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ACQUIRING THE POWER OF NATIVES: THE SOCIO-ECONOMIC TRANSITION OF MALABAR INTO THE COLONIAL ECONOMY, 1792-1812

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Abstract

The end of the eighteenth century, the English East India Company dominated most of the part of the Indian peninsula. In a way, it was also considered as the revolutionary transition of the Indian society through the westernization. At the same time, some historians point out that, it was the period of anarchy as well as the dark age of the Indian history. The English East India Company controlled the trade between India and Europe, and finally they acquired the administrative power over India. In the context of Malabar, the English East India Company took the administration in 1792, and emerged as a kind of superlord through the domination over the indigenous rulers. The advent of the Company rule in Malabar replaced the traditional customs and introduced structural changes in the society and economy. This study emphasis on the people's attitude towards the Company administration in Malabar and how they incorporated to the 'new administration'.

Key Words: Malabar; the English East India Company; economy, revenue; the Pazhassi Rebellion

Introduction

During the time of Mysore invasion into Malabar created an insurgency among the people and the *rajyas* by the administrative reforms of the Tippu Sultan. He introduced monopoly over the spice trade from the Malabar. Earlier, the European Companies tried to manipulate the price of agricultural products which was disadvantage to the cultivators. Tippu established warehouses at Calicut, Quilandy, Mahe and Vadakara for collecting the commodities and fixed the prices by the state and also compelled to buy the commodities for the export from these warehouses for a fixed price (Menon, 2007). Tippu's commercial policy broken the European mercantile interests in Malabar.

The political circumstances of Malabar led to change in the social condition also. The pre- Mysorian society of Malabar allowed special privileges to the upper castes like *Brahmins*, *Kshatriyas*, *Nairs* etc, but it was stopped by Tippu. It moulded an open war in the minds of upper castes and the local *rajyas* of Malabar. The rulers of Malabar received the protection from the English East India Company (hereafter the Company) against Tippu Sultan. Finally, it led to an

open conflict between the Company and Tippu and it was ended in 1792 by the treaty of Sreerangapattanam.

Review of Literature

The year 1792, symbolized the transition of Malabar into the colonial structure of administration. Most of the studies were started from the period of 1792 onwards, but they bounded to the later part of the British administration in Malabar. So they did not represent the earlier stage of the Company administration. Kurup (1998) gives a good picture of the land grant relationship and the economic impact of the Company rule in Malabar. The institutionalization of the legal system was the backbone of the Company administration in Malabar, which elaborates by Raveendran (1978). Panikkar (1989) and Vasanthakumari (1995) points out that the expansion of the colonial ideology and the administration of justice in the earlier phase of the Company administration in Malabar respectively. Several people of Malabar fought against the Company administration and they were organized under the leadership of Pazhassi Raja, one of the local ruler of Malabar. Another work of Kurup (1999) gives more information about the rebellion and mentioned that it shows the standard of a popular struggle.

The Socio- Economic Transition of Malabar

The treaty of Sreerangapattanam in 1792 was the turning point in the history of Malabar. During this period the Company involved in the economic and political matters of the Malabar. Soon after, they implemented several laws for protecting their economic motives. This study analyzes that the Company's role in Malabar and their change from the level of merchant companies to the administrators of Malabar. Apart from this, the study focuses on the responses from the natives after the intervention of the Company to the Malabar.

After the treaty, the Company entered several agreements with the indigenous rulers. Several rulers were exiled from Malabar at the time of Tippu's invasion. But the Company denied the demands of that rulers for restore their power after the victory over Tippu Sultan. Thus, on 18 August 1792, an agreement was signed by the Company with the Zamorin, the ruler of Calicut to collect the revenues from his territories and administer the justice for one year (Logan, 1998). It was the first step towards the rule of law for the revenue administration in Malabar by the British authorities.

The overall administration and justice in Malabar was controlled by the company officials which was enabled through the treaties and the military help. In December 1792, the Bengal commissioners were appointed by Lord Cornwallis to examine the possibility of implementing the Bengal model of legal system in Malabar. Under the period of Lord Cornwallis, as the Governor General of the English East India Company made judicial reforms and established several circuit courts for the smooth functioning of revenue collection and maintaining peace in Bengal (Frenz, 2003). Accordingly, the commissioners decided to divide the Malabar into two administrative areas, each under a superintendent.

The joint commissioners took the control over Malabar for the company and they were making a calculation of the revenues from Malabar to the company. But their decision was always depend upon the availability of pepper to their account. In this regard they allowed the free trade in all items in Malabar except the pepper trade. It had created the monopoly of pepper in Malabar and the company became the supreme authority of the pepper trade in Malabar. As long as the rajas, the indigenous rulers of Malabar retained the government in their hands and exercised judicial powers, their influence over the land owners enabled them to have considerable control of the pepper supplies. And they tried to prevent smuggling of pepper by implementing the law (Logan, 1998). Though, the Company forced their power to the land owners and the cultivators through the native authorities.

Some deviations existed between the communities in Malabar, especially the Nairs and the Muslims. It started from the time of Mysore administration in Malabar which was related to the assessment of revenue under the rule of

Tippu Sultan. Subsidies were allotted to the Muslims than the Hindu community at the time of Tippu Sultan. These inequalities were abandoned by the new joint commissioners, and declared no discrimination in the collection of land revenues between the above communities under the British rule (Logan, 1998). Through the way, the Company introduced equal status in the case of land revenue and won the support from the higher caste Hindus. On 13 September 1793, Malabar supervisor W.G Farmer withdrew the Company's monopolistic control over the spices trade in Malabar and allowed to all persons can involve in the free trade to all articles like pepper, sandal, cardamom, etc. However, this new law created a free space for the cultivation of spices and the trade in Malabar without any barriers. It was more helpful to the land owners to strengthen their symbiotic relationship with the English East India Company. In turn, the Company desired the support of the higher castes (Jayasree, 2003). Moreover, the Company continued the prohibitions in the slave trade and the arms trade in Malabar. In the case of slaves, their identity were closely bound up with the land of their master and the slaves of all castes were held as entirely impure and therefore, compelled to keep a stipulated distance from the upper strata of the society.

The Company authorities indirectly controlled the people of Malabar through enacting different laws. When Tippu Sultan administered Malabar, he introduced some prohibitions related to the subject of wildlife. It was followed by the company and declared that any person, who tried to catch an elephant within the limits of Malabar province, should be reported within fifteen days to the tahasildar of that district. And he had estimated the value of the elephant and must paid to the company's account one third of the shared property (Ganesh, 2003). The company made the final agreement with different rajas in Malabar regarding the collection of the revenue, abolishing extra collections, trade in pepper, setting apart land for experimental cultivation of coffee, sugar, indigo, etc, and granted allowances of the 10% of the collections, and an understanding to allow "equitable and just proportion" of the production of their own cultivators (Logan, 1998).

Traditionally, the regional rulers got special privileges over the peoples in their territories. Frontier duties anciently levied by the Palghat Raja towards the support of the pagodas. Through by the act of 16 January 1798, 'Mughama' a tax levied from the traders in Malabar by the regional land holders was discouraged by the company and assured the protection of the traders from the regional customs and manners. The company officials were appointed to inspect the estates of the various individuals for redressing the inequalities of the assessment of the revenue collection from Malabar. And also it assured the protection in their land from the traditional duties.

Some changes in taxes were introduced by the Company officials in the collection of taxes. The Company, collected

the taxes from the each house and fixed the rate of taxes in Malabar. It was seven *panams* (local coin in the Malabar Coast) annually and it must be paid three installments. Any failure in this subject was punished by the authority of revenue collection. The company was re-adjusted the payment system of the taxes in Malabar. The tax installments were joined to the reaping of the crops and the season for the disposal of the various productions of the country (Logan, 1998). The joint commissioners assessed the land and advised to pay the tax to the company's account. And they were declared that the amount of the expenses for the temples should be given from the Company's treasury.

The Company's policy of revenue collection made disturbances in the minds of traditional rajas of Malabar. Some of them expelled from the responsibility of the revenue collection. For instance, the Pazhassi Raja, the ruler of Kottayam region removed from the collection of revenue from his region and the Company entrusted to the power to the Kurumbranadu Raja. It led to an open struggle against the Company. The Pazhassi rebellion and indigenous unrest had troubled the Company's administration in Malabar. They prepared the law for their existence in the Malabar and the monopoly of the trade and the revenue collections. The law of disarmament was the one of the results of the Pazhassi rebellion in Malabar. It was not merely an unrest of the royal blood but also it was the popular struggle against the revenue policy of the Company. The government took rigid steps to collect revenue from the peasants and they were against the Company's policy (Kurup, 2000). The small peasants and laborers and other communities like Muslims joined in this anti-colonial struggle.

The re-assessment of the revenue system in Malabar was done by R. Richard, the collector and the judge of the district. On this consideration he took the survey of lands for the purpose of the assessment and to calculate the revenue of Malabar. In rice grounds, they allotted one third of rice to the peasant for the expense of the cultivation of the gross produce of the seed. And it remains divided into six tenths into the Company and the four tenths to the Jenmakar (right over the property by birth). In the parambu lands one third of the production of the coconut and supary tree allotted to the *kudian* (tenant). The remaining pottom equally shared by the Company and *jenmakar* (land owner) of the land.

Forest policy of the East India Company

The company introduced the new laws in Malabar for their prosperity and struggled for the spread of the colonialist ideology. After the suppression of the Pazhassi revolts in 1805, Wayanadu was continuously kept under the strict supervision of the Company's army. The tribal people were subjected to severe persecutions by the British for the help they had extended to Pazhassi Raja. The Company officials denied freedom to the tribal people and forcibly made them

the slaves of the British. The Company's interventions into the tribal life of the interior areas of Wayanadu shattered the rhythm of their life. The Kurichiyas, one of the tribal community in Malabar, and other tribes in Wayaadnu even revolted against company. Though the Company introduced the cash payment of revenue instead of the products of forest goods (Indira, 2000).

The Bombay commercial resident was also appointed as the conservator of the forest in Malabar. He made a public notice related to the regulation of the timber trade in the Malabar area. The forest of Malabar was highly important for the British affairs. It was not only for the local demands but also for the construction of the ships of war in the British Royal Navy. For this purpose the Malabar forest administration controlled by the Bombay government.

The British government started control over the forest in the year 1806 when a commission was appointed to inquire into the availability of teak in Malabar, by the way of appointment of conservator of forest. The company appointed a former police officer, Captain Watson, as India's first conservator of forests in 1806. Watson's two-pronged plan involved placing a tax on teak in order to simultaneously slow its harvest by private interests and raise money for the government, and then purchasing the teak from the private sector. This forest regulation also was against the traditional system of the tribal people.

The revenue payment of each individual was raised at once about 10% of the land belonging to the Brahmins and the temples were rent free and tax paid by the higher order of the people was a trifle when compared to what the lower class had to pay. Those who defaulted were subjected to all kinds of cruelties by the British officials. They feared that the distinctive lifestyle and culture of them would be threatened by the policy of the British administration. However the inequality and the disparity between prevailing market prices and the rates adopted by government for valuation of produce in monetary terms for the purpose of revenue collection become the major cause of peasant distress. T.H Baber the collector and the magistrate of the northern Malabar called for the attention of this policy in 1812 by saying that the most grievous source of complaint was the inequality of the taxes (Panikkar, 1989). The revenue officials of the company tried to extract the arrears of tax by confiscating the property of the tribes, attacking their residences, looting their belongings and evicting from their property which produced a strong spirited resistance and aggressive behavior on the part of the people of Wayanadu (Indira, 2000).

Conclusion

The company always tried to re-arrangement of the revenue and the tax system for their existence in Malabar. But it was not for the progress of the native people. It worked for the growth of British imperialism in the land of Malabar. When they had felt the stagnation of agriculture, they removed the barriers over that subject. In 1806, very limited number of

pepper were produced by the cultivators in Malabar. It led to the scarcity of the pepper in the market. The company authorities negotiated for the encouragement of the pepper cultivation in Malabar. According to their decision it was decided to remove the revenue over the pepper vine and exempt from all export duties in Malabar until 1 January 1806. At the same time, the company took the decision for the monopoly of the salt in Malabar.

The Company's administration in Malabar was connected with the revenue subjects only. The company had worked in their own interest and anyone who turned against the Company, would be destroyed by them with the help of the regional rulers. In such a context, the emergence of the Company's policy in Malabar was the conspiracy between the Company and the native rulers. So the Company's power was the product of an elite conspiracy in Malabar.

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