



HISTORY OF COMMUNITY FOREST MANAGEMENT IN ANDHRA 1885-1930

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ABSTRACT

Community centric forest management emerged as popular policy paradigm for management of forest resources in India. This article proposes that the policy on community forest management was a strategy of the British to neutralise the discontentment of forest dependent communities in India. By focussing on history of community forest management in South India this article documents the way the policy was used by the British to handle the demands of forest dependent people in general and rural elite in particular. The core argument of this paper is that community forest management in colonial period did not become successful due to parochial attitudes of the rural elite who tried to maximise their class and caste consideration. It was this structure of policy and practice of community forest management that is inherited by independent Indian state. Hence, the paper suggests that the mistake committed in history should not be repeated in the contemporary period in the domain of community forest management.

KEY WORDS: forestry, community, South India, Andhra, panchayat forest

INTRODUCTION

Community approach to natural resource management acquired prominence in India. As a policy it has been implemented with two names: joint forest management and community forest management (CFM). At present about 90000 village forest protection committees are functional in India. As a part of this policy about 6000 village forest protection committees engaged in community forest management in the state of Andhra Pradesh. This trend in forest management projected as innovative policy to evolve harmonious linkages between livelihood considerations of forest dependent communities and conservation of forests. But history of community forest management in South India during the British colonial attests that well defined policy for management of communal forests was framed and executed in districts such as Neligiri, Changelput, Kadapah, Karnool, Anantapoor, Nellore, Guntur and Krishna districts of Madras Presidency. The importance of history of community forest management is that it provides us a longer perspective of the policy, its implementation process and its impact upon forest dependent communities.



Ascendency of CFM as a popular policy option necessitates an historical analysis for better understanding of policy dynamics. This paper documents history of CFM in Madras Presidency during the period of 1885-1930 with particular focus on Andhra region and proposes that CFM of contemporary India is strongly rooted in colonial past. Hence it is important for us to understand the policy and practice of CFM to evolve more sustainable policy options.

Local forest management during colonial rule captured the imagination of some historians. Anil Agrwal demonstrates the history of Van panchayats during colonial rule in Uttarakhand.ⁱ Ramachandra Guha analyses discourse on community forest management within the colonial bureaucracy and political activism in the context of colonial rule.ⁱⁱ Mark Profemberger and McGrean's study highlights initiatives of colonial state for management of local forests with the help of forest dependent communities.ⁱⁱⁱ I in fact demonstrated the evolutionary process of policy on communal management of forests in South India.^{iv} But history of community forest management and its implementation process in colonial South India in general and Andhra region in particular remained inadequately explored. This paper attempts to fill this gap.

History of CFM in Andhra region shows the character of British colonial rule. Vibrant national movement compelled colonial state to evolve wide range of strategies to seek legitimacy for its survival. This process can be captured with a quote from Garden Johnson: 'as the government imagined more on Indian society so it brought more Indians into the business of making and implementing policies'.^v This paper proposes that as the anti-colonial resistance gained momentum, colonial state used the discourse of respect to the opinion of the natives in formulating public policies. This trend could explicitly be seen in the history of CFM in Madras Presidency.

The Madras Forest Act was promulgated in 1883 and most of the forests and wastelands (constitutes about 20% of total area in the Madras presidency) was brought under the state control.^{vi} A separate category of reserved forests was created for exclusive control of the state. Attempt however has also been made to provide forest produce to local communities. The Madras Forest Act proposed a provision under the rule 26 (7) which empowers district collectors to create a village forest for provision of fuel and fodder to villagers. Three districts i.e. Neligiri, Cudapah and Kurnool were selected to experiment this policy. In 1885 the Madras Government announced the policy on village forests. In this policy village forests were defined 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'.^{vii} The following two models of village forest were created: constitution of village forests for each village and creation of village forests by including all



the forestlands outside reserve forests. The first model was implemented in Nilgiris district and the second model was grounded in the Cuddapah and Kurnool Districts. The policy on village forests proposed the following provisions local communities:

- Grazing without restriction.
- Collecting and removing (in head- loads only) dead-wood for domestic use.
- Collecting and removing for manure leaves (of 4th-class trees only).
- Cutting and removing thorns for fencing.
- Cutting and removing grass for thatching.
- Taking leaves for plates.
- Taking bark for fiber.
- Collecting minor fruits.
- Taking stone and earth for building.

The village forest experiment was gradually extended to Kurnool and Anantapoor districts. But this experiment was abandoned due to resistance from forest officials for two reasons: forest department begun to lose revenue from grazing and secondly, excessive importance to local communities was perceived as a danger to the power of state in rural areas. The first phase of village forest experiment was officially abandoned by 1890. This policy shift gradually begun to show negative impact upon the relationship between forest authorities and communities. This trend is attested by the unprecedented increase of crime in the form of violation of forest rules.^{viii} This situation was further aggravated by emergence of strong national movement after 1905 in South India. This process compelled the colonial state to initiate second phase of community centric forest management with two names: ryot forests and panchayat forests after 1915.

The idea of forest panchayat was first suggested by the Madras Forest Committee in 1913. Degraded lands, forests and village forests were identified by the committee as potential spaces to be conserved with the help of local communities. This measure was also perceived effective means to reduce the conflicts between people and government over the issue of forest rules. The Madras Forest Committee proposed detailed measures for implementation of forest panchayats.

DUTIES OF PANCHAYATS

-The panchayats should be held the responsible to prevent the denudation of the grazing grounds and specially for collecting the grazing revenue.



-The panchayats will be responsible for the clearing and maintenance of the boundary lines of blocks and for the carrying out of order communicated to them from time to time.

POWERS OF PANCHAYATS

-The powers to admit or exclude any cattle of their own village from the grazing grounds, 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.

-The powers to impound cattle which graze without permission.^{ix}

On recommendations of the Madras Forest Committee, forest panchayats were created in Chittore, Anantapoor, Chingleput, Bellary and Guntur districts in 1918.^x For the supervision of forest panchayats, a separate executive establishment was created in 1922, by transferring 966 square miles of reserved forests under its supervision. While mentioning the success of the forest panchayats, the District Forest Officer from Vellore taluk of South Arcot District wrote that: ‘The old order of things are changing, five years ago the Forest Officer in this part was approached by the *ryots* only with a grievances or a complaint against subordinates. Today I was met a mile out of Tanipadi by practically the whole village with tom-tom and music.’^{xi} Thus, the forest panchayat system was very much glorified by the Forest officials.

In 1923, the Retrenchment Committee, which had dealt with the re-organisation of the Forest department of Madras Presidency, recommended a general reclassification of the reserved forests. Accordingly, minor, fuel and grazing reserves, which were useful to people in meeting every-day needs, termed as “Ryot forests” were formed and kept under the management of the forest panchayats managed by local people.^{xii} In 1925, around 1,226 square miles of reserved forests was transferred for the management by 587 forest panchayats in some of the districts in the Madras Presidency.^{xiii} Another important development that took place in 1927 was that out of the 18,954 square miles of the total reserved forest, the extent of 3,389 square miles of reserve forest land was handed over for the management of the Revenue department, under the name of ‘Ryot Forests’. For their management, 1,130 forest panchayats were created and kept under the supervision of the Revenue department.^{xiv}

The functional aspects of forest panchayats could not adequately been traced on account of scarcity of evidences. We however do have some evidences. Forest panchayat is a local body created by government for management of forests and grazing sources. This body elect executive body consisting of 5-9 members to execute the functions of forest panchayat. The executive body elect one member as a president among them as a head of forest panchyat. In a way the main duties of the forest panchayats were to issue grazing permits and



collect fee on grazing and minor forest produce. The forest panchayats were expected to protect the reserved forests from illegal grazing and felling and goat-browsing and fire.^{xv}

After 1930, about 4000 square miles of forest landscape belong to the state was transferred for management of forest panchayats. This experiment was implemented in Guntur, Kistna, Nellore, Cuddpah, Kurnool, and Anantapoor districts wherein national movement was active. This experiment did not achieve envisaged success due to four reasons: degraded forests and grazing grounds which subjected to chronic degradation are allotted to forest panchayats: officials of forest department were virtually withdrawn from the management of forest panchayats as they preferred to concentrate on forest department's potential on silviculture operation.^{xvi} Third reasons for underperformance forest panchayats is monopoly of rich peasants in the routine function of panchayats. The annual administrative report of forest department of 1921 narrate this problem in the following words: 'It is to be feared that too often that panchayat powers are used in the interests of the wealthier and more influential people and to the detriment of the poorer class'.^{xvii} This led to exclusion of customary access of women, landless, pastoralists and artisans. The membership in forest panchayat was restricted to land holders and cattle having permits in reserved forests. The main reason for the ill-functioning of forest panchayats according to Janardhana Rao, a forest officer as follows: 'The revenue officials neither had sufficient time to do proper supervision on the work of these panchayats nor could they enforce the adoption of the technical principles of forestry of these panchayats. Consequently, the forests suffered particularly from enormous illicit grazing especially by goats, over grazing by cattle and indiscriminate lopping of trees for manure leaf etc'.^{xviii} The independent government transformed the control of panchayats forests to the forest department on 26th April 1948. Once again village commons became part of forest department.

CONCLUSION

Colonial state has adopted wide ranging of strategies to perpetuate their rule on Indian soil. This attempt manifested with divergent discourses and strategies. Formulation and implementation of community forest management in South India shows the character of colonial state. It was a strategy to pacify the emerging forces of national movement in South India at one level and derive legitimacy at another level. The public policy formulations in South Asia are thus mainly collaboration for hegemony between colonial state and upper strata of Indian society. It was this predicament that inherited by independent India in case of policies related to natural resource management.

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