

British Planters and the Question of Ecological Imperialism - A Historical Study in the High Ranges of Kerala

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Abstract

This research paper tries to explore the historical course of the expansion of British Colonialism in High Ranges of Kerala state owing to the growth of commercial crop plantations. History of Plantations in Kerala is closely related to the colonial era. The British Ecological Imperialism paved the way for rapid bi dimensional changes in the agricultural, social and cultural fields .Profit motivated agriculture resulted in a shift from ordinary crops to commercial crops. More over the imperial agenda to secure the availability of raw materials to the growing British industry was satisfied from the commercial farming in the British colonies. Tea, Coffee, Pepper, Cardamom, Rubber etc. which are the indispensable part of the European life motivated the British to find out suitable place for the large scale cultivation of the same. The researcher depended more on secondary sources. Even though primary sources were tried to apply as far as possible. Table, chart, diagrams, maps, averages and percentages are the tools used the most.

Keywords: Imperialism, Sustainable development, Colonialism, Commercial farming, Capitalism,

Introduction

Coffee was the commercial crop experimented in Kerala by the British for the first time. It is about in 1840 Coffee plantation started in Wayanadu. In 1860 Coffee plantations started to appear in Idukki district also. Compared to the two districts Coffee seems to be more successful in Wayanadu rather than in Idukki district. The Wilt disease the affected the leaves of the Coffee reduced its' production.

Coffee plantations in Wayanadu survived for a long time even though not free from initial troubles. Coffee Plantations in Wayanadu is commenced about 1840; Suffice it to say that mismanagement , injudicious choice of soil and locality , and an ignorant, insufficient mode of planting , together with want of encouragement by the formation of ghaut and roads , difficulty of getting good title to land , etc. have all tended to render the early attempt at coffee planting in Wayanad despite the obvious advantages it might enjoy over that of Ceylon , discouraging .Several estates were abandoned , although' a mere song had been paid for the land and tax was assessed and other maintained at a loss . This accident no doubt threw back the country many years. This circumstance it was which led the late Mr. Connolly to defer brining forward the question of assessing coffee land till the estates had recovered heart and the eligibility of Wayanad as a coffee planting country had been established¹.In Idukki district Coffee plantation first appeared in places around Peermedu.

From Peermedu an expansion of the Coffee Plantation can be seen to nearby valleys of the High Ranges like, Nedumkandam and Munnarⁱⁱ.

Capitalist investment

Capitalist investment ran to the newly emerged plantation sector in the Hilly area of the present Kerala state. British Planters showed more interest to raise plantations in Wayanadu area because of the easily available labor force from Canara. A country presented so many advantages cannot lose permanently its attraction, and for some years coffee plantation has been making steady advances in Wayanad. The aptitude of the District and of the slopes of the western Ghaut generally for coffee cultivation has been established and is increasingly drawing the attention of capitalists. Every facility and encouragement should now be offered to the introduction of capital. And althoughⁱⁱⁱ I think that time has come when the subject of taxation must be set at rest. I am satisfied that the greatest care should be taken not to check the tendency by heavy taxation or disadvantageous terms as compared with Ceylon or other countriesⁱⁱⁱ. The revenue collected from the plantation sector of Kerala became an area of interest of the British. More capital investment took a flow to the region.

Attempts were done to spread Coffee to more area of the region. Places like Sultan Bahery, Pulpally, Culpetta were found suitable places for Coffee Plantations. A more authentic depiction can be taken from the book *Selected Report of Malabar, Canara and Wayanadu* "The aptitude of Waynad for coffee seems quite established and the experiments made prove like wise and the coffee shrub may be cultivated in almost every part of it. The heavy jungle along the Ghaut ranges and the slopes of the Neelgherries have, and will be preferred by the first, but the extent is limited. However the success of the Culpetta Estate (Messrs, Parry's and Co's) and the condition of a native Estate near Sultan Battery show that Bamboo Jungle Land and even more open localities yield fair Return to proper horticultural enterprise and judicious management so that probably a full third or more of the area of Waynad (1,160 square miles, 7,25,000 acres) might be made available for coffee cultivation. A finer field, where obstacles removed and communications improved, for the employment of British capital, could scarcely be met^{iv}.

The soil of Wayanad is fertile and the climate, of West and South Waynad at least favorable. The shrub if properly guarded bears the 3rd year. An estate probably pays the expenses of the years cultivation in the 4th year and is in full bearing the 5th. No tax on coffee cultivation should take effect till the 5th year, as otherwise the tax would be paid from capital^v. The more experienced planters even have not arrived at an average of the yield per acre in Waynad and as a large no of Estates have been badly managed: their present yield can scarcely be termed an average one. Where Estates are fairly done by, 7 or 8 cwt per acre will not be an unreasonable assumption as the average usual produce of an acre and it were worth 120 to 150 Rupees. A thousand to 1,200 trees occupy an acre^{vi}. But the condition of Coffee Plantations in the present Idukki district worsen day by day. Planters started to shift from Coffee to other commercial crops like Cardamom and later to Tea.

Labor shortage and its aftermath

Labor shortage was the most severe problem that affected the Plantation sector of Kerala. Native people of Kerala were not sufficient to complete the day to day activities of the plantation both in executive level and administrative level. The reason for this labor scarcity

seems not only low wages but also the lack of acquaintance with the newly introduced crops. For maintaining sufficient labor large scale importing of labor from Tamilnadu and Karnataka took place. Labor is not abundant and has to be called in from Mysore however: good and just managers obtain a sufficiency at very reasonable rates. The cost of bringing Estates in to bearing and of maintaining them in a productive and cleanly state is there for considerably below that that of Ceylon , although' it varies even in Wayanad . The value of an average estate in bearing may be taken at 100 to 200 Rupees per acre^{vii} . The large scale labor mobilization to Kerala contributed to the Social History of the state. First of all this labor selection by the British planters later proved to be the best example for their hidden imperialist agenda. The profit motivated commercial farming concept of the British gained a new impetus through the arrival of the imported laborers.

The imported laborers later became the permanent settlers of the land. The planters were provided them with the facility to live a labor's family in the plantation itself. Those quarters were named as 'Layams'^{viii}. They were also assisted with medical care and education facilities. This historical course led to the linguistic as well as cultural transfusion especially of Malayalam and Tamil.

Table 1

Distribution of languages

Natural Divisions and Taluqs .	Distribution by language of 10,000 of population			Distribution of residence of 10,000 speaking each language.		
	Malayalam	Tamil	Other languages	Malayalam	Tamil	Other languages
Cardamom Hills	1,942.7	7,487.6	569.7	17.3	328.4	308.8

Source: V. Nagam Aiya, *The Travancore State Manual Vol. II*, Gazetteers Department , Government of Kerala, 1999, P. 23.

When Cardamom and Tea plantations started to develop in the High Ranges need of communication and transportation increased. As British were more interested in maritime transportation development in transportation was primarily focused on approach roads to the ports from where plantation products were exported to abroad. The average distance of estate for the port of shipment does not exceed 50 miles and despite the badness of the road , abundance of carriage is always procurable at rates per mile very much below these of Ceylon . There is however a serious deterioration of property in the transit consequent on the employment of bullocks in carrying the coffee. The communications of Wayanad have however already received the attention of Government^{ix} .In Idukki district it paved the way for railway expansion also. The monorail^x remnants in Munnar is the historical evidence for the same.

The Tram way^{xi} system to carry Tea from Munnar to the Thoothukkudy port in Tamilnadu is another special development that Kerala experienced during the British days. This facilitated high speed mobilization of commodities from the hills of Idukki to the rest of the world.

The rapid development of Kacha roads to Pacca roads can be considered as another historical result of the plantations Kerala. In Idukki and Wayanadu ‘anatharas’^{xii} were mainly converted as roads. In the present Idukki district roads like Neriya Mangalam- Munnar, Munnar – Udumalpettu, Kumily- Mundakkayam, Kumbammettu – Cumbum, Bodimettu-Bidi, Kumily - Goodalloor were given final shape during the plantation era. In Wayanadu famous Thamarassery pass constructed during the British rule. Besides roads connecting Sulthan Bethery, Pulpally, Kalpeta etc. were constructed with the British technical assistance.

A narration of the economic scenario of plantations of Malabar from the book ‘Report of Malabar Canara and Wayanadu’ is relevant in analyzing the Economic History after the formation of plantations in the High Ranges of Kerala. The proposed principle and rate find little favor among the planters and I think its application under present circumstances, to Malabar present some difficulties. First it were a principal of taxation new to the District were cultivated land only has as yet been assessed. The European Coffee interest naturally object to differential mode of treating there highly cultivated holdings, purchased or otherwise obtained from private proprietors, while it remains in the power of Native owners to withhold from improvement and free of tax any extent of Jungle, to the possession of which their claim may be undisputed. 25,000 to 30,000 acres are believed to be in European hands of which between 4,000 to 5,000 acres only are in cultivation. To some Estates in existence such a principle of taxation would prove ruinous and a retrospective effect therefore could not be given to it without great hardship. Much land would be abandoned perhaps, but as it would replace to native proprietors it would not be one whit more available to new comers than before. Were a survey however completed and an uniform rate assessed on all good forest land property in whosoever hands it might be, or howsoever used, proprietor’s would more willingly throw up or dispose of the land for agricultural purpose and one of the great obstacles to extension of coffee culture would be in part modified and a practical argument gained in favor of the system^{xiii}.

Ownership Crisis

It is clear from the above paragraph that in the High Ranges as a result of the expansion of plantations there experienced severe ownership crisis. The British officials who were praised by some writers as the best ever administrators of the Great Kingdom were faced severe crisis for the division of land and assessment. Reason behind this crisis is nothing but the increased number of planters and raised demand for suitable land for cultivation. ‘Report of Malabar Canara and Wayanadu’ again say a uniform rate of assessment has the advantage of tending to check land jobbing and the monopolizing by individuals, for speculative purpose of tracts of land beyond what they themselves require or can cultivate. But in Waynad as it is at present, Waste and forest land fitted for coffee is not generally public land. The land is in short already jobbed and it is “Clubbed” in the hands of a few native proprietors, who as above noticed present the great obstacles to the development of the country. It is therefore not the interest of the Government or the public to throw obstacles in the way of jobbing by Europeans within the bounds that native cupidity will permit. The European is more interested in relating his investment relating his investment in land and in getting it opened quickly than the lazy native proprietor has as yet been found to be^{xiv}.

The cunning mentality of the British is clear from the above paragraph. The British express the native proprietors as lazy and inefficient. The psychological attitude of the West to consider people of the East as inferior in blood and bread is clear from this statement. In all reforms they made and developmental activities they executed the double sided mentality is clearly visible.

Growth of business and the formulation of novel business policies got a new momentum during the plantation era. The British converted the High Ranges of Kerala a highly competent field of commercial agricultural production. It will be wrong to understand that journey of the High Ranges of Kerala from a forest land to a well flourished production area is mere a change of the time. But it is nothing but the international comprehension and relentless pursuit for competency enabled them to overcome all the obstacles in their path. Regional difficulties they faced and solution they found were started to apply in regions and problems similarly. The collector of Malabar comment on this issue in the following way. The remedy for these difficulties is obvious and I consider that it cannot be too early applied to Wynad, from which it ought to spread throughout Malabar, with a thorough survey settlement and valuation of the land of the taluk. The country ought at once to be surveyed and mapped, all the title carefully ascertained and registered, the land should likewise be carefully valued and laid out in convenient revenue lots, and assessed on this valuation to an uniform and very light land revenue demand. And on the same data a proprietor's fee or permanent rent charge should be fixed, which should not be exceeded, nor should the land be any longer presumable when cultivated by private individuals as long as the rent charge is duly paid. The entire country should be made as available as possible to European and native enterprise and capital land, I have little doubt that within ten years, Waynad and the western ghaut country might rival Ceylon or any country in the world as a field for the enterprise of the European and the cultivation of the more valuable commercial products^{xv}.

The British set up a clear model of taxation and collection of revenue from custom duty which later became the policy of independent India to an extent. The forbearance which allows, the Proprietor in that Province, to raise Pepper, Coffee, Silk, Sugar, Cinnamon, etc, without paying anything direct to the land Revenue will not occasion any particular inconvenience, so long as the indulgence is confined to Malabar proper and the produce is exported by sea, because, government may always get a fair revenue from such articles by means of a sea custom duty^{xvi}.

Conclusion

In the historical analysis of the Plantation era of the High Ranges of Kerala, the pre independent era deserve special mention because most of the historical diversions like migration, cultural blending, formulation of a mixed socio- economic system etc. were flourished during this time.

The plantation sector in the High Ranges of Kerala witnessed pivotal changes in the land utilization pattern in the pre- independent era especially during the British days. Growth and development of communication system, transportation system, agricultural system, land tenure system and finally the economic system of the region witnessed sea changes. The British set up a clear model of taxation and collection of revenue from custom duty which later became the policy of independent India to an extent. More over the indifferent

mentality that the natives shown should not be neglected. It will be the reckless and neutral mentality of Indians that skipped India to the hands of the colonial powers.

In certain times the British expressed the native proprietors as lazy and inefficient. The psychological attitude of the West to consider people of the East as inferior in blood and bread is clear from this statement. In all reforms they made and developmental activities they executed the double sided mentality is clearly visible. In midst of all criticisms that Indians raise against the British raj it will be irrational to deliberately forget the contributions they given. Colonization, imperialism, exploitation etc. takes its' share as the side effect of every foreign rule that any country experienced.

References and Citation

- ⁱ *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, p. 94.
- ⁱⁱ Chembakapara Santhosh, *Idukkiyude Charithram*, Self Published, 2012, p. 34.
- ⁱⁱⁱ *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, pp. 94-95.
- ^{iv} *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, pp. 101-102.
- ^v *Ibid.*
- ^{vi} *Ibid.*
- ^{vii} *Ibid.*
- ^{viii} Layam is a cottage where a number of families live together in the same building but separated rooms to each family.
- ^{ix} *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, p. 103.
- ^x The Monorail in Munnar is functioned on three wheels on which two are running in rail and the third is pulled by the Bullocks. Experienced natives say the British were appointed veterinary doctor exclusively for the nurturing and care of the Bullocks which pull the Monorail.
- ^{xi} Tram Way is a cargo carriage system functioning on ropes manually which makes cargo transportation easy and faster.
- ^{xii} 'Anathara' means usual tract of Elephants through the forest.
- ^{xiii} *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, p. 103.
- ^{xiv} *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, p. 104.
- ^{xv} *Selected Reports on Malabar Canara and Wynad*, Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, p. 105.
- ^{xvi} *Ibid.*