and the context; scientific forestry claims and commercial forestry practices.

Due to the ruthless exploitation of teak and its shortage in the timber market, steps were initiated to open monoculture plantations of the species in areas where it could grow in good conditions. Even during the time of Bourdillion, about 3000 acres of land was converted into teak plantations after much study and

experimentation. The plantation enterprise in Travancore witnessed a massive ecological transformation in the native state resulting in the elimination of the native ecological world and leading to the destruction of natural forests. The forested areas were thus reconfigured under pressure from the market economic factors, where timber, especially teak became a prime attraction due to global demand and the exigencies faced by the imperial administration in British India. Plantations like teak, coffee and tea were opened and rapidly got extended in large areas due to large amount of capital invested in such activities. It attracted the attention of big timber magnates which is evident from the willingness of Messrs Wallibhoy and Khaderbhoy Co., for proposing to purchase the whole of the teak plantations started at Konni.

The implantation of the *Taungya* cultivation on the Burmese lines in Travancore was aimed at increasing teak plantations along with the shifting cultivation of the forest people. This system which was introduced for reducing the cost of maintaining the plantations also aimed at alienating the hill cultivators from the forests. Within two or three years of cultivation under the *taungya* by which time the teak seedlings develop its canopy, the crop production would become non remunerative and the cultivators were forced to abandon the area. Thus without imposing any pressure on the cultivators the Forest Department was successful in driving out the cultivators from the forest land.

The plantations in Travancore warranted an incessant supply of timber to the market which led to the emergence of a class of timber merchants in the state. This community with enormous capital at hand materialized themselves as a powerful socio-economic class in Travancore. This became apparently visible during the first phase of timber trade where the number of traders was less but very powerful and decisive in their dealings with the native state. There existed a well-coordinated system of timber trade in the native land which was effectively utilized by the Europeans both the EIC and the British Empire. The Europeans, the native government, and the timber barons both native and foreign were all benefitted out of this lucrative trade. During this phase the system of contract was giving the monopoly of hills with rich variety of trees and rivers for transporting the extracted

timber to centres of timber trade. The forest was at the mercy of the contractor who was free to cut as much timber as he could from his monopoly regions. This profligate system resulted in the vast devastation of the forest tracts in the state as there was no supervision over the contractors at the time of felling. This improper method of felling caused a large scale destruction of teak trees which were found in plenty on the hills and by the side of the rivers.

These trading communities were so influential that they at times influenced the timber trade policy of the state and even dictated terms in forest management. The government which was attracted by the monetary benefit arising out of the thriving timber trade seemed providing all facilities for the furtherance of the trading community by yielding to their demands. The influence of Mathu Tharakan, the timber baron of the times is visible in his interference in state policy making, like the development of the port for effecting massive timber trade to other parts of the world. He was able to influence the timber trade policy of the state unilaterally according to his whims and fancies. Even it is evident from the records that he was meddling in the affairs relating to the day to day administration of the state. All these point to the fact that Mathu Tharakan was in the core group of the Travancore Raja, who was so much dependant on the help of the timber baron. The leverage that Tharakan built up was used for extending timber trade operations far and wide through a network of mechanisms under his control which was established well through sub agents, brokers and even big European timber traders. Tharakan was able to supply any quantity of timber that was demanded by the western market and imperial front. It conclusively suggests that he was the merchant capitalist, the only one, who was determining the course, politics and economics of timber trade of the native state during the first phase of the history of timber trade in Travancore. This phase therefore can be regarded as the 'era of *Tharakanism*', because he became a 'cult figure' in the history of timber trade in particular and on a higher plane, the forest politics of the native state.

Definitive and significant changes had occurred in the structure and organisation of timber trade in Travancore in the closing decades of the 18th c. Timber traders and big contractors emerged as a new social class in Travancore

during the period and they were able to make inroads into the patterns and organisation of trade in timber. Phenomenal was the increase in the volume of trade catering to the needs of domestic as well as foreign demands in good quality timber especially teak. The rivers of Travancore virtually became water channels through which the timber traders floated their stock. The Channels of trade became significant pointers in the timber trade of Travancore from this time onwards.

The native timber trading community in its initial phase itself proved its competency in distributing the quantity of timber demanded by the European traders. A dominant group of five timber traders effectively co-ordinated the supply of timber to Alleppey, the newly emerged port. Like the cotton textiles industry of the 16th and 17th centuries in India, these timber traders succeeded in fulfilling the demands raised by European traders. As a matter of fact the EIC was not in a position to make cracks in this system of native merchants who were playing a leading role in timber trade and instead made use of such a system for the Company's own furtherance. At times, when they attempted to break this system that was well co-ordinated by the native timber traders, the company met with disastrous failures which pointed to the formidable politico-economic status of the native timber traders.

With the emergence of this merchant community and their success in effectively liaisoning timber trade in Travancore, a whole new culture of timber trade commenced in the native state. Influential and wealthy timber traders, who were able to influence even the policies of the native state emerged. The economy of the Travancore state at this point exhibited tendencies of an emerging nascent capitalist economy due to the powerful presence of the British and their trade networks. Big timber traders with huge capital at their disposal were able to control the timber trade economy which was favourably patronised by the ruling Maharaja, in whose court this big timber traders like Mathu Tharakan won a seat of honour. It is also an irony of history that in financial crisis the native state borrowed money from these traders. Being a banker to the native state government in such a situation, these traders were able to influence the policies of the native state regarding forest management and timber trade which were mutually complementary.

In the following days, more powerful and dominating timber traders were to play a prime role in the Travancore state which made certain structural changes in the organisation and pattern of timber trade.

The timber trade which assumed great importance in the first phase, started scaling up in massive proportions in the closing decades of the 19th c and the first half of the 20th c. The exigent needs of the empire impacted the growth of timber trade which was propelled by industrial as well as imperial requirements. For the first time in the history of Travancore severest forms of timber extraction became order of the days where mighty timber contractors in connivance with the forest department virtually controlled mechanisms and organisation of timber trade in the native state. In reality, the so called scientific forestry practices introduced in Travancore became a convenient label for all commercial activities connected with timber trade.

The Travancore state was virtually approving all modified trade agreements and practices which were conceived in favour of the big timber merchants. A sphere of timber merchant capitalism emerged in Travancore at this point of time where capital of these native merchants together with capital of European companies were making interventions in the field, which resulted in massive deforestation through timber fellings. Along with these activities, the opening of plantations by European companies and individuals also resulted in extensive clearance of forest. Timber imperialism set in motion for the whole of the British India was seen effectively implanted in Travancore's native ecological world, through which timber trade in Travancore got effectively connected with international timber trade controlled in significant ways by western capital and industries.

The departmental mechanism set up in Travancore was seen simply catering to the needs of the native and European timber companies. Enactments and regulations promulgated in Travancore became a convenient rubric under which the department sponsored illegal timber fellings by big contractors and the individual smuggling of timber by other people went hand in hand. The native state and its authorities were seen remaining as faithful witnesses for all the above

illegal operations because of lump sum revenue generated through timber trade. The fact that Angoor Rowther, the mightiest timber merchant was receiving and entertaining guests of the state, both native as well as British exposes the great extent of freedom that he enjoyed in the power circle, through which he continued his timber operations in the high ranges according to his whims and fancies. What is pointed out here is not only the influence of timber merchant but also the system which facilitated and promoted the rise of such timber trading magnets. The railways, the war front, and private timber trade were to benefit from these episodes which revealed the magnitude of timber imperialism that was set in motion in the native state.

What the Travancore state was witnessing during the era of '*Tharakanism*' repeated most vociferously through '*Rowtherism*', the 'cult figure' being Angoor Rowther and his brothers and the coterie were virtually determining the terms and conditions for the timber extraction and trade in the state. Even a cursory look through the documents relating to the timber trade reveals the magnitude of his influence in the arena of timber trade. Like Tharakan, he was also in the close circle of the Maharajah of the Native state, who could easily afford to have a meeting with the ruler at any point of time. The Forest Department was virtually acting in accordance with the timber operations of Angoor that at several points the extent of the forest area assigned to him for extraction was extended to the limits fixed by the trader while the forest department, the supposed guardian of scientific forestry was allying with the forces of commercialisation of forest resources. Colossal was the destruction caused to the native forests during this phase, owing to the ruthless extraction of teak trees. More over it is to be noted that only the core part of the timber was taken by the trader, leaving the remaining part of the timber as waste. This was a sheer case of ecological profligacy, arising out of the specific demands from the western timber lobbies. Oral tradition about Angur goes saying that he even set Forest Offices on fire, when his demands were not conceded, like the actions similar to a villainous timber trader in popular films. It is an amazingly wonderful story of the making of a timber empire on the high ranges of the Travancore state, where Angoor, the emperor of timber trade was dictating terms and conditions of all timber operations, after annihilating all contestants in the field.

On an analysis of the timber trade in Travancore, it was the timber policy that had the greatest influence on the forest policy. What tuned the forest policy of the state was the increasing demand of timber from within and outside the state. Even the preparations of working plans were controlled by this demand. Working plans which were the most important parameter of scientific forestry were not given due importance before the emergence of timber demands. There are evidences for deviations made in the working plan when there was a great demand for timber. For example we have seen that to meet the demand from the railways, change was made in the sanctioned working plan of the Shendurney forest. Another interesting feature of the 'scientific forestry' in Travancore was that 'Working Plans' soon yielded to 'Working Schemes' for making timber extraction and its transportation more speedier.

Interestingly, the forest officers of Travancore, both at higher and lower levels, played the role of mediators for the timber traders. There are examples of low ranked officers extending their hands to the timber smugglers. In the case of contractors like P.T. Thomas and his agent Kadamapuzha Pappan, Subramania Karayalar etc., range of officers were involved in the case. The Conservators were also very eager to favour the contractors. There are clear evidences that the Conservators ardently advocating for the cause of the contractors like Angoor Rowther, Anumanthamkudi Meera Rowther, Harrisons and Crossfield, Subramania Karayalar etc. There were even instances wherein conservators were charged for supporting the unauthorised felling. For example, Conservator Subramania Aiyer was vehemently criticised for supporting Subramania Karayalar by allowing felling in the Shendurney working circle by deviating from the existing working plan

The Native state's knowledge about forest at that time was based on a traditional and rude estimates of the forest supervisors like the *vijarippukaran*. But the knowledge which the Europeans developed in Travancore was not only about the trees but also was about the soil, climate, weather and the people in it. This was not an individual oriented programme but the one which was decided by the 'Empire'. So in the later half of the great 19th c one can see a totally different governmental rationality towards the use of forested space of Travancore. Through their gaze and itinerant science the forest of

Travancore in all its richness, variety and abundance became visible for the English. This visibility gained through the application of science and technology was the first stage in the process of modernization of Travancore forest and it opened the gaze for total extraction of timber resources in the state.

Travancore forests, which were viewed by the masters as the production centre of highly valuable commercial timbers, began to be exhausted out of its tree species due to excessive fellings. The depletion of oak in England reminded them the need for conservation and artificial regeneration of these trees which in turn led to the idea of timber plantations. Through clear fellings natural forests gave way to monoculture plantations which meant getting a regular and adequate supply of timber resources in the most effective and systematic manner. Timber plantations proved to be a successful means for commercial forestry. The subsidiary treaty of 1795 acted as a spring board for engaging with the colonial forest policies in Travancore. The resource extraction mode of the coloniser tremendously changed with this treaty and definitive steps were taken by the native government under the patronage of the colonial state in reforming and restructuring the forest administration of the state. Pursuant to 1865 act, a series of forest rules and regulations were passed in Travancore which forcefully asserted state monopoly in forest management and related trade.

Apart from reserving forest, a whole new structure of forest management solidly based on bureaucratic control acted as a mechanism to safeguard the interest of the 'Empire'. Forest schools, forest utilisation branch, forest department, forest roads, and forest exhibitions are to be considered as sites of power and authority. The forest which became visible through the gaze was thus brought under the law and administrative control. This was a crucial stage in reconfiguring the forested landscapes and making it visible all the more for the European planter and trader in a global scale. In reality, agencies of scientific forestry thus got transformed as agencies of commercial forestry in the wake of excessive demand for timber for industrial, Imperial and trade purposes. From the statistical analysis it is clear that while cubic feet price of teak timber was decreasing the revenue scaled up. This could be achieved only by increasing the quantity of timber extracted. This clearly

pointed to the extensive deforestation that had happened in the native state owing to demands from the west and their imperial requirements. As a matter of fact the native state lost forests and the real revenue that was to get from the timber trade, a definite case of timber imperialism imposed on it by the coloniser.

The drive of the white coloniser in opening plantations in forested space was propelled by an industrial capitalist economy in those times. Under the pretext of bringing 'progress' on the hills (forests) large tracts of forested land were cleared through opening plantations. It was the result of a capital intensive and market driven political economy of those times. Seen from another angle the aesthetics of the garden also heavily impacted the reconfiguration of a forested space with all its variegated plant life transformed into monoculture plantations. To a socio-environmental historian the hills were Europeanised and a European culture became so felt on the hills. In this way plantations effectively created a new political ecology, where the indigenous species floristic and faunistic got eliminated leading to a state of plant imperialism. It is an irony of history that most of these plantations were opened in the reserved forests which very well explicated the western notions of environment, where in the taming of the wild and making it more productive became a state agenda which continues even in the post- colonial period.

Through a well-coordinated system of timber extraction and trade under the patronising aegis of government and administrative agencies, especially the Forest Department, the Travancorean timber found its way to the global timber market controlled by British in many ways. A small region rich in sylvan resources thus got effectively integrated into the economic structure of the core country through creating a situation of timber imperialism. The local ecological world and its politico-economic structure, thus got annexed to the grand plan of timber exploitation set in motion by the empire and its imperial cum capitalistic framework, and the depletion of forest resources became a matter of fait accompli under the culture of British capitalist forces of trade. In other words, the entire biota of the native state was used for the global system of capitalist network, where the native state became a docile political unit in the world system of trade under British tutelage. The native state was transformed into a site of periphery in colonial India,

servicing the demands for timber from the core country. On an adaptation of the theory of World System as argued by Immanuel Wallerstein, what had happened in Travancore was the forest use take over by the core country which led to the specific case of timber imperialism through subordinating the native trade networks for the service of the empire.

It is imperative here to look at the deeper ramifications of the western perceptions towards the forests which were conceived by them based on an ideology that was anthropocentric; an economy that was growing out of their frontiers in tandem with the expanding system of capitalism; a technology that was sophisticated and much beyond the level of the orient which was contextually used for resource extraction from the forests. The scientific temperament backed up by Economic Botany and Forestry Sciences, each complementing with the other which comfortably labelled all their interventions as modernistic for making progress in the hills. It was an agenda that was well set in the native state and further carried out through discourses led by the coloniser's agents. The whole programme of timber extraction was conducted under the guise of bringing progress for the native state, its ruler and his people, through the application of European science and technology. A face to face encounter between the backward state of the native ruler and the superior colonial system thus became imminent in Travancore, where the life world rationality of the native state was subjugated, tamed and disciplined by the coloniser, in the first instance by the Company and later by the British government directly. It is a matter beyond any degree of doubt that this mental as well as political subjugation of the native state created a situation in which the colonial politico-economic structure decided the forest policy of the state wherein '*Tharakanism*' and '*Rowtherism*' are focal points of reference for the environmental historian. In its due course emerged the colonial timber empire which decided the fate of the forests of Travancore in tune with the politico-economic priorities of the British Empire, and the Kingdom of Travancore was only a geo zone for facilitating its global scale operations.