

‘Forests’, Agrarian Landscapes and Public Policies in the Central Western Ghats of South India ^Ψ

Ajit Menon^{*}, Christelle Hinnewinkel^{}, Sylvie Guillerme[†], Marie Laval^{**} and Claude Garcia[‡]**

Abstract:

Decentralization policies around forest management in developing countries such as India have received a large amount of attention in the recent past. But invariably analysis has been limited to the specificities of policies and to what extent they have provided forest produce benefits or not to forest-dependent communities. Public policies around forests must be contextualized and analysed in a broader historical context that attempts to understand what ‘forests’ mean to local communities in their segmented forms and how such policies have been part of a wider process of transformation of the agrarian landscape. This paper based on on-going research in three states of the central Western Ghats of south India examines the historical transformation of the agrarian landscape and how recent public policies in the name of decentralization often fall short not only in their implementation but also in their vision. Hence, while decentralized forest management might open up spaces for communities to address some of their forest needs in particular contexts, they are as likely to marginalize other needs in the process of redefining the agrarian landscape in the name of environmental management.

Key Words: *South India, Central Western Ghats, decentralization, forest policy, agrarian landscapes*

INTRODUCTION

Over the last decade and more, academic literature on forests and forest management in India has been dominated by studies on decentralization or public policies such as joint forest management that have given local communities a role in management and a share of the usufructury and monetized benefits. A vast majority of this literature has focused on the particularities of these policies in different geographical locations, the benefits that have emerged in terms of livelihood improvement or ecological sustainability and the reasons for

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^{*} Madras Institute of Development Studies

^{**} University of Lille

[†] CNRS Toulouse

^{**} AgroParisTech-ENGREF

[‡] CIRAD-IFP

success and failure.¹ Even the literature that has been more critical, focusing on the conceptual shortcomings of policies such as JFM, have dwelled primarily on the limits of the policy in terms of community rights and/or devolution (Lele *et al.* 2005; Sundar *et al.* 2001).

In this paper, we take a broader perspective to decentralized forest management. Forests are invariably situated within wider agrarian landscapes. These agrarian landscapes are comprised of a heterogeneity of land uses and a mix of communities that depend on multiple natural resources. What constitute forests, the fluid boundary between fields and forests and the use of different lands to meet fuelwood, fodder and non-timber forest produce is highly complex and varies significantly from region to region and community to community (Menon 2004). Moreover, these landscapes have been shaped and reshaped over time, not least by public policies that have defined who owns what land, who has access to what land and what purposes specific lands (and resources) should be put to. Decentralized forest management policies, therefore, must be analyzed keeping these historical developments in mind. The questions we ask are: 'Do decentralized forest management policies recognize these complex landscapes?' 'Do they address the main concerns of agrarian communities?' 'How do people respond to them?' 'Who are the winners and losers?'

We have tried to answer these questions in the geographical context of the central Western Ghats, namely the contiguous districts of the Nilgiris in Tamil Nadu, Wayanad in Kerala and Kodagu in Karnataka. It is a highly forested area and a landscape that has witnessed significant changes over the last two hundred years especially with the advent of cash crops such as tea and coffee. The rich and fluid mosaic of forests and agricultural land provides an excellent context to explore the complexity of forest use and the impact of decentralized forest management policies which have arrived there relatively recently. The paper critically appraises what spaces and opportunities are available (or not) to local communities (in their segmented form) in this region.

The paper is based on historical accounts of the region, an examination of public policies in the recent past and extensive on-going field work. It is divided into five parts. The first part looks at the current landscape in the three districts in terms of its physical geography and socio-economic profile. The second part attempts to look at how this landscape has changed over time both prior to and during the early part of British colonialism. Although it highlights the fact that the physical and social landscape changed significantly before the British colonized the area, it argues that British arrival was a watershed in terms of large-scale land use change. Part three looks at how colonial and post-colonial public policy impacted upon agrarian communities and the forest landscape. This historical analysis provides a much needed background for an analysis of more recent decentralized public policies which is undertaken in the fourth section. The final

¹ See Sundar *et al.* 2001 for a detailed reference to this literature.

section concludes with some final thoughts about decentralized forest management

FORESTED AGRARIAN LANDSCAPE OF THE CENTRAL WESTERN GHATS

Nilgiris, Wayanad and Kodagu districts in the states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka in south India constitute three adjacent districts in the Western Ghats. While Kodagu is a historically well demarcated area, the boundaries of Nilgiris and Wayanad district have been changing until the recent past. The Wayanad of the Malabar comprised present day Wayanad district and the western part of Nilgiris district. This partly explains why the agrarian landscape of the western parts of Nilgiris district is more similar to Wayanad than to the rest of the Nilgiris. This district is also more heterogeneous in its physical landscape than Wayanad and Kodagu. It comprises the plateau region, namely the three taluks of Coonoor, Kotagiri and Kundah and a part of Ootacamund taluk and consists of steep undulations and tablelands at elevations around 1,800 metres with a summit at 2,636 metres. Towards the west, Nilgiris district comprises what has been generally referred to as the South-east Wayanad and is now namely the taluks of Gudalur and Pandalur (Jagdish 1998: 1). The hills are at a lower elevation (around 1,000 metres with a summit at 1,529 meters) than those of the plateau. Wayanad district and Kodagu district are also middle elevation mountainous territories. Wayanad has a middle elevation between 700 and 1,200 metres on average with peaks that are more than 2,300 metres high (Janardhanan 2001: 5), and Kodagu an elevation between 800 and 1,000 meters on average with a summit at 1,745 meters (Misra 2003: 2).

Forests comprise a significant part of the landscape in all three districts. While area under the control of Forest Department is around 50 per cent in all three districts, data from the Forest Survey of India suggests that forests comprise about 75 per cent of the total area in Kodagu, 78 per cent in Wayanad and 81 per cent in the Nilgiris (Forest Survey of India 2003: 69; 71; 98). From an ecological point of view, forests in the studied area are mainly tropical moist deciduous forests. They are an important source of firewood and non-timber forest produce and annual fires affect their regeneration. In the extreme west where annual rainfall exceeds 2,500 mm, sometimes even 5,000 mm, tropical evergreen forests cover the slopes that dominate Kerala. Between these two types, wet semi-deciduous forests persist in the bottoms of valleys of the central part. A band of dry deciduous forests and plantations of teak are also present in the eastern part of Kodagu district and the northern part of Nilgiris district (Pascal *et al.* 1982: map). The upper plateau of the Nilgiris also has specific vegetation found in the high altitude ranges of the Western Ghats, namely shola-grasslands. Most of these forests are under state control today.

Amidst the forested landscape of the three districts are a number of rural communities, both adivasis (tribals) and non-adivasis, most agriculture-

dependent but others with other primary occupations such as collectors of forest produce, pastoralists and artisans. In the Nilgiris, the main adivasi communities are the Todas and Kotas in the plateau areas, Irulas and Kurumbas on the outer slopes and the Paniyans, Kurumbas and Kattunayakans in the lower lying western parts of the district. In Wayanad, the main adivasi groups are the Paniyans, Adiyans, Jen Kurubas and Kattunayakans whereas in Kodagu the main adivasi groups are the Jen Kurubas, Betta Kurubas and the Yeravas. Today most of these communities, besides for the Todas, cultivate land or work as agricultural labourers, some of them because their 'traditional' rights to forests have been curtailed. Amongst the non-adivasi communities, there are communities such as the Badagas in the Nilgiris, the Chettis in Gudalur of the Nilgiris and in Wayanad and the Kodavas and Gowdas in Kodagu who have been there for many centuries, as well as more recent immigrants including a number of landed communities from the plains as well as Sri Lankan repatriates.

Agriculture varies significantly in the region, largely determined by altitude. In the upper plateau, the main crops are 'English' vegetables and tea plantations. The middle elevation plateau (Gudalur area, Wayanad and Kodagu) are dotted mostly by coffee and tea plantations though there are areas of paddy and dry land crops such as millet (in many forms) (Joy 2004). Other prominent agricultural crops include pepper, rubber, areca nut and cardamom.

The three districts of the Central Western Ghats are thus a mosaic of agricultural and forest lands. These lands, for the most part, are clearly demarcated into private and state lands (with some common lands) though in the Gudalur area much of the land is contested and property rights unclear. Unlike in the past, when forests (now reserved forests) were more expansive and access easier, today few communities have use rights to forests and even if they are able to access them physically, it is outside the purview of the law. This has meant that fuelwood especially but also fodder needs are being met from non-forest lands such as small private holdings or estates. For example, tea bushes are very common sources of fuelwood throughout the region as well as branches of silver oak that dot both tea and coffee plantations. However, it is important to remember that even on private lands the state exerts its claims, setting rules concerning the felling of particular tree species though silver oak is exempt from such regulations, at least on paper.

Public policies around decentralized forest management are, therefore, being superimposed on a landscape that itself has changed significantly over time. In order to understand the impact of such policies, it is necessary to first consider how this landscape has been changed, how these changes impacted upon different communities and what that means in terms of the scope and possibility of 'new' public policies around forests. In the next section, we try to capture the broad-based changes that affected the agrarian landscape both prior to British rule and during it with particular focus on forests and agricultural lands.

PRE-FOREST POLICY DEVELOPMENTS

Pre-British period

While colonial records and accounts of the hill districts of the Nilgiris, Wayanad and Kodagu see the arrival of the British as the beginning of a new era of hope and prosperity, the hills had been occupied for centuries before that. Who the first inhabitants were is perhaps not very clear, but many adivasi communities certainly lived in these areas for a long time. A diversity of communities existed ranging from Kattuanayakans and Jen Kurubas who were dependent primarily on the collection of forest produce to Irulas and Kurumbas who depended significantly on agriculture to Todas who were mostly pastoralists.

The divide between primarily forest-dependent communities and agriculture-dependent communities was not that clear cut. For example, while Irulas and Kurumbas in the Nilgiris district grew crops such as bananas, chilies, edible roots, jack, limes and oranges on land near their homes (Noble 1968: 92; 106), they also used to clear the forest, burn the remaining vegetation and till the earth with hoes in order to grow finger, Italian, little millets and mustard (Francis 1908: 151). In Kodagu, adivasi communities engaged in shifting cultivation of mostly minor millet crops within what are reserved forests at present. Even non-adivasi communities such as the Kodava in Kodagu used to cultivate coffee within forests. In other words, the boundary between agricultural fields and uncultivated forests was fluid.

At the same time, forests were 'open access' resources to meet multiple needs of almost all communities. In the Nilgiris plateau area, the Irulas and Kurumbas depended the most on forest resources. Both used to collect wild yams, fruits and herbs: Irulas collecting dyes and gums in particular and Kurumbas specializing more in NTFP collection. In the Gudalur and Pandalur taluks of the Nilgiris, the Paniyans, Kurumbas and Kattanayakans (Jakka Parthasarathy 2007: 129-138) were the main adivasi groups, the latter two being more forest-dependent but all accessing forests for at least fuelwood purposes. In Wayanad, around 15 adivasi communities lived (Gopalan Nair 1911: 49), among them two were forest dwellers, the Kattanayakans and the Jen Kurubas, the latter also being significantly present in Kodagu along with the Bettu Kurubas-both communities accessing forests for non-timber forest produce (Richter 1870: 113). Even non-adivasi communities depended heavily on the forests for fuelwood purposes. Other activities associated with forests were hunting and worship. Communities such as the Kodava community in Kodagu and certain adivasi communities were known for their hunting prowess (Richter 1870: 51). Forests also contained deities important to a number of communities.

This landscape was not static prior to the British. 'New' agricultural communities inhabited the landscape that had mostly been encompassed by adivasi communities. For example in the Nilgiris, the Badagas migrated to the

hills as far back as the 12th century. In Wayanad, communities such as the Malayali Chettis colonized land, most likely in the 18th and 19th centuries, and in Kodagu, the Kodava community (and the Gowdas) also claimed lands mostly for paddy cultivation at least a couple of hundred years back. However, the indication is that this new wave of land colonizing did not necessarily come at the expense of adivasi communities. Hockings (1980: 100), speaking about the Badaga community, argues that they co-inhabited the landscape with adivasis developing mutual relations of exchange. Similarly, according to Moppert (2000: 42-3), the Kodavas and Gowdas who first cultivated rice did so mostly in the valleys and not the hilly areas inhabited by adivasis. Although coffee cultivation also predated the British, much of it took place where paddy had been grown. The wider scale conversion of forest lands to coffee was to take place more after British rule started.

British arrival

The arrival of the British resulted in more far reaching changes to the landscape. The most significant changes were the expansion of cash crops such as tea and coffee. Tea was introduced in the Nilgiris after Assistant-Surgeon Christee had spotted *Camelia*, a plant known as a cousin to tea. He ordered tea plants from China and although he died before they arrived, they were distributed to various parts of the hills (Francis 1908: 178). In Wayanad, according to Gopalan Nair (1911: 44), tea was planted in a number of estates in 1892 though it had already existed on Perindotty before that. The expansion of coffee in Kodagu also sped up significantly during the British period. The first coffee plantation was started by the British near Madhikeri in 1854. Subsequently, more than 11,000 ha of forest was cleared and by the end of the 19th century more than 30,000 ha of coffee existed (Suryanath 1993 as referred to in Moppert 2000: 42). Other plantation crops such as cardamom, pepper, cinchona, arecanut and rubber were also introduced. Even in areas such as present day Gudalur, where land was under the control of the Nilambur Kovilagam (kingdom) lands were leased out to estates, mostly owned by Britishers, and much of the land was converted to cash crops.

Hence, by the end of the 19th century, the landscape was much different than earlier. While tea dominated the landscape in the Nilgiris and Wayanad, coffee was dominant in Kodagu. Although paddy fields were still visible in Wayanad and Kodagu, they covered far less of an area of land as opposed to tea and coffee (Richter 1870: 86; Logan 1887: cccxxxiii). To a large extent this was due to the fact that colonial policy was aimed at making the landscape less treacherous and inhospitable. Gopalan Nair (1911: 7) talking about Wayanad's future wrote the following: "Wayanad has a bright future before it but for the dark spot which threatens to render it unpopular. This is malaria, but it is hoped that by the further clearance of forests and the opening up of lands this will gradually disappear".

State-driven forest conservancy

In the second half of the 19th century, British colonial rule established itself more directly with the establishment of a large bureaucracy aimed at both demarcating and assessing revenue and forest lands. The Revenue Department's jurisdiction was to assess existing cultivated lands (outside of natural forests) and also other lands both available or unavailable for cultivation. The Forest bureaucracy was in charge of demarcating forests and settling rights of communities that might have claim to forest lands. These processes were no doubt interlinked. Given the fact that the distinction between agricultural fields and forests was not clearcut for many agrarian communities meant that the process of forest reservation especially could result in significant hardship to them in terms of agriculture also.

This section examines how colonial public policies pertaining to forests and trees more generally manifested themselves in the three districts, first during colonial rule and then in independent India. Considerable debate has taken place about whether or not the Forest Department had an ecological imperative in mind, whether it addressed the needs of local communities or not and what the impact of its policies were (Grove 1994; Rangarajan 1995). As we highlight below, forest policy was complex, it varied from region to region, it did on paper at least mention the needs of forest-dependent communities and it privileged conservancy as well. It is the manner in which this happened that needs to be unpackaged.

In the Nilgiris, the first significant government action around forests occurred in 1869. In that year, the Government sanctioned the transfer of woods and plantations on the Nilgiri plateau to the Commissioner's care. In 1875 the woods were retransferred to the Forest Department, under the care of which they have remained ever since (Sekar 2004: 27). In 1878, a Commission was appointed to assess forest resources. This Commission highlighted the destruction of the woodlands around Ooty which had come into private hands under the Wasteland Rules of 1863 (Francis 1908: 273) and prescribed the reservation of those forests. In Nilgiris district the first reserved forest was established in 1905. A forest administration was formed to take charge of the management of the reserved forests and scientific management principles were prescribed in Working Plans.

The scientific management of forests in Kodagu dates back to 1865. In Kodagu, the Reserved Forest Act, 1865, resulted in all non-private lands coming under the control of the Forest Department. Forest reservation in the district started in 1870 with the actual process of demarcation starting in 1871. The Indian Forest Act was passed in 1878 and implemented in Kodagu in 1887 (Misra 2003: 31). The first Working Plan for the forests of Kodagu (1894) focused only on the deciduous forests due to their greater economic value. According to the Working Plan, reservation was a means to introduce a system for the selective felling of trees, in this case the most beautiful ones only. Thereafter, in

1925 onwards, efforts were made to increase the extent of teak by clear felling large areas of land (Misra 2003: 32).

Similarly, in Wayanad district, the first Working Plan dates back to 1902 in which logging and timber extraction were also the priorities. Dr. Cleghorn, the first Conservator of Forests visited Wayanad in 1858, in search of teak. He recommended the reservation of certain valuable species for timber or minor forest produce and the abolition of shifting cultivation. In 1863, Captain Beddome, Officiating Conservator, classified the Wayanad Forest as one of the twelve first forests of Madras. The reservation of forests was taken up in 1885 after the Madras Forest Act came into force in 1882. (Janardhanan 2001: 30). The first workingpPlan of Wayanad (1902 to 1915) focused on tree felling and artificial regeneration (Janardhanan 2001: 32).

But not all areas in the three districts came under the purview of the Forest Department and working plans. The Gudalur area remained for the most part outside the gamut of the state's jurisdiction until 1977 when a Gudalur forest division was created. Previously, only a portion of the division (Cherambady Range, which belonged to the Nilgiris North division) had been subject to scientific management through working plans. As a result, people had easier access to forests. On the down side, it meant that many of the forests were cleared for agricultural purposes.

There is little disagreement that the process of reservation was extensive throughout the three districts and that it was justified to a large extent by the need to follow principles of scientific forestry. But what was the impact on communities? A number of practices were banned such as the felling of trees, the cutting of branches and shifting cultivation all of which impacted communities dependent on fuelwood or agriculture within forests. With the Madras Forest Act of 1882, the felling of trees was totally banned in all the shola forests of Nilgiris district and numerous lands with forest cover or grassland became reserved forests. Similar developments took place in Wayanad and Kodagu. In 1894 the system of cutting of trees from all accessible areas was abolished and tree felling was restricted to definite localities each year in Wayanad (Janardhanan 2001: 32). After introduction of working plans in 1884, a selection system was adopted in Kodagu to remove only mature and over mature trees (Misra 2003: 32).

The impact on grazing was less absolute, at least for particular periods of time. For example, in the Nilgiris the Forest Administration banned grazing in 1905 only to permit the selective use of fires in 1924 for maintenance of pasture under certain conditions. Each Toda grazer could burn 4 acres of grassland per buffalo in a rotation system. Ranganathan's Working Plan in 1941 delimited 19 grazing blocks where fires were allowed every 2 years. Grazing of cattle in forests was also allowed through a permit system (Sekar 2004: 64). However, limits were put on both practices. In Jayadev's Working Plan in 1953, many grassland areas were converted into acacia plantations. As a result, the practice

of burning land was stopped. With regard to grazing, certain forest areas like the plantations on the plateau, the golf course in the Downs, and the teak plantations in Mudumalai were closed to grazing for a specified period and a heavier compounding fee was prescribed in 1948 for illicit grazing in closed areas (Sekar 2004: 64).

It is also important to scrutinize the Forest Department's claim that it was primarily interested in conservancy. While Dr. Brandis, Inspector General of Forests, argued that plantations were meant to increase the fertility of cultivated valleys, protect the hillsides from erosion and conserve water, the primary aim was to meet timber demands. In Nilgiris district, the first plantations of acacia and of eucalyptus were established in the upper plateau in the middle of the 19th century. Keeping in view the timber demands for the Madras Railway and the Bangalore barracks and other works, the Government ordered an inspection of the Mudumalai forest in 1862. Mudumalai forests were declared as reserved land under section 26 of the Forest Act (1882) and the working plans planned regular selection or clear fellings of timber (Sekar 2004: 38).² The first working plan for Nilgiris district, written in 1882 by Gamble, dealt mainly with raising eucalyptus plantations for the upper plateau. For the Mudumalai forest in the northern part of Gudalur area the prescription was to remove "sound trees over 6' girth" and to "protect seedlings and saplings of teak, vengai, rosewood from the over growth of inferior species" (Sekar 2004: 35). At the same time, the *taungya* system was introduced in order to restore the depleted forests, clearings were planted with teak, rosewood and vengai along with cultivation of dry crops like ragi.

Similar development occurred in Kodagu. The British Government undertook a systematic exploitation of Kodagu's forest resources for economic purposes with the creation of the Forest Department in 1865 and the introduction of silviculture practices. All the efforts concentrated on tree harvesting for timber, the most valuable forest product. In 1869, 15 tree species were declared as 'reserved' and became absolute property of the Government. Thus, selection felling was largely practiced in evergreen forests to exploit hardwood timber used as matchwood, plywood, firewood and to construct railway sleepers. The most accessible portions of the important forests were the most exploited. During World War II, before India's independence, the exploitation reached its highest level (Misra 2003)

The claim made by the Forest Department that it was interested in meeting the 'needs' of the people also needs further scrutiny. Local needs such as fuelwood, primarily, were indeed recognized by the Forest Department, but they were to be made available through specific fuelwood working circles. Communities who had for centuries collected fuelwood and other non-timber forest produce from the forest were no longer allowed to do so. It is also not clear

² Timber removed from Mudumalai forests during the 20th century amounted to 622,551 cubic feet during 1910-26; 286,367 c ft during 1926-36; 705,588 c ft during 1938-52, 1 330,517 c ft during 1952-63 (Sekar 2004: 38).

to what extent fuelwood working circles in practice actually made available fuelwood to local communities. For instance, in Nilgiris upper plateau around 1880. the Forest Department attempted to run three firewood depots and in 1894 about 134.5 acres of plantations were formed for firewood production but further operations were stopped in 1898 and no details about the harvest and utilization of those plantations were given by the Forest Department (Sekar 2004: 52). Moreover, for adivasi communities primarily dependent on the forests for their livelihood, not only for NTFP collection but also cultivation and domicile, their livelihoods and their physical location became illegal. Though this did not necessarily mean that they were physically removed, it did mean that they lived more precariously. Second, as highlighted above, reserved forests were worked by the Forest Department and hence the Forest Department became a landlord of sorts. While it is true that some adivasi communities gained employment with the Forest Department, such as the Yeravas in Kodagu (Laval 2008: 22-23), it alienated these communities from their traditional ways of living. Third, this was aggravated by the fact that the Forest Department itself was transforming the nature of forests. Finally, in an agrarian landscape where there is much demand for land, reserved forests provided an obstacle to cultivation. Agriculture and forests had historically not been separate spatial or land use domains, but now they were treated as such.

Having said this, two things need to be kept in mind. First, not all forests were classified as reserved forests. The Indian Forest Act, 1878, also introduced the concept of a protected forest and village forest. In Kodagu, *devarakadus* (sacred groves) and *uruduves* (village forests) were classified as protected forests along with *paisaris* (lands outside reserves not included in revenue paying or revenue free lands) (Kalam 1996: 11). According to Kalam (1996: 12), there were 873 *devarakadus* in Kodagu in 1873 covering an area of 10,865 acres. Access to fuelwood and NTFP was permitted from these forests. In fact, many of these *devarakadus* were encroached upon through coffee cultivation, some of the encroachments being legitimized.

Second, it is worth recalling that other processes were also at work. It was not only the state who was transforming the forest. Agrarian communities and estates, sometimes encouraged by the state, colonized more land. As mentioned above, in Gudalur, in 1845, the Nilambur Kovilagam started the process of leasing out land to large estates, Manjushree Plantations being the first leasee. Over the years, approximately 50,000 acres were leased out (PUCL 2002). Simultaneously, small-scale growers such as the Malayali Chettis also started cultivating land in this region. Yet the major transformation of land away from forests was encouraged by the colonial government.

POST-INDEPENDENCE FOREST POLICY

Forest policy, in the aftermath of independence, mirrored to a large extent colonial policy. As Guha (1983: 1888) has highlighted, the 1952 Forest Policy

clearly stated that the 1894 forest policy constituted its basis and that the national interest would be paramount. Hence, the process of reservation continued. In the central Western Ghats reserved forests constitute a large percentage of total forests. Reserved forests represent 50 per cent of the total area of Nilgiris district with Gudalur having the lowest proportion of reserved forest, namely 37 per cent of the land. However, another 37 per cent of the area is considered under private forests and are being claimed by the state. In Kodagu, reserved forests constitute about 30 per cent of the total area of the district (Elouard & Guilimoto 2000). Moreover, like its colonial forest predecessor, the 1952 policy also mentioned as one of its main aims the need to provide adequate fuel supply, grazing and small timber for agriculturalists. And like during the colonial period, these needs were to be met through working circles while other working circles continued to be exploited for timber stocks.

While the contours of forest policy remained much the same, the demands of independent India put added pressure on forests. Of particular importance was industrialization and the demand on forests. Guha (1983) has highlighted how the demand and consequently production of industrial timber increased from 4.46 million cubic metres in 1956-57 to 9.91 million cubic metres in 1975-76. This was to a large extent due to the increase in production for the paper industry from 92,800 tonnes in 1948 to more than 1 million tones in 1978, most of it being met from reserved forests. In 1976, the National Commission on Agriculture in fact stressed that the priorities of forest management should be production forestry for industrial and wood production.

This priority manifested itself in the central Western Ghats as well. Forest working plans for the Nilgiris, Wayanad and Kodagu, highlight the continued existence of working circles for pulpwood and timber extraction. Regular plantations took place during the 20th century up to mid-1970s³. And nowadays they occupy around 23 per cent of the total area of the reserved forests of the district. In the Gudalur region, there are a number of species to be found such as rose wood (*Dalbergia latifolia*), kulir mavu (*Machilus macarantha*), aini (*Artocarpus hirsuta*), red cedar (*Toona ciliata*), nawal (*Syzygium cuminii*), edalai (*Olea Dioica*) and vengai (*Pterocarpus marsupium*). In Kodagu, the Forest Department conducted the clear felling of forest patches of up to 200 to 300 acres to raise teak plantations (*Tectona grandis*) in moist deciduous forests. Consequently, the floristic composition of those forests changed a lot. For example, in Maukal and Devamachi reserved forests in the northeast of Kodagu with an area of 7004.40 ha teak comprises about 33 per cent of the total area (Misra, 2003). Similarly, in Rajiv Gandhi National Park, teak, eucalyptus and miscellaneous plantations account for almost 22 per cent of all species in 4 of the 7 ranges (Appayya 2001).

³ Plantations in Mudumalai and Benne forests during the 20th century constituted 32 acres during 1907-11, 241 acres during 1924-36, 288 acres during 1938-48, 259 acres during 1956-64, 300 acres during 1964-74 (Sekar, 2004: 34-39).

In the mid-1970s, the priorities of the Forest Department did partially change. For the first time, environmental concerns assumed importance, not only in terms of rhetoric around conservancy, but also in terms of practice. Planting of teak plantations was discontinued in the Nilgiris in 1974. The Mudumalai forests were brought under the jurisdiction of the newly appointed Wildlife Warden. The felling and marketing of trees was maintained for some time in order to improve the habitat for wildlife and in late 1980s felling activities ceased in Mudumalai. In Kodagu, the Virajpet Working Plan (2001-2002 to 2010-2011) confirms the end of heavy forest exploitation preferring to concentrate on “maintenance of environmental stability and ecological balance”, “forest cover and soil protection” and “sustainable forest production in natural and man-made forests”. Tree exploitation in moist/dry deciduous forests is limited to the removal of dead/falling material and salvage logging yet teak plantations, bamboos and sandalwood trees continue to be managed under working circles with different felling cycle periods.

A number of other legislative interventions, with an apparently environmental logic, were enacted immediately after independence that also shaped the ‘forest landscape’ in the way the Forest Department felt best. As forests were until 1980 under the jurisdiction of states, most acts were implemented at the state level. In Tamil Nadu, two significant acts were passed: (1) the Tamil Nadu Preservation of Private Forest Act, 1949 and (2) the Tamil Nadu Hill Areas (Preservation Of Trees) Act, 1955 (Act No. XVII Of 1955). Similar acts were passed in Kerala and Karnataka. In Kerala, two acts and one set of rules were passed, namely the Kerala Private Forests (Vesting And Assignment) Act, 1971, the Kerala Preservation Of Trees Act, 1986 and the Kerala Restriction On Cutting And Destruction Of Valuable Trees Rules, 1974. In Karnataka, the Karnataka Preservation Of Trees Act, 1976 made restrictions to cut, transport and sell timber especially teakwood, rosewood and sandalwood the most valuable species. Only eleven tree species were exempt from these regulations, most of them being exotic⁴.

The other significant development in the Western Ghats was the formation of protected areas for wildlife. Many of these protected areas including Mudumalai Sanctuary, Wayanad (or Muthanga) Sanctuary and Nagarhole National Park were formed prior to the enactment of the Wildlife Protection Act, 1972. These areas like reserved forests were zones of exclusion meant to create habitats for wildlife. The establishment of those protected areas had severe consequences especially for adivasis. The creation of Nagarhole National Park in 1983, for example, led to more and more restrictions on developmental activities within the park – resulting in almost no employment opportunities either. Moreover, the zoning based on the IUCN principles of wildlife management promoted the ‘voluntarily relocation’ of adivasis in the fringe areas. This mode of

⁴ Casuarina, Coconut, Erythrina, Eucalyptus, Glyrencia, Hopea Wightina, Prosipis, Rubber, Sesbania, Silver Oak and Subabul trees (Chapter V article 8. Inserted by Act 21 of 1977 w.e.f. 29.7.1977, Substituted by Act 39 of 1987 w.e.f. 1.12.1987).

conservation refused to accept the human history of the territory and aimed at clearing people out. As Mathews (2005: 9) has argued, adivasis were seen as encroachers. Hence, though on paper the Government of India recognised local communities' role in forest management in the 1988 National Forest Policy, the local reality is that adivasi populations living in the park are very poor and their rights curtailed (Appayya 2001: 69).

In summary, policies pertaining to forests and trees had a number of implications for local communities. First, from a legal point of view, not only did the Forest Department's jurisdiction increase in terms of area under its control, but it also extended its control to trees on private lands. Second, this meant that cultivators were less likely to grow trees on private lands due to the bureaucratic rules in practice to regulate it. Third, in the case of areas declared as national parks, further restrictions were placed on adivasis. In reserved forests at least, some employment opportunities existed but these became minimal within national parks. Finally, it is important to stress that unlike in the plains social forestry, aimed at meeting the needs of communities outside of the reserved forests, was insignificant. Most non-forest lands were under cultivation, leaving little land available for plantations.

FROM RESTRICTIVE TO PARTICIPATORY POLICIES?

Reference was made above to social forestry. Social forestry, on paper, was not only meant to wean rural communities off dependence on reserved forests but also as a means to recognize their needs. Ironically, the main criticism of social forestry was that it did not adequately involve rural communities in the process of identifying their needs, i.e. it was not participatory enough. As a result, communities often marketed timber obtained from social or farm forests and continued to use the reserved forests for fuelwood and other purposes (Saxena 1995).

For this reason, the National Forest Policy, 1988, has often been heralded as a watershed in forest policy. The 1988 policy recognized that forest dweller rights to forests should be paramount alongside environmental conservation. In 1990, the Government of India passed a government order providing a formal basis through which forest-dependent communities would be given certain rights of usufruct and proceeds from timber sales in degraded reserved forest areas in return for co-managing these forests (Sundar *et al.* 2001). The specifics of the sharing arrangements varied from one state legislation to another. In 2000, the government order was modified to include non-degraded lands as well in response to criticism that local communities were only given rights to 'poor quality' forests. In the case of protected areas (not reserved forests), ecodevelopment has been heralded as a new participatory policy in the sense that microplans identifying people's needs were to be drawn up. This, as we discuss later, was to be done because rights to use of resources within protected

areas were to be taken away. In other words, the policy aimed to offer alternative sources of livelihood so as to reduce their dependence on protected areas.

As mentioned at the outset of the paper, there is a substantive literature on participatory decentralization policies. Of particular concern to us are those studies that have focused more on the principles behind such policies and the extent to which power is actually being devolved to communities. For example, Lele *et al.* (2005), based on a rapid assessment of JFPM in Karnataka argue that very little devolution of power has actually taken place and that decentralization is nominal at best. Other studies such as Sundar *et al.* (2001) also highlight the significant powers retained by the Forest Department and hence the limited benefits accruing to local communities. Examples also exist of how such 'co-management' policies have overridden community-based forest management initiatives that were autonomous of the state (Sarin *et al.* 1996).

While such analyses are important in understanding the potential (or lack thereof) of decentralization policies, the impact of them are determined as much by how communities actually depend on forest resources and to what extent such policies address the wider resource needs of communities. As we have illustrated thus far, there are a mosaic of communities in the central Western Ghats region. Each of these communities has a distinct relationship to forest resources that include use of reserved forests, forests other than reserved forests and use of trees on private lands as well. Our interest is, therefore, in seeing how these 'new' public policies take cognizance of the wider agrarian landscape in which forest policies manifest themselves. Do participatory policies recognize the claims of local communities? Do they seek to address these claims? How are they received by communities? To answer these questions, a look is taken at both the particularities of these policies in the different districts, the scope of them and how they operate in practice.

JFM legislation in the three southern states of Tamil Nadu, Kerala and Karnataka emerged at different points. In Karnataka, a government order (G.O.) on joint forest planning and management (as JFM is known as) was issued in 1993 simultaneously to the initiation of the Western Ghats Forestry Project (WGFP). As a result, the focus of JFPM until 2000 was mostly in the Western Ghat areas of Uttara Kannada, Shimoga, and pockets of Chickmagalur district (see Lele *et al.* 2005: 1-2). In Tamil Nadu, the G.O on JFM was enacted in 1996 though its predecessor interface forestry was implemented from 1988 itself. After the JFM legislation, the main programme to implement it was the Tamil Nadu Afforestation Programme Phase I which was started in 1997-98. Finally, in Kerala participatory forest management (PFM) was legislated in 1998. PFM was implemented through the formation of *vana samrakshana samithis* (VSSs).

It is first of all important to assess the benefits to be derived from JFM. The main intent of JFM was to provide forest-dependent communities access to NTFP and certain monetary benefits associated with timber sales. Each of the

state legislations give members of established committees (VFCs and VSSs) unlimited and free access to firewood, fodder and green leaf manure⁵ though in the case of Tamil Nadu this is governed by clauses such as 'subject to availability', 'carrying capacity' and 'sustainability'. Furthermore it is the DFO who decides whether adequate produce is available or use is sustainable. The other constraint on local use is that it is, as the Kerala legislation stipulates, for 'bonafide use'. What exactly constitutes bonafide use remains open.

Nonetheless, one could argue, as many do, that access to reserved forests is a significant improvement from regimes of total 'legal exclusion'. There are signs, however, that JFM in practice is more about plantation activities than about rights to usufructs especially in the hills. For example, in the Nilgiris district, near Coonoor on the upper plateau, 240 ha of degraded forest in RF were planted at the end of the 1990s with local species and fruit tree species and around 300 persons were member of the VFC in order to take care of this area. At that time the forester in charge to implement the JFM programme in this district used to belong to the Social Forestry Department, a separate wing from the territorial. For him the main difficulty was to fulfill the needs of firewood for the local people. In a district where there are so many acacia and eucalyptus plantations, this should not be a problem. Since the plantations are under the custody of the territorial wing, the forester wanted to convince the territorial wing of the Forest Department to open a firewood depot for the members of the VFC. In Kodagu too, VFCs appear to be largely driven by plantation activities.

It is not, however, simply a case of choosing between exclusionary reserved forests and JFM-type strategies. As Lele *et al.* (2005) have highlighted in the context of Uttara Kannada, the pre-JFM landscape was itself highly complex with a number of different land tenure arrangements and rights either recognized by the Forest Act itself or by other forms of customary law. Similar complexity existed in the central Western Ghats. In some areas, adivasi communities appear to have had rights to collect NTFP and graze their cattle though these rights were not always articulated in working plans. In other areas, despite legal restrictions, they continued to cultivate land in what had become reserved forests. JFM, by institutionalizing a particular type of 'co-management' limited these possibilities. The impact of JFM, of course, would vary from context to context depending on the specific socio-economic and historical dynamics. For example, in parts of Wayanad where adivasi communities have had to compete with non-adivasis for use of reserved forest areas, AVSSs (adivasi VSSs) have

⁵ The VSS in Kerala is entitled to collected fodder, fuelwood, green manure and other products for bona fide use according to the provisions of the micro-plan as well as 100 per cent of the net revenue of NTFPs from the PFM area though only 25 per cent of the fund will be distributed amongst members whereas 50 per cent placed in a fund for developmental activities other than forestry activities and 25 per cent in a fund for sustained forest use. 10 per cent of proceedings from plantations within VSS will be allocated to the VSS. The VSS is also entitled to collect specified quantities of bamboo and reeds for bona fide use as well.

given specific adivasi communities exclusive rights to particular forests. On the other hand, many adivasi communities in the Gudalur region, for example, are primarily interested in being entitled to cultivate land within forest areas. JFM offers no solutions for this. In fact, JFM has firmly institutionalized the separation of forests from non-forests in landscapes where this distinction often was not there.

Participatory policies, moreover, have not been implemented in all areas. In Tamil Nadu, initial experiments with JFM (TAP) were in the plain areas. Although according to the government order, JFM can be implemented in any degraded forest area, this has not happened everywhere. For example, in the Gudalur tract of the Nilgiris, there has been no mention of JFM at all. The manner in which forests are to be protected remain the same as ever, namely through exclusionary reserved forests patrolled by rangers and guards. This is so because consolidation of forests is the main objective. The main reason for this is that much of the forest land is contested, i.e. Section 17 land under the Janman Act, 1969. People want titles to their land and the Forest Department is trying to wrest control over the land. Moreover, the way to protect forests in Gudalur area remains the same as those used in the creation of reserved forests a century ago: strengthening the work of rangers in improving their working conditions and delimitation on the ground plots (consolidation of forest areas). According to the latest working plan for Gudalur, 4,580 ha of land still have an uncertain status because of the incompleteness of the reservation procedure. For these lands, the working plan prescribes measures not only to identify and delineate public forest plots, but also to move the occupants considered illegal. When those lands come under the authority of the forestry administration, the aim is to regenerate forest cover which is nearly nonexistent today.

In Wayanad, PFM is prominent in most of the panchayats near the forests. The Kerala legislation, in addition to saying that PFM should be implemented in scattered and degraded forest lands also, also targets fringes of forest areas near villages and forests adjoining tribal settlements. In Kodagu, village forest committees (VFCs) are also quite prominent. However, though the Karnataka G.O. also provides space for VFCs not only in degraded lands but also in reserved forests near adivasi habitations, there are no separate adivasi VFCs. Finally, VFCs can not be formed in national park areas. As much of the eastern forested area of Kodagu lies within Nagarhole National Park it means that JFPM is not applicable there.

As mentioned above, ecodevelopment is the other main 'participatory' policy present in the central Western Ghats. Ecodevelopment was initiated in 1996 and supported by the World Bank and the International Development Agency (IDA). The strategy aimed to conserve biodiversity by addressing both the impact of local people on the protected areas and the impact of the protected area on local people. Ecodevelopment thus has two main thrusts: improvement of protected area management and involvement of local people (World Bank

1996: 3). The main logic of the project was to wean communities away from their dependence on natural resources within protected areas by providing them with income-generating activities and land and houses outside the protected areas (Laval 2008: 39). As Jha (2000) has argued, while JFM aimed to provide goods from the forest to communities, ecodevelopment aimed to enhance the services of forests for environmental purposes primarily. Ecodevelopment committees (EDCs) were established in which communities would help protect national parks, but from outside the parks to where they had been relocated. Not all households, however, have left the jurisdiction of the parks. In Nagarhole National Park, 7,500 persons (Jenu Kurumbas, Betta Kurumbas and Yeravas) are living inside the protected area and their main activities are wage labor, NTFP collection for their own consumption and for trade (31 plant species are collected for trade), cultivation, forestry works (World Bank 1996: 80; 88-89; 261). Under the terms of the Indian Wildlife Act of 1972 settlements within a National Park are considered illegal. Protected area authorities had therefore proposed that the 1,550 households currently residing within the protected area be relocated to forest areas on the periphery. A local human-right NGO (Fedina Vikas) has expressed concern over the relocation process, especially as it affects tribal non-cultivators. Redefining protected area boundaries could be more effective than resettlement as a means of resolving illegal habitation by farmers. The establishment of a protected area has restricted access to forest resources and affected traditional livelihoods (World Bank 1996: 90).

The main purpose of EDCs along protected areas appears to be to prevent elephants from exiting the national park and venturing into coffee estates. Not surprisingly, therefore, the main activity of EDCs has been the construction of trenches and the fencing of the park boundaries. According to official data 43 Solar lanterns, copper water containers, kerosene stoves, pressure cookers, utensils, and blankets were given to the people who were moved outside the park. Other income generating activities do not seem to have occurred because of lack of regular funds (Appaya 2001 as quoted in Laval 2008: 39)

Not surprisingly, EDCs elicit different reactions from different people. As Laval (2008: 39-40) has highlighted, some planters feel EDCs have helped reduce the elephant menace. However, if EDC is to be judged by the benefits it has provided to people who lived within the national park the story is very different. Adivasi communities do not appear to have benefited at all. Those families who have remained in the park are effectively isolated from any development activity as the Forest Department will not allow even electricity supply or wells for drinking water. These would constitute a violation of the laws governing protected areas. Similarly, if ecodevelopment is to be judged by its 'participatory' content, it also appears to fall short. The rehabilitation of people from within Nagarhole to outside Nagarhole occurred without any consultation with local people. Law defined the rules of the game. All the protests made by tribal communities and supporting NGOs -such as CORD, DEED and Fedina

Vikas- before and during the IEP project were ignored. Hence, the relocation of many tribal groups was forced displacement rather than voluntary as the Karnatak Forest Department claims. As a result, not only do these 'developmental activities' further impoverish those communities who live in the park, but consequently have had a negligible effect on biodiversity and forest conservation through proposed alternative livelihoods (Devullu *et al.*, non dated).

CONCLUSION

Agrawal (2005), in his recent book *Environmentality: Technologies of Government and the Making of Subjects* examines how government policies have created new decentralized governmental localities or communities that are interested in managing the forests. One must recall that the thrust of forest policy, post-1988, remains environmental conservation and that the priorities of rural people have been envisaged keeping this in mind. In that sense, participatory policies have been possible to the extent that the Forest Department deems them supportive of conservation. Policies such as JFM and ecodevelopment remain relatively small-scale in terms of the overall coverage of Forest Department policy. The promotion of biodiversity, non-timber forest produce, ecological restoration etc., as articulated within Forest Department working plans since the 1970s, continues to occur mostly as it has historically, i.e. in designated working circles, managed by the Forest Department. Not surprisingly, another main thrust of forest policy is the promotion of tree growing outside reserved forests. In the hills, these policies are only now being promoted. Nonetheless, the thrust seems to be to make 'forest produce' available outside the state forests so as to reduce pressure on these forests, a philosophy reminiscent of social forestry in the 1980s.

Moreover, it remains to be seen whether or not such decentralized localities take shape in pristine forest areas or whether they admit the rights of forest-dependent communities within protected areas. Second, these new governmental localities have redefined claims to forest resources ignoring pre-existing claims. In some cases, as illustrated above, these new rights regimes might strengthen the claims of adivasi communities where they have been challenged by other communities before. However, in other areas, these localities are excluding prior claimants. Third, the old philosophy of meeting rural community needs from non-forest lands appears to be still very much in place. In the hills, the list of species that farmers can fell without permission of the Forest Department has become bigger, making it less restrictive to grow trees. It appears therefore that the idea of weaning away communities from dependence on reserved forests is still very much on the table.

The long-term impact of these policies, environmental and social, remain to be seen. If one returns to Agrawal's larger argument, new governmentalized localities influence the manner in which new regulatory communities evolve and environmental subjectivities are created. The emergence and sustainability of new regulatory communities, i.e. communities that manage forests, however,

depends on the long run upon how these communities perceive of new public policies and whether or not they feel they benefit from them adequately. With the recent passing of the Scheduled Tribe (and other Forest Dwellers) Rights Act, 2007, increasing attention is being paid to historical claims to forest land within reserved forests and protected areas. In Kodagu, the NGO CORD is raising the issue of adivasi land rights. In Gudalur, the Act also provides an opportunity for communities to claim title to lands declared as Section 17. In such a context, participatory policies of the kind described provide few benefits. But in other localities, these policies perhaps can?

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