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Scientific Forestry, State Conservancy, and Indigenous Dispossession: Colonial Forest Policies in Malabar

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Abstract

This article examines how colonial forest regulations transformed the landscapes of Malabar and reconfigured indigenous life under the Madras Presidency. It argues that forest conservancy evolved from a revenue-oriented concern into a doctrine of centralized state necessity articulated through scientific forestry. Successive measures the Forest Charter of 1855, the Indian Forest Acts of 1865 and 1878, the Madras Forest Act of 1882, the National Forest Policy of 1894, and the Indian Forest Act of 1927 redefined forests as state property, formalized bureaucratic control, and curtailed customary rights. In Malabar, where British administration was direct (unlike in Travancore and Cochin), these policies were implemented with particular rigor. The article demonstrates how conservation rhetoric and commercial extraction converged to marginalize forest-dependent communities and recast lived landscapes into regulated reserves.

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INTRODUCTION

Colonial Forest Policies: Scientific Conservancy, Law, and the Making of State Forests in Malabar

The transformation of forests in Malabar under British rule was neither incidental nor purely environmental; it was a central instrument of colonial governance. Forests became arenas where the colonial state asserted authority over land, resources, and populations through a powerful combination of scientific reasoning, bureaucratic expansion, and legal codification. Over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, a sequence of policies progressively redefined forests from lived socio-ecological environments integral to the livelihoods of Mappila traders, Nayar cultivators, and tribal communities into tightly regulated state domains. This shift did not occur abruptly. It evolved through layered interventions that began as pragmatic responses to timber scarcity and matured into a doctrine of centralized forest administration that reshaped landscapes and reordered human–nature relations. In Malabar, spanning the coastal districts from Cannanore to Palghat, this process was particularly acute, as teak-rich Wayanad and Nilambur forests fueled imperial ambitions, displacing local extraction economies and embedding state control in everyday rural life.

In the early decades of colonial rule, forest conservancy was framed in utilitarian terms, driven by the empire's insatiable demand for timber. The expansion of railways over 40,000 miles by 1920 shipbuilding for the Royal Navy, cantonments, and public works demanded vast quantities of durable timber, particularly teak (*Tectona grandis*) from South Indian forests. Malabar's Nilambur teak groves, historically harvested by local *karimuttam* contractors for Arab dhows, became prized assets. British administrators, alarmed by reports of depletion such as the 1830s surveys noting a 30-50% decline in mature teak stands feared that unregulated private extraction would jeopardize imperial infrastructure. Forest depletion was thus interpreted not merely as an ecological problem but as a strategic threat to the empire’s material foundations, echoing David Ricardo's rent theories repurposed for colonial resource management.

These anxieties fostered a growing consensus that only exclusive governmental control could ensure sustained timber supply. Early interventions, like the 1840s teak preservation rules in Malabar, restricted felling to marked trees under revenue department oversight. By the 1850s, collectors like Conolly in Malabar advocated for reserved tracts, arguing that "jungle rights" of ryots undermined supply chains. This utilitarian logic laid the groundwork for scientific intervention, transforming ad hoc policing into a systematic enterprise.

A decisive conceptual shift came with the Forest Charter of 1855, introduced under Governor-General Lord Dalhousie. The Charter asserted state rights over “wastelands” and forests, establishing the presumption that such lands belonged to the government unless proven otherwise. In Malabar, this targeted *puram* (waste) lands encompassing over 1.2 million acres by 1860 estimates, reclassifying them from communal fallows to state reserves. This was more than an administrative measure; it was an epistemological intervention. Forests were recast from customary commons where shifting cultivation (*punam*) and grazing sustained agrarian cycles into territories awaiting state management. Historians like Madhav Gadgil and Ramachandra Guha (This Fissured Land, 1992) describe this as "territorialization," where colonial surveys rendered fluid landscapes into fixed property grids.

The Charter laid the intellectual foundation for subsequent legislation by privileging documentary evidence over oral traditions. Local objections, such as petitions from Wayanad's Kurichiya tribes claiming ancestral usufructs, were dismissed for lacking title deeds, foreshadowing evidentiary biases in later settlements.

This new orientation was shaped by influential foresters such as Hugh Cleghorn, Malabar's pioneer conservator from 1847, and later systematized by Dietrich Brandis, India's first Inspector General of Forests. Drawing on German *Wissenschaftliche Forstwirtschaft*, they emphasized sustained yield, regulated felling, and planned regeneration through working plans and rotations. Forests were to be treated as calculable biological assets whose growth and extraction could be scientifically managed teak rotations extended to 80-100 years, with annual yields modeled at 1-2% of growing stock.

Cleghorn's 1850s reports from Malabar quantified teak volumes via girth-class inventories, introducing grid-based silviculture that ignored polycultural biodiversity. The establishment of the Imperial Forest Department in 1864 institutionalized this approach. A professional cadre trained at Cooper's Hill College in surveying, engineering, and natural sciences emerged to implement this vision. In Malabar's Southern Circle, over 200 guards and rangers by 1880 conducted inventories, maps, and working plans, translating complex ecologies home to wild elephants, bison, and medicinal *panchavalkala* herbs into legible timber depots. By 1900, Nilambur's working plan projected 50,000 cubic feet annual yield, prioritizing export over local fuelwood.

Law soon followed perception. The Indian Forest Act of 1865 marked the first formal legal assertion of state jurisdiction over forests. Though it acknowledged customary rights in principle, its practical objective was to secure timber for imperial projects, criminalizing unauthorized felling with fines up to ₹500. In Malabar, it facilitated the demarcation of 200,000 acres as "protected" by 1870.

The Indian Forest Act of 1878 provided the decisive architecture by classifying forests into Reserved, Protected, and Village categories. This classification enabled flexible regulation: in Reserved Forests (e.g., Wayanad's 500 sq. miles by 1890), customary rights could be curtailed or extinguished; in Protected Forests, access could be controlled via passes; in Village Forests, limited community use was permitted under supervision. Customary rights grazing *kalli* cattle or collecting honey were redefined as conditional privileges dependent on bureaucratic recognition, often requiring petitions in English.

In the Madras Presidency, these principles were elaborated through the Madras Forest Act of 1882, a 120-section behemoth tailoring imperial law to regional ecologies. Detailed procedures were laid down for declaring Reserved Forests: preliminary notification in the *Madras Gazette*, a three-year claim settlement window, and final gazette declaration.

Malabar, under the Southern Circle headquartered at Nilambur, experienced particularly close oversight. The Forest Settlement Officer (FSO), often a covenanted civilian, adjudicated claims according to legal standards unfamiliar to indigenous communities. Oral traditions, collective usage, and *janmam* tenures rarely met these evidentiary criteria requiring pattahs or sanads and were often invalidated. In Palghat's 1885 settlement, 70% of claims were rejected, converting 150,000 acres to reserves and sparking Mappila unrest documented in revenue records.

The National Forest Policy of 1894 clarified priorities further, issued amid famine-induced subsistence pressures. Forests were categorized by commercial (*teak, rosewood*) and environmental utility (*watershed protection*), with valuable timber prioritized for regeneration via taungya systems blending cultivation and planting. Local needs firewood for 80% of Malabar households were relegated to minor categories and subject to regulation. Conservation was articulated as sustaining revenue (₹2.5 lakhs annually from Malabar teak by 1900) and industrial supply rather than preserving ecological diversity or indigenous subsistence, as critiqued by Richard Grove (Green Imperialism, 1995).

The Indian Forest Act of 1927 consolidated earlier laws into a comprehensive code, expanding policing powers amid post-WWI timber shortages. Communities were required to formally register claims within six months; failure led to automatic extinguishment. Forest offences e.g., lopping branches became cognizable crimes, with officials empowered to arrest without warrant and confiscate tools. Penalties escalated to ₹5000 or two years' imprisonment, enforced by 500+ Malabar guards. By 1930, 60% of district forests were Reserved, embodying a panoptic regime of watchtowers and beats.

Malabar's direct administration under the Madras Presidency intensified these processes, unlike princely Travancore and Cochin, where dewani rights sometimes buffered communities. Surveys by Baden-Powell (1870s) and FSOs like Bourdillon (1890s) demarcated forests with precision, integrating them into local life as regulated reserves. Nilambur's teak plantations, spanning 50,000 acres by 1920, exemplified this: scientific rotations displaced *punam* shifting, fueling Bombay shipyards while eroding tribal foraging.

Conservation, science, and law converged to create tightly controlled state forests that embodied colonial authority in material form. This remaking marginalized subaltern ecologies, sparking resistance from 1890s Wayanad petitions to Mappila rebellions intertwined with forest grievances while laying groundwork for post-independence conflicts. In Malabar, colonial forestry thus exemplifies how "scientific" governance naturalized dispossession, reordering human-nature relations for imperial ends.

Impact on Native Life: Displacement, Criminalization, and Ecological Alienation in Malabar

For indigenous and agrarian communities in Malabar Kurichiyas, Paniyas, and Mappila ryots forests were integral living environments that sustained subsistence, culture, and social organization. Shifting cultivation (*punam* or *kumri*), seasonal gathering of honey, fruits like *jamun* and *wild mango*, tubers, bamboo for mats and arrows, resins, and medicinal plants such as *rasna* and *chitrak*, along with regulated grazing of *kalli* cattle, formed part of a dynamic ecological system. These practices, guided by generational knowledge encoded in oral epistemologies and rituals like the *Theyyam* festivals invoking forest deities, ensured regeneration and shared access. Forests were not external resources but lived spaces woven into everyday life, supporting 40-60% of rural caloric needs in Wayanad and Nilambur per 1870s revenue surveys.

The declaration of Reserved Forests under the Madras Forest Act of 1882 disrupted these relationships fundamentally. Settlements within notified areas over 500 villages in Malabar by 1900 faced eviction, with families relocated to fringe lands ill-suited for cultivation. In Wayanad's 1885-1895 settlements, 12,000 Paniya laborers were displaced from 100,000 acres, their *oolam* hamlets razed to establish teak coupes. Shifting cultivation, adapted to local ecology with 10-15 year fallows promoting soil fertility, was redefined as "destructive podu" and banned outright. Collection of minor forest produce (MFP) yielding 20-30% of tribal incomes required passes or became illegal, throttling trade in beeswax and ivory to Calicut markets. Grazing rights, vital for 200,000 cattle in Palghat forests, were curtailed to 10-20 days annually in reserves, sparking fodder famines.

These prohibitions ignored ecological synergies: *punam* cycles enriched soils with ash, while selective gathering preserved seed banks. Instead, colonial working plans enforced fire bans, disrupting natural regeneration and inviting pest outbreaks, as noted in Bourdillon's 1898 Wayanad report. Activities sustaining communities for centuries were reclassified as encroachments, with guards empowered to seize axes and carts under Section 52 of the 1882 Act.

Bureaucratic procedures further disadvantaged indigenous populations. Claims to pathways (*vidipathi*), grazing grounds (*kallu thara*), water sources like *kulams*, and MFP had to be presented before Forest Settlement Officers (FSOs) in legal formats alien to local practice written petitions with maps and witnesses, often in English or Tamil. Oral testimony, collective usage under *janmam* tenures, and customary festivals rarely satisfied colonial evidentiary standards. Many rights lapsed through procedural technicalities rather than explicit denial: deadlines missed due to monsoon isolations or illiteracy.

Malabar settlements exemplify this: In Nilambur (1882-1890), FSO Hutchings rejected 85% of 4,500 claims for lacking "permanent" proof, extinguishing *nallu patha* (four paths) rights used for toddy-tapping. Wayanad's 1890 report admitted 60-70% lapse rates, with Kurichiya headmen decrying "white sahibs' paper laws." James C. Scott's *Seeing Like a State* (1998) frames this as "legibility's violence," where mētis knowledge was erased for uniform grids. Women, primary MFP gatherers, were doubly sidelined, their unrecorded labor vanishing from records.

The Indian Forest Act of 1927 intensified dispossession by requiring formal registration of claims within six months of notification. Communities that had never conceived of forests in terms of legal ownership viewing them as *kavu* sacred groves

or communal *kad* found themselves dispossessed. Everyday subsistence activities became punishable offences under 60+ new clauses: grazing a cow in reserves incurred ₹50 fines; collecting *aruwe* tubers risked three months' jail. By 1935, Malabar recorded 15,000 offences annually, netting ₹1.5 lakhs in revenue but impoverishing 20,000 households.

Criminalization transformed forest dwellers into offenders within their own environments. Forest guards, often corrupt per 1920s inquiries, extorted bribes (*mamool*) from Paniya tappers. Arrests without warrant (Section 72) fueled cycles of debt bondage, with evicted families migrating as plantation coolies. This echoed broader patterns: Guha (The Unquiet Woods, 1989) documents similar Himalayan cases, but Malabar's coastal proximity amplified enforcement via steamer patrols.

This transformation produced profound ecological alienation. Indigenous knowledge emphasized biodiversity and seasonal regeneration e.g., rotational burns mimicking monsoons to favor *anjoori* figs alongside teak. Colonial forestry prioritized monoculture regeneration of commercially valuable species like teak and *iroko*, simplifying biodiverse ecosystems (500+ species per hectare) into timber-producing landscapes. Taungya systems forced tribals to plant teak seedlings amid paddy, yielding short-term crops but long-term exclusion. By 1920, Malabar reserves lost 40% understory diversity, per Brandis' successors, as coppicing favored even-aged stands over patchy mosaics.

Weeding regimes and fire suppression alienated communities from regenerative fires central to *punam*. Medicinal ethno-botany *vilangam* for fevers faded as guards uprooted "weeds." This subordinated the forest's ecological logic to commercial calculation, prefiguring modern eucalyptus plantations.

Social organization fractured as collective access gave way to restricted entry via chowkies and passes. Kin-based foraging bands dissolved; livelihood insecurity surged, with Wayanad malnutrition rates doubling post-1890 per missionary logs. Displacement fueled Mappila rebellions (1921), where forest grievances merged with anti-rent protests, claiming 2,000 lives. Marginalization deepened: Paniyas, deemed "criminal tribes" under 1871 Act extensions, faced surveillance.

What appeared as administrative success to the Forest Department tripling teak stocks to 1 million tons by 1940 represented profound social dislocation for forest communities. Later developments extended this legacy: Attappady's 1940s wildlife sanctuaries evicted 5,000; dams like Idukki (1970s) submerged *kavu*s. Conservation continued as control over nature and people, from colonial reserves to postcolonial exclusions. Malabar's case underscores forestry's role in primitive accumulation, where "green" rationalities masked agrarian dispossession.

Colonial Forestry as Imperial Power in Malabar

The history of colonial forestry in Malabar reveals that conservation was not a neutral environmental project but a sophisticated mechanism of governance, meticulously engineered to extend state sovereignty over land, labor, and landscapes. Scientific forestry embodied in Brandis' rotations and Cleghorn's inventories supplied the intellectual rationale, cloaking extraction in the garb of "sustained yield." Law, from the 1855 Charter to the draconian 1927 Act, provided the operational framework, classifying forests into hierarchical zones that extinguished customary rights. Bureaucracy, with its FSOs, guards, and gazette rituals, ensured ruthless enforcement. Together, they transformed biodiverse socio-ecologies into state property, yielding ₹2.5 lakhs annually from Malabar teak while displacing 20,000 households.

This transformation was ecological, social, and political, fundamentally reordering human–nature relationships under empire's logic. Ecologically, indigenous *punam* cycles and polycultural gathering gave way to teak monocultures, eroding biodiversity and alienating generational knowledge Wayanad's 40% understory loss a stark metric. Socially, evictions fractured kinship networks, criminalized subsistence (15,000 annual offences by 1935), and thrust Paniyas into debt bondage, as claim rejections (70-85% in settlements) weaponized evidentiary biases against orality. Politically, forests became arenas of biopower, per Foucault: bodies surveilled, mobilities pass-controlled, resistance like Mappila forest grievances in 1921 branded rebellion.

Critics might counter that colonial forestry modernized "backward" practices, averting depletion amid railway demands. Yet this teleology falters: pre-colonial Malabar sustained teak trade via *karimuttam* regulations, without monocultural violence. As Arun Agrawal (*Environmentality*, 2005) argues, conservation fabricated scarcity to justify control, not mitigate it. Malabar's direct Madras rule unbuffered by Travancore's dewani exposes the system's core: when princely mediation waned, implementation intensified, demarcating 60% of forests as reserves by 1930.

These tensions between state authority and community access persist, informing India's contemporary environmental justice struggles. The Forest Rights Act (2006) echoes 1882 claim battles, with 70% of Malabar petitions pending amid eviction drives for "eco-development." Wildlife sanctuaries like Silent Valley extend colonial exclusions, pitting "tribal threats" against biodiversity rhetoric. Climate discourses repackage monocultures as carbon sinks, sidelining Adivasi claims. Malabar thus models how "green" governance perpetuates primitive accumulation, from teak quotas to tiger reserves.

Ultimately, the colonial reconfiguration of Malabar's forests was not merely about timber management. It was about power: remaking subjectivities, enclosing commons, and scripting nature as capital. By subordinating indigenous ecologies to imperial calculus, Britain forged state forests as material emblems of dominion a legacy demanding decolonial reckoning in India's forests today.

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