State, Forests and Communities
History of Community Forest Management in Colonial Andhra 1800-1947

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The history of communal forest management in south India shows its exclusive nature. The resistance to colonial forest policies forced the administration in the Madras Presidency to look for options to pacify public discontent. At the level of policy, it was the dominant agrarian communities that evolved an effective link with political parties and the native press, compelling the revenue department and the colonial state to recognise their claims. A community-centred forest management policy, implemented in the form of village forest panchayats, delegated management powers to the dominant agrarian communities. This mainly benefited the rural elite, ignoring the claims of poor peasants, pastoralists, agricultural labour and women.

The interaction between the state, communities and forests has been a highly contested issue in India. The forest sector in the colonial and postcolonial periods has undergone a series of policy experiments. The history of communal forests in south India during British rule shows the complex process of contestation between the state and communities on the one hand and among different communities on the other. The Government of India’s shift in policy to community-centred forest management in colonial south India, its implementation and its shortcomings act as a useful guide to the contemporary policy process. The colonial period was important to community forest management because it incorporated precolonial forest management practices into its material and ideological apparatus and handed it all over to independent India as a legacy. This paper, which analyses the process in south India with particular reference to the Andhra region, proposes that while the socio-economically and politically dominant sections negotiated with the colonial state and acquired benefits, the needs of a majority of tribes and the rural poor were ignored. So there existed a wide gap between policy formulations and their practice.

Histories of Communal Forest Management
Historical studies on communal forests in India fall into four broad categories. First, studies influenced by the framework of decentralised governance propose that policy initiatives on communal forests were framed by the colonial state as a response to people’s discontent (Jeffery and Sundar 1999; Sundar 2001; Poffenberger and McGean 1996; Arora 1994; Tukka 2005). They view the reform process in the forest sector in independent India as an attempt to address the lacuna of colonial policy, which initiated half-hearted measures for the management of communal forests. Second, activists involved in the development of forest-dependent communities argue that community forest management is an indigenous eco-friendly system, which was disrupted by the commercial orientation of British policies (Shiva 1991; Kulkarni and Hiremath 1995). They perceive British rule as having upset native practices, which need to be revived for the development of forest-dependent communities.

Third, some academic studies propose that though the colonial state destroyed the native communal forest management
tradition, some sections of the colonial bureaucracy were aware of the importance of communities to forest management. This, however, was not translated into policy measures as the revenue and resource priorities of the colonial state prevailed (Guha 1993; Rangarajan 1994; Sangwan 1999). Fourth, the history of communal forests in South India has been debated, with some studies holding that peasant communities in pre-colonial Andhra had evolved ecologically sensible ways of managing forests, which was dismantled by the British (Murali 1995). A similar argument has been advanced by Saravanam (1998, 1999), focusing on the tribal region of Salem district in the Madras Presidency. This paper examines the context in which communal forest management was introduced by the colonial state, what effect native assertion had on this policy, which social groups actively articulated the demand for communal forests, and who the main beneficiaries of the policy were.

**Discourse and Practice of Community Forest Management**

An expansion in the colonial state’s spread and activities during the period between 1800 and 1860 appropriated a significant quantum of forests for shipbuilding (Ribbentrop 1989) and the railways (Cleghorn 1861). This meant a heavy pressure on forests, which forced the colonial state to evolve strategies for conservation. The period from 1865 to 1882 witnessed an intense debate on the ownership of forests. Eventually, this was settled in favour of state control. But the rights of village communities over forests remained a perpetual concern to colonial policymakers, forcing the state to carry out several policy experiments. The discourse on communal forests in the colonial period was a product of the interaction between native and European forest management practices. Three models of communal management were articulated in the colonial discourse on forest policies (Brandis 1875; Powell 1882). Of these, one existed in France, where forest management was delegated to local political bodies like municipalities for the benefit of the people. The second was in Germany, where communal forests were created and managed by the state with the involvement of communities (Powell 1882). The third was proposed by Inspector General of Forests Dietrich Brandis, who envisaged creating village forests on wastelands in India, which he estimated to be a little more than one million square kilometres (1873: 165).

The project of scientific forestry introduced by the colonial state was implemented by declaring extensive stretches as reserved forests, including certain trees in the reserved category and regulating people’s access to them. This led to unprecedented interference of the bureaucracy in the day-to-day lives of the people in the countryside, compelling the state to devise certain mechanisms to address the discontent of the people. An official pronouncement on communal forests, under the name of village forests, was made in the Indian Forest Act of 1865. But the Act did not provide any mechanism for implementation. Some provincial forest policies, such as in Rawalpindi and Buram, incorporated village forests into policy formulations. In the domain of communal forests, the Madras Presidency emerged as an active player.

**Communal Forest Management in Madras Presidency**

The forest department in the Madras Presidency was established in 1856 and rules for the management of forests were promulgated in 1862 (MacLean 1985). This policy at one level proposed non-interference in the customary access the people enjoyed and at another level proposed certain institutional arrangements for communal forests. A systematic forest policy was not promulgated because of a lingering debate between the Governments of India and Madras on the nature of the policy to be adopted. This centred on the communal rights of the people over forests. The very idea of forest conservation advocated by foresters was attacked by revenue officials, who argued forests were the property of village communities and therefore state control over them did not exist. This resistance was aimed at restricting the forest department’s control over forests. The rhetoric of communal rights was used by revenue officials because the lower-level bureaucracy of the revenue department was mainly from the dominant agrarian communities. They pressured higher-level revenue officials to not interfere in the customary access of village communities to forests. The notion that forests belonged to village communities, which was articulated by revenue officials, was aimed at reinforcing the control of the dominant agrarian communities over forests.

The Madras Forest Act was promulgated in 1882 to facilitate state control over forests. However, the claims of the dominant agrarian communities were so forceful that the Act took into account the idea of village forests (Brandis 1883). At the policy level, communal forest management in the Madras Presidency was experimented with under two names—village forests (1885-90) and panchayat forests (1914-50). The first phase of the communal forest experiment was pronounced in 1884. The policy defined village forests as,

Where the practice of grazing cattle, sheep or goats, or of cutting trees (other than reserved trees) or other forest produce for fuel, or building, agricultural or domestic purpose, or of cutting grass for thatching or fodder, or thorns for fences, or leaves of trees (other than reserved trees) for manure, free of charge, has long and steadily obtained, the collector shall set apart once for all such areas as he may consider reasonable for this purpose.

This provision was created to address the pressure of the agrarian economy for forest resources. Two models of village forests were experimented with in Madras Presidency—village forests for each village; and the inclusion of all unreserved land under village forests. While the first model took shape in Nilgiri district, the second was introduced in Cuddapah and Kurnool districts. The village forests policy was implemented in Nilgiri district in 1885 where tribes resisted land-grabbing by the government and European planters. Here, village forests were those that gave...

...the free supply to the indigenous villagers (Badagas, Kothis, Todas, Irulars and Kurumbers) of wood for building or agricultural purpose, fuel, grass, fruits and similar produce, as well as grazing for domestic
cattle wherever possible. The uses of village forests will, as a rule, be enjoyed solely by the indigenous inhabitants of the village within such forests are situated.\textsuperscript{11}

The communal forests model in Nilgiri district was a combination of the French and German models, where the state as the owner of forests delegated the responsibility of managing them to local bodies. The following restrictions were imposed on people’s access to village forests:
1. Full-grown trees may be cut with the permission of the Monigar, after he had inspected and marked the trees.
2. No person shall graze or permit to be grazed in any village forests.
3. No person shall be allowed to cut more wood, or gather more fuel, grass, fruit, &c., than permitted for his domestic use.
4. Selling of any wood, fuel and grass gathered in a village is forbidden, except to persons entitled to cut or gather such wood, fuel, grass, and, under these rules.
5. All disputes amongst villagers regarding the produce of village forests settled by the village panchayat consisting of the Monigar, Curram and three of the principal ryots of the village not concerned in the dispute or the matter in appeal.\textsuperscript{12}

The form of governance instituted for the management of village forests shows the nature of communal forests created by the colonial state. The controlling authority was given to local village chiefs, besides three principal ryots, who invariably belonged to the dominant section in a village. This shows colonial rule strengthening the control the dominant sections already had over forests in the countryside.

Apart from Nilgiri, the village forests experiment was carried out in Cuddapah and Kurnool districts. Village forests here were created under rule 10 of Section 26 of the Madras Forest Act. Being dry districts with a large number of cattle, often troubled by quarrels between factions in villages, these districts received the attention of the Madras government. The village forests here consisted of all unreserved land in a village. The following regulations were proposed for management of these forests.

Access to forests without permit:
- Grazing of cattle except goats
- Collecting and removing dead-wood, in head-loads only, as fuel
- Collecting and removing manure leaves of 4th-class trees
- Collecting and removing thrones for fencing
- Taking the bark of creepers for fibre
- Collecting minor fruits

Where permits were required:
- Cutting and removing timber for agricultural purpose
- Cutting and removing timber for field watch platforms.\textsuperscript{13}

The village forests experiment lasted only five years. The Madras government claimed that village forests were an obstacle to creating reserved forests, while officials of the forest department were not in favour of them because the department lost revenue from grazing. Finally, in 1890, the Madras government abandoned the idea of village forests in preference to extracting revenue from grazing and minor forest products by incorporating wastelands and grazing grounds under reserved forests. This measure was justified, saying “The idea of village forests must be altogether abandoned, that it is desirable to have the sources of fuel and fodder supply under the government control and to have the reserves in fairly large locks” (Vocher 1893).\textsuperscript{14} The figures from grazing revenue (Table 1) show why village forests were incorporated into reserved forests.

\begin{table}[h]
\centering
\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
Year & Revenue from Grazing (Rs) & Total Forest Revenue & Per Cent of Grazing Share in Total Forest Revenue \\
\hline
1886-87 & 81,203 & 12,46,738 & 6.5 \\
1887-88 & 1,05,811 & 13,74,920 & 7.6 \\
1888-89 & 1,29,855 & 15,15,006 & 8.6 \\
1889-90 & 1,43,845 & 15,57,627 & 9.2 \\
1890-91 & 92,621 & 17,95,408 & 5.0 \\
1891-92 & 1,15,794 & 16,94,215 & 6.8 \\
1892-93 & 1,75,589 & 15,77,212 & 11.13 \\
1893-94 & 2,66,891 & 194,375 & 13.70 \\
1894-95 & 3,28,293 & N A & N A \\
1895-96 & 3,40,496 & 21,67,630 & 15.70 \\
1896-97 & 3,76,354 & 21,88,917 & 17.19 \\
1897-98 & 3,63,905 & 21,51,144 & 16.91 \\
1898-99 & 3,76,354 & 20,75,254 & 18.13 \\
1899-1900 & 4,89,765 & 23,13,507 & 21.16 \\
1900-01 & 5,10,451 & 24,43,773 & 20.88 \\
1901-02 & 5,40,068 & 24,96,494 & 21.63 \\
1902-03 & 5,78,500 & 25,92,779 & 22.31 \\
1903-04 & 6,07,400 & 26,90,571 & 22.57 \\
1904-05 & 627,474 & 28,30,542 & 22.61 \\
1905-06 & 6,62,837 & 30,36,892 & 21.82 \\
1906-07 & 6,78,537 & 34,50,733 & 19.66 \\
1907-08 & 7,27,343 & 38,58,026 & 18.85 \\
1908-09 & 7,82,510 & 38,86,296 & 20.13 \\
1909-10 & 7,69,770 & 41,84,633 & 18.39 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Revenue from Grazing Fees in Reserve Forests in Madras Presidency}
\end{table}

Initially, the income from grazing was insignificant in the total revenue of forests. But it steadily increased in the 1890s and became an important revenue source, which brought in more than 20% of the total income of the forest department. This escalation was reflected in the policy of the Madras government, which converted village forests into reserved forests. The increase in revenue was made possible by a tax imposed on grazing in reserved forests (Table 2).

\begin{table}[h]
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\begin{tabular}{|c|c|c|c|}
\hline
\textbf{Grazing Rates Per Annum} & \textbf{Re} & \textbf{An} & \textbf{Ps} \\
\hline
\textbf{Bulls, cows, bullocks, calves, horses, asses and foals} & 0 & 8 & 0 \\
\textbf{Buffaloes} & 0 & 4 & 0 \\
\textbf{Sheep, goats} & 0 & 2 & 0 \\
\hline
\end{tabular}
\caption{Grazing Fee in Reserved Forests}
\end{table}

Resistance to Forest Policies

The colonial state could not sustain the momentum of extraction of revenue from forests. After 1890, the forest rules became a symbol of oppressive colonial rule in rural areas. The forms of resistance against forest policies reflected the class character of the peasantry. While the dominant peasant sections put forward an organised defence, small peasants, pastoralists, communities that depended on forests as a main...
source of occupation and agricultural labour simply violated forest rules.

The conversion of most of the accessible forests into reserved forests increased the regulatory powers of the forest department. The period between 1890 and 1915 was marked by intense struggles between the people and the forest department, which became one of the most unpopular departments of the Madras government. Table 3 shows the number of crimes reported due to trespass into reserved forests.

**Demand for Communal Forests**

Though there was no explicitly organised or violent opposition to forest policies, there was a resistance to them among all sections of the people in the countryside. While the resistance by village societies created a widespread anti-colonial awareness, this was used by the dominant peasant communities for their benefit by establishing links with the Indian National Congress and other political associations. This alignment of the dominant peasant sections with the Congress provided them with a platform to negotiate with the colonial state for communal forests. This process was carried out by a combined effort of the native intelligentsia, the press, revenue officials and the dominant agrarian communities. The effort of these sections was aimed at acquiring control over forests in the plain areas, and tribes who depended on forests for livelihoods did not figure in this discourse. It testifies to the fact that the political forces that fought colonial rule mainly represented class interests and not the common interests of all sections of the people (Kumar 1987).

The more or less organised opposition to forest policies by the dominant sections among peasants was articulated through various channels. Petitions against forest policies reflected the range of resistance – from challenging the validity of forest reservation to the demand for communal forests. Most of the petitions had one of three broad themes – documenting the problems due to forest policies and a systematic critique of them; ascribing great antiquity to communal rights over forests; and demanding the revival of customary rights in the form of communal forests. For instance, a petition by Subba Reddy and members of his family, who belonged to the dominant peasant caste in Chittoor taluk of north Arcot district, demanded the exclusion of a certain portion of a forest from reservation. It was argued that the family had possessed this area for more than 80 years and carefully guarded it from encroachment and damage. The following extract reflects the nature of communal management of forests that was practised in the plain areas.

The Petitioners humbly beg to add that the forest in question was originally planted and improved by the forefathers of petitioners about 70 or 80 years ago, and ever since petitioners’ ancestors and latterly petitioners themselves have been improving and maintaining the forest by planting young trees in place of withered ones and by employing watchmen to water and watch them; and that petitioners have in return for the large outlay been enjoying from time immemorial, the produce of the forest such as leaves for manure, wood for agricultural purposes and for fuel and so on.23

This account indicates the exclusive nature of the communal forests the dominant agrarian sections controlled. It was this kind of communal forests that were being demanded by the dominant peasant sections who had lost free access to forests for agriculture. To emphasise their demand for communal forests, some petitions exaggerated the problems due to forest policies. A petition by the peasants of Salem district said,

That contrary to the immemorial custom of ages by which the ryots have been permitted to graze their cattle upon the common plain, they are now handcuffed from the enjoyment of their rights of common. The shepherd and the cow herd are told that it is trespass...To their vexation and bewilderment are they told that fines and punishments will be their rewards for the troubles of grazing cattle on the forbidden grounds...This is a source of great annoyance which is growing almost intolerable.18

The narratives of the dominant communities attempted to ascribe great antiquity to their customary rights over forests. Pattabhi Ramireddi complained, “From the time of Adam and Eve we have been using the forests. I do not know why the forest department should come in and fix a fee” (RFC 1913: 32).20 Thus, there was a constant attempt to historicise claims to make them more concrete. Naveen Reddy, who owned 200 acres of land, informed the Madras Forest Committee that “before reserves were constituted all lands were common lands”. When the committee asked him to suggest a solution for mitigation of the problems due to forests policies, he proposed, “If the forest department do not take it up, but on the other hand if the revenue department or the village panchayats take the management under their hand then grievances may be redressed” (RFC 1913: 18). Communal management was thus projected as a panacea for the grievances forest policies had brought about.

A reduction in the number of cattle and goats was linked to forest policies, in particular the creation of reserved forests (RFC 1913: 22-23).20 The discourse on community forest management needs to be located in the prism of class structure. While small peasants and landless labour demanded a relaxation of restrictions (RFC 1913), the economically dominant peasant communities demanded communal forests.21 It shows that the discourse on communal forests and the demand for it as a policy was mainly exclusive in nature.23

The native press emerged as an important agency in articulating the grievances forest policies had given rise to. It manufactured public awareness on the problems of forest policies and projected the creation of communal forests as a remedy. *Hindujanasamskharini*, a Tamil daily, opined, “People in this country had never been accustomed to pay a tax on

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### Table 3: Forest Crimes Reported in Madras Presidency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Year</th>
<th>Number of Cases</th>
<th>Year</th>
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</tr>
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<tr>
<td>1885-86</td>
<td>2,269</td>
<td>1903-04</td>
<td>21,883</td>
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<tr>
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<td>2,443</td>
<td>1904-05</td>
<td>21,930</td>
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<td>1887-88</td>
<td>3,358</td>
<td>1905-06</td>
<td>23,021</td>
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<tr>
<td>1888-89</td>
<td>3,377</td>
<td>1906-07</td>
<td>23,141</td>
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<tr>
<td>1889-90</td>
<td>3,088</td>
<td>1907-08</td>
<td>24,453</td>
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<tr>
<td>1890-91</td>
<td>5,577</td>
<td>1908-09</td>
<td>25,470</td>
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<tr>
<td>1891-92</td>
<td>8,124</td>
<td>1909-10</td>
<td>25,277</td>
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<td>1892-93</td>
<td>10,905</td>
<td>1910-11</td>
<td>26,489</td>
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<td>1893-94</td>
<td>10,007</td>
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<td>1894-95</td>
<td>9,883</td>
<td>1912-13</td>
<td>29,892</td>
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<td>1895-96</td>
<td>9,610</td>
<td>1913-14</td>
<td>31,177</td>
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<td>1896-97</td>
<td>11,638</td>
<td>1914-15</td>
<td>32,541</td>
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<td>1877-98</td>
<td>14,993</td>
<td>1915-16</td>
<td>30,885</td>
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<td>18,295</td>
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<td>1899-1900</td>
<td>20,450</td>
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<td>22,130</td>
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<td>26,160</td>
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<td>1901-02</td>
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<tr>
<td>1902-03</td>
<td>23,125</td>
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Source: Compiled from the annual administrative reports of the forest department.
firewood, but they are now made to do so, that is precisely the reason why many people hate the forest rules and the department” (26 February 1887: 25). The editor of Swadesamitran, a Tamil newspaper, wrote that before the implementation of forest policies, plenty of forest and wastelands were attached to villages and people enjoyed access to them without restrictions. He suggested a viable remedy for the problems forest policies had engendered.

The wastelands adjoining villages should be planted with trees and given to villagers who should be made responsible for the cost of planting and maintaining trees on those lands. In return for their labour, the villagers should enjoy free of tax or on payment of an easy tax on the produce of these forests. They should be allowed to take timber from the forest and other products as well, in such quantity as they require but a penalty should be imposed on those who wantonly destroy the forests (6 June 1885: 20).

A similar opinion was expressed in another edition of Swadesamitran.

For many generations people have been freely utilising the forest products for purpose of life, and to put sudden restriction upon the long continued practice by the adoption of stringent measures will but cause the people much distress. The officers of the Forest Department should therefore, be kept under proper control and not allowed in their zeal for carrying out the measures stringently that would ignore the time immemorial rights enjoyed by the people (16 April 1886: 55).

The native press boldly attacked the forest department and claimed that it was the main culprit for the misery of the rural poor. Besides the critique, several newspaper editorials put forward the idea of communal forests. The editor of Swadesamitran demanded the creation of village forests for each village to supply people with free forest products (16 April 1886: 55). Deshabhimani, a Telugu periodical, suggested that the government conduct an enquiry into the extent of waste and forestlands and create village forests for the free supply of forest produce (14 May 1892: 220). On one level the native press evolved a systematic critique of forest policies and on another level demanded communal forests as a remedy to the misery caused by forest policies.

The strong anti-colonial feelings in the countryside due to forest policies forced political organisations to take a note of them. In 1885, the Congress working committee appointed a commission to enquire into the grievances of the agricultural sector in Bombay. The Madras Mahajan Sabha and the Kerala Mahajana Sabha collaborated on an enquiry into the operation of forests policies and demanded a relaxation of forest rules (Kerala Patrika, 7 September 1885). The entry of political organisations into the struggle against forest policies resulted in the emergence of a new political discourse, which evolved a systematic critique of forest policies and proposed the revival of native communal forest management. District-level associations also took up the issue of forest policies. In 1894, the Guntur district association adopted a resolution protesting against the reservation of porambokes in villages.

The political discourse on communal forests did not exist in a monolithic form favouring communal forests. Some voices expressed reservations against communal forests with the argument that it could widen conflicts in villages (RFC 1913). However, a forceful demand for communal forests was a predominant feature of the native discourse on forest policies. Venkatappaiah, a leader of the Congress in Guntur district, suggested two models of communal forests. First, each village could be allotted communal forests where they existed, and second, villages that did not have forests could be allotted forests in places away from them for communal management. In three agricultural conferences held during 1909-11, resolutions were passed demanding communal forests under the supervision of village panchayats (RFC 1913: 122-23). Krishna Rao, a joint secretary of the Nellore district Congress, proposed reviving the kancha system in which the highest bidder acquired control over communal forests. For him, communal forests had to be supervised by the intelligent ryots of villages who acted as custodians. He explained, “The poorer ryots did not actually take part in the conference. Generally the intelligent part of the community and persons who have been in a position to understand these matters attended. There were poorer persons whose demands were not properly represented.” This shows the nature of the political discourse on communal forests, which mainly concerned the requirements of the dominant sections among the agrarian communities.

The grievances related to forest policies also captured the imagination of the urban public in Madras Presidency. The district people’s association of Madura district passed a resolution in 1909 with a demand that “sufficient land must be set apart in each village” for communal forests (RFC 1913: 334). The political discourse on communal forests reflected a class bias. The demand for communal forests, mainly as a grazing source, was articulated as it was important to the dominant agrarian communities. At the same time, the tribal people who suffered just as much did not get any attention. It was the rural elites who fought and negotiated with the colonial state for favourable policy amendments to maximise their class and caste interests.

**Madras Forest Committee**

After experiencing continuous unrest in the countryside, the Madras government appointed a committee to enquire into the problems caused by forest policies. This committee, known as the Madras Forest Committee, consisted of two Indian officers. After an extensive enquiry, in 1913, it recommended communal forests under the management of panchayats. Quite often the state and its organs in colonial India projected community forest management as an act of benevolence for the development of the people. (This has not been very different in contemporary India.) But close examination of the discourse on forest policies reveals that it was administratively expedient for the state to do so. The forest department’s credibility as an organ of the bureaucracy was seriously questioned by the people. So much so the legitimacy of the colonial state itself was questioned in the countryside of the Madras Presidency. The forest department had become a symbol of state oppression and this forced the colonial state to initiate policy changes towards communal forest management. This served four objectives of the colonial state. First, the demands of the dominant agrarian communities were satisfied; second, the administrative burden of degraded forests, which neither the forest nor revenue departments were willing to shoulder, were transferred...
to communities; third, the energies of the forest department could be diverted to efficient conservation of timber forests; and fourth, the people were afforded a certain measure of relaxation as they were increasingly coming under the influence of the national movement (Murali 1987; Venkataramiah 1967). The Madras government incorporated the recommendations of the Madras Forest Committee into its forest policy. Some of the important proposals of the committee were as follows.

**Duties of Panchayats**

1. Regulating the number of cattle to be grazed, prohibiting goats, and managing a grazing rota.
2. Preventing the denudation of grazing grounds and collecting the grazing revenue.

**Powers of Panchayats**

1. To admit or exclude any cattle of their own village from grazing grounds, or where limitations ordered, to decide what cattle are to be admitted. This will include the powers to exclude the cattle of any person who is found cutting or doing other harm to the forest without permission, or who fails to pay his share of the revenue or who refuses to obey the legitimate orders of the panchayats.
2. To impound cattle that graze without permission.
3. To regulate villagers collecting firewood for domestic use without permission (RFC 1913: 22).

The recommendations of the Madras Forest Committee were implemented in some districts in 1914. The momentum of implementation picked up after a retrenchment committee dealing with the reorganisation of the forest department suggested the creation of “ryots forests” in 1923. It was proposed that the forests required for the everyday needs of the agricultural population be managed as communal forests. And for the management of ryots forests, the committee recommended panchayats (Boag 1933: 61).

Forest panchayats were defined as small committees of five to nine members elected from among a general body of cattle owners in a village. These committees were authorised to issue grazing permits, collect tax and protect forests. The government policy on forest panchayats saw steady progress. After 1918, forest panchayats were created in districts such as Bellary, Guntur, western Cuddapah, Chingleput, Anantapur and Chittoor. A special staff for the general administration of forest panchayats was formed in 1922. The forests brought under the management of forest panchayats were transferred to the land revenue department on 1 July 1924. By the 1930s, 8,555 sq km of forests had been transferred to forest panchayats.

**Elections to Forest Panchayats**

In 1931, the Madras government promulgated an order for the election of forest panchayats, which resembles the joint forest management policy adopted by the Government of India. The election process was to be conducted by a divisional officer or through a deputy tahsildar. Panchayat management committees of five to nine members were to be elected by a general body of all villagers who held permits issued by the forest department. The permit system was introduced in 1890 to regulate grazing in reserved forests. Those who wanted to graze their cattle in reserved forests had to take a permit by paying a prescribed amount every year. These permits for grazing were generally taken by rich peasants who had a large number of cattle. The membership in forest panchayats was thus restricted to rich peasants. Females, the handicapped, those under 25, with a criminal record, and who were insolvent were not eligible to become management committee members.

It is difficult to trace how the forest panchayats functioned from day-to-day, but we do have a general picture of the way they worked. The forestlands allocated for management by the panchayats were mainly degraded and close to human habitation, which increased the incidence of overgrazing and illicit felling. The forest panchayats were mostly controlled by the dominant sections among the peasants and they were the main stakeholders as well. This neglected the interests of women, pastoralists, small peasants and agricultural labour. It also led to continuing degradation due to lack of support from all sections of a village in conservation activities.

The main reason for the inadequate performance of forest panchayats, according to Janardhana Rao, a forest officer, was that the revenue officials neither had sufficient time to properly supervise the work of these panchayats nor could they enforce the adoption of the technical principles of forestry on these panchayats. Consequently, the forests suffered particularly from enormous illicit grazing, especially by goats, overgrazing by cattle and indiscriminate lopping of trees for manure, leaf etc. Some of these panchayats exercised no control whatsoever either due to their inefficiency or due to factions among themselves (1960: 17-18).

The deplorable state of forests allotted to panchayats forced the government to shift its policy again. After Independence, the government transferred the control of forests to the forest department on 26 April 1948.

Post-Independence Indian governments have followed a policy of increasing the control of the forest department. The Forest Act of Andhra Pradesh in 1967, which was closely modelled based on the Madras Forest Act of 1882, got rid of all forest panchayats (Rao 1995). This Act divided forests into reserved, protected and private forests and there was no provision for communal forest management. The concept of forest panchayats gradually merged with social forestry. However, the demand for community forest management continued to be heard from the newly emerging political elite, which resulted in the concept of joint forest management and community forest management. This move was heralded as an innovative one towards the establishment of a people-centric forest management. Of late, studies have shown that such community forest management has several shortcomings, which have come in the way of it achieving the expected results.

**Conclusions**

The history of communal forest management in south India shows the exclusive nature of forest resource management in the colonial period. This means that while the dominant agrarian communities enjoyed a larger share of resources, the poor peasantry was deprived of easy access to forests. The colonial policy of scientific forest conservation further excluded...
Fiscal and administrative powers to the dominant agrarian communities.

This mainly benefited the rural elite, ignoring the claims of poor peasants, pastoralists, agricultural labour and women. It led to increasing degradation of forests as the neglected sections of society continued with their everyday forms of resistance.

The history of communal management of forests in south India shows dominant agrarian groups systematically excluding small peasants and pastoral communities from accessing resources. This trend continued in the colonial period. The communal forest management introduced by the British was mainly motivated by pressure from the dominant agrarian communities on the one hand and administrative expediency on the other. The communal forest management that was tried out in south India represented the character of colonial rule, which continued exploiting resources while also systematically incorporating the demands of the dominant communities so that there would be no serious challenge to its legitimacy. It was the threat to legitimacy that consistently prevented the colonial state from using its will. Yet, the colonial state mastered the art of expanding its collaboration with assertive communities, enabling it to prolong its time in India. It is this framework of community forest management that independent India inherited, which it has struggled hard to jettison.

NOTES

1 These studies, while analysing the reform process in the forestry sector, see colonial rule as an originator of the policy framework on communal management of forests.

2 The general tendency of these works is to project pre-colonial India as a period of sustainable forest management practised by village communities, which was destroyed by the colonial state's forest policies.

3 Cleghorn, the first Conservator of Forests in the Madras Presidency, estimated that one mile (1.6 km) of railway track required 1,760 sleepers of durable timber. If we compare his estimate with the length of track that was constructed by 1879 in the Madras Presidency (Board of Revenue Proceedings, hereafter referred to as BRP), the railway consumed 60,00,000 tonnes of wood.

4 They discussed village forests in their works and recognised their importance in an agricultural country like India. But both of them only saw giving village communities user rights, not property rights, because forests and wastelands belonged to the state.

5 Brandis (1875) documents the village forests measures adopted in different provinces of British India.

6 BRP, Madras, 16 March 1863, No 1567, p. 1, TNSA. This correspondence consists of a government order (No 2645, 20 December 1862), which proposed forming tope, or village groves. Some of the topes still exist in Andhra and are known by the family names of the people who established them. Most of them are named after Brahman, Reddy, Kamma and Kapu families, who were the dominant agrarian castes in Andhra. However, access to them was prohibited to the lower castes, especially untouchables.

7 Village-level officials of the department such as Karanam, Patel or Reddy (village police), tahsildar and thaliar mainly belonged to the dominant castes.

8 BRP, Madras, 25 July 1884, No 2541/F-201, pp 1-7, TNSA. In 1884, the Madras government issued guidelines for the management of forests, which were not included in reserved forests, under Section 26 of the Madras Forest Act. These rules enabled the state to take over village common lands under the supervision of the forest department. Rule 7 proposed the creation of village forests by the collector and they appealed to higher courts. But their claim was rejected on the ground that ownership over forests absolutely belonged to the state and the people could only enjoy access to forest produce.

9 BRP, L/R, Madras, 19 July 1889, Forest no 586, a petition from the ryots of Salem district. For similar petitions, see memorial from ryots of Coimbatore district, BRP, L/R, 28 April 1891, Forest no 396; petition from ryots of Kurnool district, in BRP, L/R, 12 April 1892, Forest no 392; memorial from ryots of Cuddapah district, in BRP, L/R, 8 January 1890, Forest no 6; Memorial from ryots of Kurnool district, in BRP, L/R, 5 November 1900, Forest no 649, Petition from ryots of Kurnool district, in BRP, L/R, 22 April 1904, Forest no 358; and petition by ryots from Kistna district, in BRP, L/R, 19 February, 1907, Forest no 136, TNSA.

10 In the report of the forest committee (hereafter RFC), appointed in Go No 1677, Revenue, 5 June 1912, and published by the Madras Government Press in 1912, 411, he was from Nellore district and the owner of 350 cattle.

11 Raghava Reddy and Venkatappa Naidu, both of whom had more than 300 acres of land, submitted their grievances to the committee. Raghava Reddy claimed that before the reservation of forests, he had 2,000 cattle and 1,000 goats, but after reservation, the numbers fell to 200 and 34 respectively. Venkatappa Naidu said that he had 3,000 goats and all had to be sold after reservation. They proposed that the only way to solve this problem was to collectively manage grazing in forests.

12 Small peasants and the landless requested the Madras Forest Committee that the restrictions on their access be relaxed, and they be allowed free grazing, firewood and wood for agricultural implements.

13 BRP, L/R, 16 September 1904, TNSA. Some cattle breeders from Nellore district put forward a memorial to the government on the sad state of affairs because of forest policies and the restriction on grazing. They demanded a change to the grazing policy and devolving grazing to communal management.

14 BRP, Revenue Settlement and Land Records, Madras, 12 December 1906. A representation by the Agricultural Association, Nellore, marshalled facts to push for more relaxation of the rules on grazing. It calculated that the maintenance cost of cattle required Rs 308 and the return was Rs 220, which...
meant a deficit of Rs 88. The argument was that the maintenance cost far exceeded the return from cattle. It proposed reviving the kancha system and allotting grazing grounds to ryots who had a large number of cattle at a minimum rate of tax. In the absence of such cattle owners, the grazing grounds could be allotted to small ryots.

The news reports are from Native News Paper Reports (NNPR), Madras, translated versions of native newspapers in the Madras Presidency, TNSA.

The issue of grazing was taken up by political organisations at different levels such as the Congress, district-level political organisations and others.

A missionary from Guntur district, John Duss, felt that communal forest management benefited only the dominant sections in villages (RFC 1913: 216). Muhammad Sheriff of Nellore district argued that most of the villages had factions and communal forests may not be feasible in Nellore (14); and Sessa Charlus, a lawyer from Nellore district, argued that if communal forests were formed, influential ryots would corner all the benefits. He said that if this was to be introduced, it should be under the supervision of the forest department.

Several lawyers, who owned vast extents of fertile land, demanded entrusting the management responsibilities to local bodies. For instance, Venkatarayappa, a lawyer from Nellore district, argued that the Madras Forest Committee that degraded forests be handed over to the management of panchayats. The zamindar of Muthyalpad of Nellore district proposed the creation of panchayats for the management of forests close to villages.

After the 1920s, the forest department was the most popular department in the Madras Presidency and its subordinate staff, who controlled day-to-day access to forests, were treated as enemies by the people. The imposition of heavy fines on trespassers and the collection of bribes in cash and kind contributed to the hostile relations between the people and the department.

Most of those who interacted with the Madras Forest Committee were big farmers who owned more than 200 acres of land and a huge number of cattle. They forcefully demanded the revival of old grazing practices under the supervision of village panchayats.

After the 1920s, forest officials were interested in silviculture and were willing to transfer grazing lands and degraded forests to the management of local communities. For instance, the conservator of forests in the northern circle said, “The ideal to be aimed at is the surrender of all forests on which the villagers depend on for their daily wants to the management of village interests itself, but such a surrender must be accompanied by some guarantee that the forests are not destroyed by the selfishness of the present generation.” Thus, the forest officers conceded that the people were the appropriate managers of forest resources on which they depended. However, this was mainly to withdraw from the responsibility of managing unimportant forests and to focus on silviculture.

They documented the forms of mobilisation of peasants by the Congress in Andhra.

Government Order, No 1185, 11 June 1931, Government of Madras, Revenue Department (Andhra Pradesh State Archives).

Rao prepared a working plan for Anantapur district and documented the way forest panchayats were implemented in the district.

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