

Struggle and Resistance: A Study of Road Building in Highland Travancore

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ABSTRACT

With the advent of building roads in Highland Travancore in the mid-nineteenth century, there evolved many dissenting voices. The road making in the hills was fundamentally a colonial project favouring an influential section of people. A new space was produced displacing and re-displacing many lives. The study concentrates on the trunk roads and the material process present in building it. It captures the struggle involved in between different sections of people in bringing out their interests to reality. By twentieth century, the resistance movement gets stronger and a new system of building roads was pursued taking the interests of the weaker sections as well.

KEY WORDS: Highland, Roads, Resistance.

Introduction

The development of infrastructure in the Highland Travancore took place in the early nineteenth century. Construction of pagodas, palaces, and government offices were started with the formation of a Maramat cell. Administration expansion and trade matters necessitated the construction of roads for communication purposesⁱ. Travancore saw the introduction of the knowledge of “European engineering art” during this timeⁱⁱ. The Maramat cell was equipped with all the accomplished chief engineers who were

Europeans. The cell was then reorganised to form Travancore Public Works Department in 1862.

During the nineteenth century three major crops namely cinchona, coffee, and tea were introduced to the Highland Travancore. Tea cultivation prospered in 1880's as coffee was abandoned due blight disease. Many forest lands were also acquired by the London based joint stock companies since the place was good enough to grow teaⁱⁱⁱ. Apart from European planters colonial officials also began to acquire land. For an instance, a European planter named J. S Valentine wrote a letter to the Dewan of Travancore requesting land for cultivation^{iv}.

As tea became a major produce, planters found the conveyance to be a serious issue. As the number of cardamom cultivators rose in 1880's, neither one track paths nor bridle path weren't sufficient. Hence it was necessary to develop tracks for pack-bullocks. Bridle paths were constructed using the money collected as grazing fees from the tribespeople^v. Since the urge to build a trunk road from highland to the plain was alarming the engineers started surveying the region. The construction of the trunk road was concluded by the end of the nineteenth century.

Highland roads were fundamentally the result of colonialism. In most cases the paramountcy would pressurise the princely government to build roads and also to meet the entire cost of construction. Building of roads was entirely a colonial project which was strictly imposed by the state to cater the planters interest. The study captured the struggle and the resistance between local people, planters, and princely state. The local people suggested new routes which benefited them and negotiated with the state to make it happen.

Methodologically, the study took-off from the Braudelian hypothesis: roads are more than ribbons put across planet earth. With the emergence of roads there arises mobility. Besides human mobility in the form of labourers, tribals, migrants there was non-human mobility. Mobility took various forms as capital accumulation went on.

Highland Travancore: An Exploration

Highland Travancore that covers a part of Western Ghats is 1200m above sea level. The dense forest, steep hills, and deep valleys form region. The outline of Highland Travancore represents the present Idukki district in Kerala. Highland Travancore attracted the eye of the European visitors only by the late eighteenth century. The first men to visit was Col Arthur Wellesley^{vi}. In 1817, Lieutenants BS Ward and PE Conner of the Madras Army surveyed the region as part of the Great Trigonometrical Survey of India. According to them:

[T]he immense tract of hills interposing Eastward between the British and Travancore States, forms a perpetual and indelible barrier, their confines Ward and Conner 1994, 1: 4).abandoned to solitude and but little calculated to produce jealousies or discussion, have not been defined with any nice precision or artificially marked; the strict bounds are only known to the mountaineers that rove through those wilds, and the information regarding them is liable to all the incorrectness of traditional [sic] knowledge^{vii}.

After the survey of Ward and Conner, nearly 50 years later, there arrived General Douglas Hamilton to look for the feasibility of a sanatorium for the British troops. He anticipated the advent of plantation once the connectivity was established “the thousands of acres of land suitable for chincona [cinchona], tea, and coffee, would soon attract planters to these lovely hills”^{viii}.

In 1868, JD Munroe the then superintendent of Cardamom Hills travelled around these hills. His monograph, *The High Ranges of Travancore* gave a vivid picture of regions from the hills of Karimkulm and Anamudy:

From the top of the latter is a beautiful and extensive view on a fine day of the sea to the west coast, the intermediate hills and forests making a splendid foreground. To the north can be seen the Anney-malleis [Anamalais] and Cochin hills, and to the north-east the plains of Coimbatoor [Coimbatore] and the Neilgherries [Nilgiris], also the Unjennad [Anjunad] valley, and to the south as far as the eye can reach the Cardamom hills and the ranges of hills beyond Peermad [Peermad], and to the south-east a glimpse of the Bodynaike-noor valley. The view in fact comprises four provinces otherwise than Travancore, viz. Coimbatoor [Coimbatore], Madure [Madurai], and Cochin. The view from Currincollum [Karimkulam] is also very grand, and the stupendous precipices on its eastern face add a peculiar grandeur to it^{ix}

Highland Travancore was inhabited by forest communities such as Muduva, Urali, Mala-pulaya, Mannan, Palian, and Ulladan. All of them were settled in various regions of Anjunad and Cardamom Hills. Though not all of them are originally hailed from these places but some are. Due to diverse reasons they must have relocated themselves in various times^x. Tamil immigrants such as Vellallars and Chetties also became inhabitants along with these forest community. As time passed, when planters and migrants flocked to the region the census showed different figures. The population of Peermad that stood at less than 16000 in 1875 had crossed 45000 by 1911. The population of Devikulam was a mere 1820 persons in 1875 and had risen to over 23000 by 1911^{xi}.

A Road to the Ghats

A planter on horseback riding from Kottayam to the Peermad Hills around mid nineteenth century noted that there were only six places on the entire stretch of over forty miles, where he could light his cheroot meaning-only six places of habitation^{xii}. Before the cart road came to exist it was once a trek path. A CMS missionary named Richard Collins narrates his journey through the trek path:

W]hen I first went eastwards, there was but a foot path through the nearly forty miles of jungle to Mundakayam [from Kottayam]. On this we went in Indian file..... before reaching Mundakayam we entered a primeval forest. What a sight was this! Untouched, as we cannot doubt, since the creation of man, these woodland giants, huddled together, and owing no laws but those of nature, had for centuries grown,

lived, and died in each other's arms. Standing in the roadway that had been cut through them by Madura merchants, who have long traded with Travancore by this route, the eye could scarcely penetrate the deepening blue of those recesses.... On the morning we set out to ascend the mountains, the crest of which was about twelve miles from Mundakayam. We followed the route of Madura merchants, several gangs of whom we met with their bullocks in single file laden with cotton cloths and chillies. The journey was very charming, the road lying often through exquisite scenery, and for a long way through forest lands which had been partly felled for cultivation...When we reached the tableland called Peer Merd (more properly Pir Mede, Medu signifying high, or tableland), the cool air was most exhilarating. We were about 3500 feet above the level of the sea; some of the neighbouring peaks being least 5000 feet.^{xiii}

As trade rose and for better convenience a cart road had to be built. The construction of the Kottayam-Peermed Ghat road that connects the west to the Tamil plains took nearly three decades to complete. The Ghat road beginning from Kottayam passed through Mundakayam and Kanjirappally to reach Peermed. The road then descended to Cudallur, Cumbum and Teni in the Tamil country. Teni was connected via Aandipatti, Uslampatti and Madura to Tuticorin port on the east coast. The produce would then be exported to the west. The Ghat road connecting the west coast with Peermed Hills measure over 60 miles cost about Rs 8.25 lakhs^{xiv}. The road was built solely by the Travancore government, the Chief Engineer mentions in his letter to the resident dated March 13, 1869: "I was on the hill side [?] of that ghaut for days together tracing and retracing, surveying, sparing neither time nor personal convenience"^{xv}. In Travancore, trunk roads were built by PWD through supply contractors of materials and labourers. According to the Chief Engineer: "The entire absence of contractors, not only for the construction of any portion of the works but even for the supply of the most ordinary materials required by the Department, makes the labour extremely hard"^{xvi}.

Contestation over Roads

Roads in the Highland Travancore were mainly built favouring the planting community. An important change that occurred in the beginning of the twentieth century is that local people entered into negotiation with the princely government so as to lay out the colonial project to serve their needs. As the negotiations gained strength they used the platform such as newspapers and legislative bodies to draw the attention of the Dewan and higher officials. Newspapers often wrote editorials under heads such as 'An important matter for the consideration of the Dewan and the Chief Engineer in Travancore'. For an instance, in an editorial dated February 10, 1897, the Nazrani Deepika pointed out an alternative route to the Peermed Ghat Road

which would be favourable to the local peasants also listing out other advantages^{xvii}. In the follow up editorial the newspaper daily expressed regret as no move was made from the officials^{xviii}. Ultimately Travancore officials came up with a report that alternative road proposal was not feasible^{xix}. By 1930's local people began to voice against the practice of road making favouring influential people: "The current practice of building roads only for influential section [meaning, the European planters] would not in way mitigate the sufferings of the local people. Unless the government formulates an appropriate policy and layout a scheme for providing annual grants according to the needs of the villages, their difficulties can never be mitigated"^{xx}.

Unlike the KK Road which was built directly by the Travancore government, the trunk road from the Anjunad Hills opening out to the Tamil plains, the Northern Outlet Road, as it was called, was built by the planting company, Kannan Devan Hills Produce Company (hereafter, KDHPC), on behalf of the government. The process was started in 1881, when Col. Valentine marked the trace from Munnar flat, through the Nyamakad gap, down the Talliar valley and Marayur to Chinnar, and to the village of Manpatty^{xxi}. In 1892, the Martins followed the Valentine's trace to explore the possibility of laying a bridle path, which could be subsequently developed as a cart road. The route partly

traversed the high altitude rice-fields of immigrant Tamils who sought to resist it. As Violet Martin notes of the 1892 exploration:

They [the Martins] got to Talliar by 10 a.m. After tiffin they tried to go on to Marayoor for the night. Servants and coolies with personal saman [luggage] and some provisions went on, wading across rivers and walking through paddy fields until the village chattram was reached. There with waterproof sheets and blankets as their only shelter they camped. Since they were going to rice-growing country Af Martin had not taken rice for the coolies, thinking he could purchase it. Alas! things did not fall out as he had thought. The villagers heard that a cart-road was to be cut through their paddy fields and refused to help the gentleman who dared to think of thus spoiling their land. Even after offering Re. 1 per measure for rice nothing could be done, and the poor coolies had to go on to the next camp without proper food. Mrs Martin giving them the six loaves of bread that she had arranged to bring for her own and her husbands' supply.

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Endnotes

Roads as such has a life cycle of its own. In many cases, once a footpath or a bridle path later becomes a cart road and finally turns to a metalledⁱ or a gravelled road.

ⁱⁱ P Shungoony Menon, *A History of Travancore from the Earliest Times*. Madras: Higginbotham and Co, 1878, p 417.

ⁱⁱⁱ S Muthiah. *The Planting Century: The first hundred years of the united Planters' Association of Southern India 18913-1993*. New Delhi: Affiliated East-West Press, 1993, p 78.

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- iv GoT. Proceedings. Cover File. B. No.125. F. No. 4537. Letter dated 23.04.1891 from JS Valentine to the Dewan of Travancore.
- v Travancore Administration Report (hereafter, *TAR*) 1868-69: 49
- vi Amita Baig, and William Henderson. *Facets of a Hundred Years Planting: A Centenary of Planting in the Kanan Devan Hills Concession 1878-1978*. Munnar: Tata-Finlay Limited, 1978, p 47
- vii BS Ward, and PE Conner. *Geographical and Statistical Memoir of the Survey of Travancore and Cochin States*. Trivandrum: Travancore Sircar Press. 1994 [1901]. 1:4
- viii Douglas. Hamilton,. *Report on the High Ranges of Annamullay Mountains*. Madras: Madras Saint George Gazette Press. 1866, p 10.
- ix JD Munro. *The High Ranges of Travancore*. np: np. 1880, p 5-6.
- x Heather Lovatt and P de Jong . *Above the Heron's Pool*. London: British Association for Cemeteries in South Asia. 1993, p 7-8.
- xi Census 1911: 6.
- xii Baig and Henderson, op, cit., p 56.
- xiii Richard Collins.. *Missionary Enterprise in the East*. London: Henry S. King & Co. 1873, p, 251-58
- xiv GoT. Proceedings. PWD Files. B. No. 362. F. No. 1402, File notings dated 14.10.1921.
- xv GoT. Proceedings. Cover Files. B. No 33. F. No 235. Letter No [Illegible] dated 13.03.1869 from Chief Engineer to the Resident of Travancore and Cochin.
- xvi *TAR* 1865-66: 91
- xvii *Nazrani Deepika*. 10.02.1897
- xviii *Nazrani Deepika*. 30.06.1897
- xix GoT. Proceedings. PWD File. B. No. 264. F. No.11359. Letter No 626 dated 19.05.1899 letter from the Executive Engineer to the Chief Engineer.
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