
EUROPEAN HEGEMONY OVER THE HIGH RANGES OF TRAVANCORE AND ITS IMPACT

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KEY WORDS	ABSTRACT
Hegemony, Lease agreement, Commercialisa tion of forest, Plantation industry	‘Hegemony’ is an important term used by Italian scholar Antonio Gramsci. The word refers to the domination of the ruling class through ideological and cultural consensus. Europeans created their power through laws, policies and military advancements. At first, they approached regional rulers to offer military assistance. During the reign of Poonjar chief Kerala Varma Valiya Raja, the British Government approached him for an agreement to develop plantations in the high ranges of Travancore. This agreement paved the way for the transformation of the land and soil, culture, society and economy. The British Government implemented different forest laws and policies for commercialising Indian forests. These laws helped European planters develop their plantations in the high ranges. European planters realised the possibilities of climate and soil. They experimented with different crops like coffee, cinchona, tea and cardamom. At last, European planters understood which crops were suitable for developing the plantation industry in the high ranges.

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Introduction

‘Hegemony’ is a term coined by the Italian Marxist scholar Antonio Gramsci, which means how the ruling class maintain its power not just through military force but through ideological and cultural consent. European powers dominated global economic systems from as early as the 15th century. The Industrial Revolution had produced enormous capital, and the wealthy merchants were ready to invest in any part of the world. The English East India Company's monopoly on the tea trade with China came to an end with the Charter Act of 1813. The British colonies were opened to all British citizens who were ready to invest. Many British merchants searched for investment opportunities in these colonies. Among these, the Scottish merchants got the opportunity to start the plantation industry in the High Ranges of the then Travancore State. They had wealth to invest, and what they needed was support from the native state. Travancore was one of the princely states, and the support was easily gained from the Government. Labour was the wanted item in Travancore High Ranges. The only possibility of procuring labour was from the Madras Presidency, and enough labour was obtained through the Kangany, or intermediaries, from Tamil villages. Through imported labour, factories, and other industrial techniques, the planters were able to transform unproductive land into cinchona, coffee, and tea plantations.

European Strategies of Colonial Control in Travancore

The word hegemony refers to the domination of the ruling class through ideological and cultural consensus. Europeans created their power through laws, policies and military advancements. At first, they approached regional rulers, offering military assistance. During the reign of Poonjar chief Kerala Varma Valiya Raja, the British Government approached him for an agreement to develop plantations in the high ranges of Travancore. This agreement paved the way for the transformation of the land and soil, culture, society and economy. The British Government implemented different forest laws and policies for commercialising Indian forests. These

laws helped European planters develop their plantations in the high ranges. European planters realised the possibilities of climate and soil. They experimented with different crops like coffee, cinchona, tea and cardamom. Eventually, European planters identified suitable crops for developing the plantation industry in the high ranges.

Natural Resources and Commercial Potential of Travancore

The topography of Travancore was ideal for the natural growth of plant life due to the wide ranges of elevation, temperature and rainfall. This facilitated the existence of vast natural resources in Travancore, which acted as a treasure house of biodiversity. During the time of the Europeans, the utility and commercial importance of forest resources, especially spices, were known to the natives. This situation was completely changed after the arrival of Europeans. How their strategies penetrated the nook and corner of the wild forest is, of course, a matter of concern. It was mainly through their system of knowledge-making, such as documentation, modern science, law, etc. This process revealed the wilderness of Travancore and transformed it into a mode and forest in every sense. Their travelling habits helped them explore the vast forest areas of Travancore and Cochin, aided by superior knowledge systems. They found the utility of each forest spice and its possibilities and commercial importance. Their method of documentation helped them prepare important reports, which were executed with the help of European laws. Travancore was one of the most important geographical portions of India, as is seen from the words of Lord Curzon, as is mentioned in Nagam Aiyyas Travancore State Manual.” Since I have been in India, I have had a great desire to visit the state of Travancore. I have for many years heard of natural beauties and its arcadian charm and nature has spent upon the land here richest bounties”.

Lieutenant Ward and Connor did the first authentic description of Travancore in their Memory of the survey of Travancore and Cochin States. They surveyed the country from 1817 to 1820. According to them: The whole country presents a ground of green and is, for a considerable

part of the year, from the abundance of moisture, rich verdure, but it is too wooded to admit of much extent of pasturage. According to Citizen dated 27/09/1923. The Travancore forest was not a streak of shrubs just at the foot of the ghats, but it was also an endless wood expanse, ocean-like. They were famous for their royal teak as well as different kinds of reeds. This encouraged the enthusiasm of the colonial rulers for further exploration of Travancore forests, with a view to exploiting its resources such as reeds for pulp, grasses for oils, soft Woods for matches and chests, etc.

Douglas Hamilton has given a beautiful description of the Anamalai hills. These hills are divided into the regions of higher ranges and the lower ranges. The lower ranges were covered with the famous teak forests, and they also contained several valuable Timber species. The high ranges of Travancore contained extensive open grassy hills and valleys with the shola forests similar to those on the Neelagiri and Palani hills—Vanasmarangal, a book written by N. Parameswaran, has given a detailed description of the forests of Travancore. According to him, the forests of Travancore were better than the Shendurni valley. One side of the Shendurni Valley was very terrible, and the other side was extremely beautiful. Shendurni forest was an immense treasure house which replenished the officers of the Maharaja of Travancore from time to time. The total area of the valley at the time of the preparation of the working plan for this forest was shown to be 73 sq. miles and 188 acres. In Travancore, the higher hills are covered in their recesses, glens and deep base by dense forests. On approaching the sea, this love and overspreading luxuriance gradually subside. The extensive woods are decorated with ample and varied foliage, which is slightly deciduous. The larger trees were hung with creepers, canes, reeds and shrubby plants. The richest and finest vegetation could be seen throughout the greater part of the sylvan labyrinth.

The Poonjar Lease Agreement and Colonial Penetration

European hegemony over high-range areas began in 1877 through a lease agreement between the British colonial government and the Poonjar chief, Kerala Varma Valiya Raja. This historical agreement paved the way for the economic, cultural, social and ecological transformation of these areas. British surveyors and adventurers, notably Lieutenant B.S Ward and Douglas Hamilton, mapped the terrain. Planters like John Danial Munro recognised the immense agricultural potential of the cardamom hills and the high ranges. Munro negotiated the Poonjar concession, acquiring nearly 550 square kilometres of highland forests from the local raja. This granted Europeans exclusive dominion over the high ranges. The Kannan Devan concession, 1899, was subsequently transferred to the Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company, backed by British capital, laying the foundation for large-scale, corporate tea cultivation in and around modern-day Munnar. The forest reports and policies of the colonial government shaped its exploitation agenda. To ensure the smooth running of this policy, the total land area was divided into small administrative units.

Emergence of the Plantation Economy

The establishment of tea plantations in southern Travancore was associated with the coming of Europeans. In the initial phase, they were scattered in various places. The European planters realised that favourable situations existed in the hilly areas of Travancore. The geographical peculiarities of Munnar as well as Peerumedu hills were suitable for tea cultivation. For this purpose, they conducted several surveys to begin plantation cultivation. Finally, they were more concerned about Munnar hills for Tea cultivation. During this time, the Munnar region was an important political and geographical division. The area was more concentrated on the arrival of Europeans. The European planters cleared this area with great effort. With the colonial conquest of Munnar, they brought drastic changes in the landscape.³

³ George Abraham Pottamkulam, *The Path to the Hills: History of the*

According to the Travancore State Manual, the high range regions as “lands were practically unexplored regions covered by thick fever-haunted forest, the abodes of elephants, tigers, bison, and leopards, having no means of communication”. European officers investigated the commercial importance of Munnar. It was part of a European agenda to commercialise forests, including land, inhabitants, and natural resources. Lieutenant Ward noticed the High Ranges on November 18 and 17 and later published his references in his memoirs in 1820. During this time, Lieutenant Ward and Corner conducted a trigonometrical survey on the peaks of the High Ranges. Secondly, John Daniel Munroe, superintendent of the Cardamom Hills, prepared a report on the High Ranges of Travancore. Col. Munroe was the British resident of Travancore from 1811 onwards. In 1872, he came to Travancore to settle the boundary dispute between Travancore and the Madras Presidency in the High Ranges. Along with this, he submitted his report on 8th March 1877 titled ‘The High Range of Travancore’.⁴

Before the European intervention, the high ranges of Travancore were inhabited only by indigenous tribes like the Mudhuvans, Mannans and Paliyar. British hegemony required massive infrastructural development. They constructed bridle paths, cart roads, ropeways and dams to tame the challenging terrain. They cleared dense rainforests for sprawling tea and cardamom plantations. The influx of British capital effectively integrated the local agrarian economy into global markets. The local population did not challenge this intensive wage labour. British planters relied heavily on indentured labourers brought over from the neighbouring Madras Presidency. This created a multi ethnic, distinct demographic profile in the High Ranges, far removed from the cultural mainstream of Travancore.

Plantations of Western Ghats, Southern India: A Journey Along the Plantations and its Tourist Destinations, Stayhomz Ltd., Kottayam, 2010

⁴ T.F. Bourdillion, Report on the Forests of Travancore, Government Press, Trivandrum, 1893.

Environmental Impact and Forest Administration

European hegemony imposed restrictions upon the use of the forest, including hunting and fishing. The coming of tea plantations resulted in biodiversity loss in the forest. They introduced trees like *Spathodea* and *Eucalyptus grandis* to serve their needs. The colonial penetration continued until 1983. It was only in this year that the whole company got Indianised by the takeover of the area by Tata Tea Ltd. This treaty marked a definitive step, undertaken by the native government under the patronage of the colonial state, in reforming and restructuring the forest administration of the state. Pursuant to the 1865 Act, a series of forest rules and regulations were passed in Travancore which forcefully asserted state monopoly in forest management and related trade.

Socio-economic and Ecological Consequences of Colonial Rule

The British hegemony over the High Ranges marked a new era in the political, economic, and Geological dimensions. The European exploitation of the High Ranges of Travancore, especially Idukki and Peermedu regions, transformed dense unmapped forests into massive commercial plantations. Spearheaded by the British in the late 19th century, this era was defined by the Poonjar concession, environmental alteration and the large-scale exploitation of marginalised labour. Vast tracts of schola forests and grasslands were clear-cut to make way for monoculture tea and cardamom estates. The ecology was fundamentally altered to suit European metropolitan capitalism. The Brutal labor intensive work of clearing forests and cultivating tea and cardamom carried out by poor landless labours predominantly Tamilians who migrated across the border from the Madras Presidency.⁵

Conclusion

While the kingdom of Travancore retained nominal internal sovereignty as

⁵ Ward and Conner, *Memoir of the Survey of the Travancore and Cochin States, Vol.1*, Kerala Gazetteers Department, Trivandrum, 1994.

a princely state under the suzerainty of the British Empire, European planters effectively dictated the economic administration of the highlands. The British Raj wielded political hegemony primarily through the British resident in Travancore and Cochin, ensuring that the kingdom's policies favoured foreign investments, free trade and the uninhibited extraction of oriental resources.

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