



An Evolution of the Native Land Ownership: Peermade Under the British Rule

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Abstract

The history of British migration to the High ranges started in Peermade. Mala Arayans, the tribal people, welcomed Henry Baker Junior in their territory for its development. The British realized that the land was much fertile and suitable for cultivation of various kinds of cash crops. Hence, they started different kinds of plantations in every nook and corner of Peermade region according to the atmospheric conditions and landscape. And the people from different areas were transported to their region as workers in the plantations. They were settled here in the 'Layams', the settlement for the working class. The British started cultivating different types of cash crops in various areas of Peermade. It was the beginning of Coffee plantations, Tea plantations, Rubber plantations, Cardamom plantations, Cinchona plantations, Eucalyptus plantations etc in this region. And many European companies like Tyford and Ashly Tea Estate Company Ltd, Travancore Tea Estate Company, The Peermade Tea Company Ltd, etc, were established to control the trade and commerce of the plantations. Transportation and communication became essential for the day-to-day services. It was an evolution of the native land ownership under the British rule in Peermade.

Keywords: Colonialism, Tribals, Plantations, Plantation companies, Transportation and communication, Aerial Ropeway and Community Life.

Introduction

Peermade is a hill station more than 3000 ft above sea level in the district of Idukki. Being a part of the Western Ghats, the region was rich with fertility of soil and evergreen forest, according to historians, the current Kumily near Peermade originally served as the seat of the second Chera Empire during the Sangam era (800–1102 AD).¹ The Changanacherry Kings ruled the area in the 18th century. Changanacherry was subjugated by the King of Travancore in 1756 when Changanacherry was placed under his rule. Kuttikanam and Peermade were inaccessible to humans at that time. Henry Baker, a CMS missionary, was the one who first recognised this location's distinctiveness and he began coffee plantations here. Nevertheless, under the reign of Srimoolam Thirunal, the plantations were converted

to tea. After then, it was only a matter of time until word of this location's popularity spread. Many Europeans soon followed Henry Baker's lead. Opportunities of adventurous hunting, spice trade, plantation and missionary activities attracted the Europeans to Peermade. So, this was one of the first European settlements in Idukki. As Travancore kingdom, in south India to which the region was belonged to, was an ally of the British in India the English could easily protect their interests in this regard. Long distance from the capital city Trivandrum and hurdles on easy access to the region tempted Travancore kings to give free hand to English investors.

Presence of the Europeans at Peermade can be traced back to first decades of 19th century. The English had established their settlements at Peerumedu decades before that in Munnar. The first of its kinds in the high-ranges of Idukki were at Pallikkunnu and Peerumedu near Kuttikkanam. Adventurous travels and elephant hunting of Lt. Jarvis in 1834 at forests near Kumily has been recorded in history. Inflow of Englishmen to the high-ranges was increased following appointment of U V Munroe as Forest Conservator of Travancore in 1840.ⁱⁱ

Tribals

The *Irulars* and the *Muduvars* are the local tribes. The *Irulars*, who have migrated from the nearby Tamilnadu plains, make their living by selling firewood and hunting snakes for the purpose of extracting poison after the government made it legal for them to do so. The *Muduvars cooperate* in agricultural activities like hunting and fishing despite their shyness, dislike of non-tribal company, and sense of superiority toward the *Irulars*.ⁱⁱⁱ They live in isolation and preserve a little portion of their own culture. The *Uralis* are skilled at capturing elephants and were early pioneers in the hidden valleys of the highlands. In 1850 on invitation of the *Mala Arayan* tribe, the English missionary Henry Baker Junior visited Peermade. He arrived at Mundakkayam from where, crossing the forests, he visited Kuttikkanam, Vandi Periyar and Elappara. Henry Baker settled here and planned cultivation on commercial basis. Later he secured ownership of a vast area of land at free cost from the Travancore rulers. In 1860 Henry Baker set up the first estate in the region Tyford Estate.^{iv}

Peermade On Its Transformation to Plantations

In 1865 the Travancore rulers regularised tax on trees and created law to release barren lands for plantations. The new legislation caused increased inflow of European planters who secured here large pieces of lands. It resulted in opening of plantations at large scale.

Emergence of Coffee Plantation

In England, coffee was a preferred beverage. According to legend, a pilgrim named Baba Sudan who travelled to Mecca in the seventeenth century brought the coffee plant to India. The coffee plant is thought to have originated in the Koffa district of Abyssinia. He planted it in his garden in the state of Mysore, which was then a part of the Tippu Sultan's Kingdom, not far from Chickmangalur (a hill station in Karnataka). Birds' seed dispersion aided its further development in the Western Ghats. Coffee was recognised for many years as a wild crop, but it also grew wild in the Wayanad (Kerala) jungles at the same time. Hindus in many parts of India never regarded coffee as a proper beverage.^v

The missionary who came to Peermade, Henry Baker, had the idea to plant coffee in Peermade's new clearings. He obtained a free land grant from the government of Travancore, and two coffee estates were later expanded to eight estates closed to Periyar. He was soon joined by other planters, and by the 1860s Peermade was a bustling coffee-growing region. The original seeds came from Wayanad. The little plants were transported at the time as a head load.

However, coffee plantations were not around for very long. Hemalia Vextratix, a leaf disease, was affecting coffee farms. The leaf dried up and turned dark as a result. Due to overproduction and the availability of cheaper Brazilian coffee, coffee farmers were also impacted by the drop in price of coffee on the global market. Many growers were compelled to abandon their coffee farms as a result.

Emergence of Cardamom Plantation

In some areas the planters experimented the cultivation of cardamom. By the time cardamom cultivation had been started in suburbs of Peermade. In 1867, U.V Munroe was appointed as superintend of cardamom estates in Peermade. The British collected Malavaram from the planters. A special category of officials called Aminadar were appointed to help the Superintend. But following introduction of the Periyar project, cardamom cultivation on riverbed was prohibited and hence the cardamom department was shifted to Devikulam in 1898.

Emergence of Rubber Plantation

Peermade was the site of an experimental rubber plantation, and it was determined that the area was not appropriate for a rubber plantation. The soft wood trees, such as rubber trees, were devastated by persistent rain and strong winds. As a result, rubber is not grown close to Peermade, albeit a small amount is produced on the Western Ghats' slopes there, specifically in the Mundakayam valley^{vi}.

JJ Murphy and Rubber Plantation

Irish planter JJ Murphy was the first to attempt Rubber Plantations at Peermade. He was a fragile, asthmatic baby who was born in Dublin to a family of shippers and bankers at the age of seven months. J.J. (as he was commonly known) left for the East after receiving a private education from Marist Brothers, a Catholic Educational Brotherhood in Europe, and Trinity College, Dublin. In Ceylon, which is now Sri Lanka, he began working for a tea plantation company, but later moved to South India to work for another. Despite his independence, he managed to work there for a few years before being let go.

At the age of 29, that in a way freed JJ Murphy. And before him was the entire, untamed earth. Interest for Murphy shifted to rubber. The India Office in London has been unsuccessfully attempting to introduce hevea rubber plants to India since 1872. However, Murphy founded the nation's first rubber plantation at a location called Alwaye with the help of three associates. The man eventually purchased his own private rubber plantation in Yendayar, where he would reside until his death, in 1904.

At Yendayar Murphy planted tea as well, and scored another first by organizing pepper cultivation on plantation pattern. Till then, like cardamom, pepper too was procured from wild growth and small farmers.^{vii}

Emergence of Tea Plantation

During the British rule the whole of the Kerala was surveyed for geographic features like humidity and temperature. It was found that Peermade was best suitable for the cultivation of Tea. Also, the coffee plantations were all destroyed due to the leaf disease. All these made the planters clear the coffee plants and plant tea bush. For well growth tea require an altitude of 1000 M above sea level.

Tea was growing wild in the uncultivated uplands in Assam in North East India. Tea was brought to Nilgiris (Ooty) from China and later brought to Peermade. At first tea cultivation was done experimentally in about ten acres. After watching its success tea plantations started all around Peermade. Plantations founded by the Europeans here includes the Estates of Hope, Ashley, Stagbrook, Bonami, Valardi, Glenmary, Fairfield, Ladrum, Marie Ann, Vagamon, Kottamala, Periyar-Connemara, Heaven valley, Chinnar and Pasuparai. Names of many of them survive today even under the new management.

Emergence of Cinchona Plantation

Cinchona is a type of plant planted in Peermade hills. It is used a medicine for malaria. Malaria is always a big problem. Many people died due to the severity of the disease. This disease, which is transmitted by Anopheles mosquitoes, spreads rapidly in the plantation areas. Cinchona was planted for the protection from this disease. The bark product obtained from this was used as an antidote.^{viii}

Major Plantation Companies

We find the frame of history in the references of the day-to-day developments of the two companies floated in the following years. The year 1897 was an important landmark in the history of the district for it was in those years that the Travancore Tea Estates company was registered with an authorized capital of 1,50,000 pounds. 21 Among the seven founding members were H.M. Knight and William Mackenzie, owners of bonami estate, who had interest in other estates. Mackenzie had left India after opening the Talliyar estate with John Payne in 1887. He was back in Talliyar from 1938 as a manager still being a director of T.T. Estates.

The Tyford and Ashley Tea Estates Company Ltd

Four well known estates namely, Tyford, Vembanad, Ashley and Bison Valley, are historical interesting as they belongs to the oldest plantations. The first of these properties were originally obtained by Rev. Mr. Baker, who arrived in Travancore in 1819, and they remain in the possession of the Bakers till the present time. Another family deserves the mention, however, in connection with these estates, as the Ashley and Bison Valley were opened by Mr. JD Munro, who was a contemporary of Mr. Baker and it is interesting to note that descendents of these pioneers are signatories to the document of the formation of the Tyford and Ashley Tea Estates Company Ltd.

Travancore Tea Estate Company

1897 was an important landmark in the history of the district for it was in that year that the Travancore Tea Estate Company was registered with an authorized capital of \$150, 000. Among the seven founding members were H. M Knight and William Mackenize, owners of Bon Ami who has had interests in other estates. William Mackenize had left India some years earlier after opening Talliar Estate in the high range, but Knight become the first chairman. Rutherford had no experience of South India but while Ceylon had written a number of standard textbooks on planting tea. There was a close association of interests between South India and Ceylon and for many years subsequently it was the practice to recruit both staff and labour with Ceylon experience. The first estates acquired by the new company were Bon Ami, Mount Munjamullay, and Koliekanam, whose previous owners held the majority shares. The company also applied to government for direct grants of land, and in 1899 the areas now covered by Injikadu, Pasumullay and Nellikai were bought by them. During 1897 Thengakal was bought from the Revs. Leo Base and Joseph page, in 1898 Pambanar which consisted of Woolbedding division owned by Mrs. R. S. Imray, and Brigton division owned by the Reverends Leo Base and Joseph Page Granby, whose original title deed was dated 1877, was acquired by the company from Edward Harley in 1899^{ix}.

The Peermade Tea Company Ltd.

A Syndicate of planters in the neighborhood of Peermade acquired the cheenthalar estate of 2250 acres in 1911 and they developed and planted 750 acres in the following year. The property together with its then existing crops, were sold in 1914, to the Peermade Tea Company Ltd whose registered office is at Cochin. The directors are Messer's pierce Leslie and Company Ltd. The manager, T. C Forbes, is assisted by Mr. T. S. Corner and about 600 coolies are employed throughout the year. It is intended that 2000 acres will be opened up, planted with dark leaved north Indian indigenous tea in an acre of ground bearing 2600 bushes. Cheenthalar property is drained in a systematic manner. The annual rainfall is 160 inches.^x

Central Travancore Planters Association

During those years, there were a few opportunities for planters to meet and discuss their problems. In the hills they had to rely on their own resources for recruitment of labour and the organization of their estates. During the 1880 s annual race meetings were held by coffee planters at Trivandrum which was within easy reach of Ashambo, the major coffee area in south Travancore. Here as many as sixty planters and their wives gathered to celebrate plante's week, which included dinner given by Maharaja which coincided with the annual general meeting of the Travancore Planter's Association. Once or twice Peermade planters sent their representatives to Trivandrum, but the journey was long and uncomfortable. As the number of planters in Peermade grew, it seemed feasible to form a local association and it was done at the suggestion of Harry Clark and Mr. F.M. Parker in 1874 when Peermade planters association came into being. Meetings were held in turns in member's bungalows but these meetings did not take place regularly. Sometimes not once a year, in fact it happened only when planters wanted something from

government. Ashamboos were badly hit by coffee leaf diseases and from that time onwards Peermade grew in importance at the expenses of the south.^{xi}

By 1894 it was doubtful whether the Travancore Planters Association could muster as many as twenty men for one of their meetings, and it was then that G. L. Ackworth, the owner of Arnakal, who was Hon. Secretary of the Peermade Association, that the Travancore Planters Association changed to South Travancore and the Kannandevan Association style itself north Travancore. His idea was to bring the name of Travancore and “Travancore Tea” more before the public. However, only his own association adopted the suggestion^{xii}.

Transportation and Communication

There were no roads in Travancore until 1860 when a cart road was built from Trivandrum through Aramboly pass. Before this transport, except close to the backwaters, was done by cooly portage. In 1860, a Public Works Department was set up and this marked the beginning of an ambitious programme in road building, the road between Kottayam and Gudalur (which is now part of Tamilnadu on the foothills of Kumily) being one of the first to be constructed by widening and protecting the cart road cut by the pioneers in 1865 onwards. In 1871 the work was taken further from the Peruvanthanam climb and completed thirteen years later in 1884, but the work on the Vandiperiyar bridge was completed only in 1903 where a ferry was used until then to connect the movements across Periyar. Presence of the English at Peermade was reflected not only at the plantation sector but also on economic, social and cultural fields. They constructed mountain roads and brought motor vehicles to deport their products. The major roadways connecting Kottayam and Kumily, Kuttikkanam and Elappara, and Elappa and Cheentalar were constructed during the time.

Aerial Ropeway System

The planters wanted facilities to transport their products from Peermade to plain land. For this purpose, in the beginning, they employed bullock carts. But following the strike of bullock cart men in 1912 the British imported three Lorries from England. But due to steep nature of the roads the Lorries could reach up to Mundakkayam only. So, the British decided to use rope-way to connect Peermade and Mundakkayam. In 1914 they set up Mundakkayam-Peermade Motor Transport and Aerial Ropeway Company Ltd. Also, materials for the ropeway were sent from England to India in 1916^{xiii}. But, as the First World War was going on, the ship loaded with the ropeway material was destroyed in Mediterranean Sea. So, the construction of ropeway was delayed and which could be completed only in 1924.¹ But the ropeway became insignificant within years following the construction of new mountain roads which were more convenient for bulk movement of goods. Soon the ropeway stopped functioning but its relics remained here for many years as a memory of the western technology.

Evolution of Communication System

Travancore had its own postal service known as the Anchal Department and issued its own stamps. The Sarkar Anchal is one of the oldest institutions in Travancore kingdom. It was established much before the introduction of Postal communication by the Postal Department. Shungoonny Menon in his, History of Travancore state that it is 1784. His Highness Ramavarmma after his return from Rameswaram improved the Anchal and established it on better principles. An anchal had to carry stipulated quantity of articles as to cover specific distance and then have led to entrust the same to another Anchal. Some type of a relay arrangement would continue till the article had reached destination. In the initial years the planters alienated from the outside world. The tea gardens were located in the remotest of the areas. There was a little chance for outside communication. The only way of communication was through the Anchal service provided by the Travancore Government. The runners took the mail from one place to another. But this was considered not practical to high ranges.

Social Welfare Schemes

The English started some social service schemes for the welfare of the workers in the plantations. They set up *layams* (community living facilities) and provided free medical facilities and clothing for the workers. The *layam* became a typical form of employee settlements in the plantations and this system was continued by the Indian planters also even after departure of the British.

Community Life of Europeans

J. E. Piggot, brother-in-law of the Buxton Laurie, was one of the several planters brought in from Ceylon to work for the new companies. He arrived in India in 1898, and was Superintend of Kudakarnam for a short while before moving down the in penury in Nagercoil, supported by a pension from the Planters Benevolent Fund, Piggott was asked by the Secretary of the C. T. P. A. Bob Coglan, if he would write down his memories of planting life at this time. It was a kind thought for the lonely old man loved a yarn and was only too happy to remember his days on Kudua: soon there arrived a sheaf of pages covered in his small, neat handwriting; every other word carefully underlined to give force to his observations. No money to spare for necessary buildings because there was then no district club. The custom for everyone was to spend the first part of the weekend at Bon Ami and move to Penshurst estate where they were entertained by the Parkers. New Year's Day was celebrated with a trek up the Annan Thampi hills.

Two third of the way up the mountain the party left Kuduvakarnam tea estate border and took a truck through the jungle that led round to the other side of the mountains, were they camped on the slab rock above Koliekanam. From here there is a view of Devicolam near Munnar where the tea could be clearly be seen through a telescope brought up for the purposes. Servants went ahead to make fire, boil water for Tea and get things ready, so that by the time the main party arrived the cloth was spread and silver laid out the first day of the "picnic" passed in a tennis tournament on the bungalow tennis court, while Mrs. Parker directed the household, kindly freeing Piggott for his duties as host.^{xiv}

Education was generally neglected. In 1906 87% of the population of Travancore were illiterate but Mrs. Parker ran a school on Peshurust for the laborer's children, and the Imrays offered to pay Rs. 10/- each month towards the salary of a teacher on Bon Ami. Ackworth made a similar offer on Arankal, but it was not until 1919 that the T. T. E. introduced schools on company estates, and even then these were simply buildings with a paid attendant to watch the children while their mothers work most of the planters took immense pride in their gardens. Blue gum, Spathodia and Norfolk pines, Tulip trees were all planted and the landscaped gardens had excellent lawns and shrubberies. J. S. Wikie was responsible for introducing Cypress to the district. Ackworth planted fine mahogany in the garden of Aranakal, with each visit to Bangalore or the Nilgiris. Planters returned with new varieties of roses; the exchange cuttings of shrubs and in this way fine azaleas, hibiscus and camellias spread through the district.

St. George CSI Church

The St. George CSI church at Pallikkunnu near Kuttikkanam is one of the oldest shrines constructed by the British in Idukki. The church was constructed in 1869 and Henry Baker Junior was its first priest. Records in the church give a long list of Europeans who had their baptism and marriage here. English dominance in the church is evident from tombs of the Europeans in its premises. In the cemetery there was special area for the Europeans.^{xv} The compound contains 37 European tombs including that of a two-month-old baby. Tomb of Samuel Porter who died in 1883 is the first tomb here. Marble pieces imported from abroad have been used to decorate the tombs. Successors of the Englishmen in England occasionally visit the tombs of their ancestors. It is very interesting to note that dead body of the pet horse of J D Munroe also has been buried here and its tomb is maintained still. The cemetery has been renovated in the recent past.^{xvi} The British High Commissioner in India is in-charge of protection of the cemetery. These tombs show how the British segregated the local people, including those followed Christian religion. Anyway, the tombs are witness to the colonial connection of Peermade.^{xvii}

Some of the Englishmen who were buried at the CSI church were died during epidemic that affected Peermade in the year 1924. During this period many *Oushadappura* (herbal fogging kiosk) were set up to treat the patients. The *Oushadappuras* were single-door kiosks to house patients and fog them with smoke of herbs. Along with the local people many Europeans also lost their lives in the epidemic.

Conclusion

The arrival of Europeans in the Highrange soil started a new era in the history of Highranges. The new era recorded a wide change or it is a chain of changes. The developments and changes made by the Europeans helped for forming a community life in Peermade. Now concluding with the findings and information understood the colonial mode of production the developments and facilities provided by the planters or the colonialists during their expedition. The History of colonial era in High ranges depicted a lot of changes, conflicts and struggles to modify their own life with the exploitation of colonial rulers. The life of common people was fully exposed within the work. In other words, it is an enquiry to the colonial life or rule in the high range land. The colonial rulers used the workers

to make or their life and labour to increase surplus production. They provide not only developments but also demerits. They changed the entire geography of the land by clearing of forests and introduction of various type of plantations. They exploited the common men's life, using the lives of people they made maximum profits. The entire work will cover all the corners of the life of common people during British era in Peermade.

Endnote

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- ^v George Thengumoottil, *Story of Peermade*, accessed from http://gtedits.com/The_Story_of_Peermade.html on 10/1/2020
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- ^{vii} Ibid
- ^{viii} Personal interview with Mr. Sunil Abraham, Secretary, St. George CSI Church, Peermade, on 1/12/2020
- ^{ix} George Abraham Pottamkulam, op. cit., p.370
- ^x Ibid., p.15
- ^{xi} George Abraham Pottamkulam, op.cit., p.354
- ^{xii} Ibid. pp.17-18
- ^{xiii} Manoj Mathirappaly, “*Idukki Charitram Charitratheethavum*”, Kazhcha Book Publication Kattappana., 2001.
- ^{xiv} George Abraham Pottamkulam, Op. Cit., p. 328.
- ^{xv} Manoj Mathirappaly, “*Idukki Charitram Charitratheethavum*”. Kazhcha Book Publication, Kattappana. 2001.
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