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RESTORING ‘ADAM’S EMPIRE’: LOCKEAN COLONIAL PROPERTY AND STATISTICAL-BUREAUCRATIC REPORTS IN EARLY COLONIAL MALABAR, 1792-1805

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British colonialism in India, from its inception, was motored by the assumption of civilizational superiority- both material and cultural, over the colonized. The initial step in validating such a sense was to narrate the material and social backwardness of India, especially its countryside. The process of ‘making visible’ the material impoverishment of the Indian economy was the defining paradigm of most early colonial reports, surveys and assessments undertaken by the ever-expanding English East India Company regime. These initial colonial ‘investigative modalities’¹ fixed its ‘colonial gaze’² upon that India which it sought to make visible in the manner they wanted, suiting their state-building schemes. They further satisfied the resource-seeking tendency of the expansionary English capital. This twin-pronged colonial-capitalist quest is tautologically validated by assuming scientificity for investigative modalities of survey reports via the Baconian induction method. As the recent Latin American decolonial scholarship would show³, the rise of modernity, in the sense of modern state-building and governmentality, and the rise of modern Baconian science is inextricable from the process of European colonization and the invention of the ‘civilizational other’. The principle of ‘improvement’, propounded by 17th century English scientists like Robert Boyle, philosophers like John Locke and eventually institutionalized by the Royal Society of London in their endeavours at ‘making visible’ the natural history of the colonies, sought to restore the true resource-potential of earth, supposed to be lost with the primal sin of Adam, by

interventionary labour. Thus, early colonial records as in Malabar, attempting to recount the ‘wastelands’ in colonies unused by ‘ignorant’ natives, substantiated the colonial implications of Lockean notions of private property that gave right to the colonizer to take possession of and improve colonized lands underutilized by the civilizationally inferior and non-industrious ‘other’.

Narrating the ‘Wastelands’ of Malabar into Existence

The early colonial enterprise of English East India Company in India, beginning with its acquisition of *diwani* rights over Bengal in 1765, prospectively and retrospectively asserted their moral entitlement to rule over the territories that it acquired and intended to acquire by making visible (constructing) in detail the materially impoverished state of Indian economy, especially its countryside.⁴ The blame for the Bengal famine of 1770s was implicated upon the ignorance and inertia of India’s agricultural classes⁵ so that not only can the budding company state steer clear of any acquisitions for their role in the famine, they could self-posit themselves as manifest agents of intervention validated by their civilizational superiority. English colonialism exercised similar claims not only in the Orient but in European heartlands too as they justified their colonial intrusions in Ireland by enumerating in detail their equivalency with “...pagans, or even barbarians” despite being Christian.⁶ Upon its acquisition in 1792 as part of the spoils won against Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo-Mysore war, Malabar too was subjected to such civilizational deriding by the Company officials for the want of dire material improvements. Revenue reports and surveys undertaken by the colonial officialdom, limited by the continuing threat of Mysore north of ghats until 1799, frequent uprisings by Mappila chieftains in South Malabar and the ever-present Pazhassi rebellion in the east till 1805,⁷ nevertheless continued to visualize in writing the supposed squalid state of material economy ruined by native ignorance and disturbances. Beginning with the *Joint Commissioners Report* of 1792-93 (henceforth JCR), such reports and surveys exhibit



civilizational anger at supposed native ignorance leading to the primitive state of economy and frustration at not being able to improve for the native deceit and restlessness.

J. Smee, in his *Report on the Survey and Assessment of South Malabar*, made in 1799, highlights the “spirit of dishonesty and speculation” that was supposed to be rampant among the natives of Malabar.⁸ Cultivators in South Malabar were projected to be so ignorant that the “...unfavourable apathy of minds that their thoughts never have as yet aspired to the improvement of their estates”.⁹ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, a natural historian employed directly by the then governor-general Wellesley to survey South India in the wake of the conquest of Mysore in 1799, reconfirms Smee’s narrations of the Malabar economy. Since his survey was modelled as a travel report that detailed each locality as he travelled, he could substantiate the depravities of each locality that could then be inducted to highlight the material backwardness of Malabar as a whole. Consequently, the then Palakkad was shown as completely neglecting the cultivation of arable lands in spite of them not being taxed.¹⁰ The state of cultivation in neighbouring Kollengode was also ridiculed.¹¹ J. Strachey in his 1801 *Report on the Northern Division of Malabar* complains of the unskilful husbandry of native agriculturalists leading to the impoverishment of the high-potential *Paramabu*¹² cultivation in ghat-regions of Northern Malabar.¹³ Thus, a series of complaints were repeatedly registered by such reporting directed against the existing state of Indian agriculture including sluggish investments, crude agricultural implements and technologies and poor livestock. The latter was repeatedly referred to by Buchanan, as in remarking that the cattle he saw in Palakkad was the most diminutive and malnourished he had ever seen.¹⁴ Natives are portrayed as having no notion of utilizing forests for timber in such assessment reports.¹⁵ Buchanan repeatedly exoticizes the market potential of teak and blackwood which the natives are shown to ignore.¹⁶ Pre-colonial industrial

forms are also nullified as in Smee seeing only coarse waistcloths being produced in southern Malabar.¹⁷ While Strachey does detail the existence of iron, brass, ivory and silver works, they are shown as not to be in an advanced state fit enough for market proportions.¹⁸

The caste Hindus of Malabar, especially its Nair populace, are narrated as non-industrious and sluggish. Maj. Macleod, in his *The Jamabundy Report of the Division of Coimbatore and the Province of Malabar, dated 18th June 1802*, positions Nairs as averse to any form of productive activity.¹⁹ Buchanan elaborates on this by portraying “Hindus” of Malabar intoxicating themselves by wasting away their harvest for cheap prices, leading to severe scarcity by the end of the harvest season.²⁰ Further, pepper products are supposedly sold off cheaply to extravagantly celebrate the festival of *Onam*.²¹ The customary *Kanam* mortgaging system itself was deemed non-industrious as it provided no incentive for the cultivator to improve the productivity of the land he worked in.²² These chidings are similar to admonishments of Bengali landlords by John Shore who are shown as not being “...duly qualified for the management of their hereditary lands; and that, in general, they are ill-educated for this task; ignorant of the common forms of business...; inattentive of the conduct of it...”.²³

The earliest colonial reports on Malabar, mostly falling between its acquisition in 1792 and the suppression of serious resistance movements by the fall of Pazhassi in 1805, have a uniqueness of attributing the state of material backwardness in the region to the military activities of the recent fallen Mysorean regime and the then ongoing disturbances. This is achieved by marking out once active countryside cultivations being encroached upon by unproductive scrub, a narration repeated across the Subcontinent in the early colonial phase.²⁴ This wasting away of cultivatable lands is mostly attributed to the bygone ‘atrocities’ of Mysorean rulers as time and again repeated in early colonial reports on Malabar. Mysorean interventions are argued as reasons for the depopulation of



whole stretches of agricultural lands earlier controlled by Brahmin *Janmis* and Nair *Kanamkars*.²⁵ Buchanan stresses out these ‘degenerations’ locally as the entire agricultural tract between Thirunavayya and Parappangadi supposedly remained fallow²⁶ and only a quarter of arable Kurumbranad was put into use,²⁷ effects attributed by him to the depopulation triggered by the Mysorean presence. Persisting revenue stagnation during the initial years of direct company rule in Malabar too is attributed to native resistances, as in Buchanan angrily complaining of Nair militias creating havoc in the experimental plantation set up in 1797 at Anjarakandy by an English privateer merchant Murdoch Brown.²⁸ In fact, Buchanan finishes his survey of Malabar by reporting to Wellesley that agriculture and manufacture “were at low ebb due to rebellious spirit and heavy-handed response required to restore them and make use of the actual rich potential of Malabar.”²⁹ Native deceit, another marker of civilizational inferiority, was constructed as the reason for stagnating revenues. While the JCR complains of Zamorin not letting his *Karikkar* cooperate with British revenue agents³⁰, Macleod blames accountant *Menon* and *Parputties* for concealing true revenue records for personal profit³¹. Consequently, Indians are shown as ignorant, unscientific and superstitious³², as in Buchanan blaming the poor state of Cattle health on native customs as in the Brahmin women of Palakkad sacrificing bull calves for fertility to temples that then go on to roam around and in its stead are employed younger less-productive cattle.³³

The Politics of ‘Improvement’

While the Irish were chided for possessing only ‘barbaric’ faculties irrespective of being Christian, the 16th-century Elizabethan English colonialists placed themselves as agents of improvement by introducing planned plantations in conquered Irish lands.³⁴ This colonial conceiving of civilizational improvement was inherently associated with Christian providentialism from the beginning in such a way that it sanctified itself by the divine will to turn

unused/underutilized wasteland into productive fields both at home and abroad.³⁵ John Locke, the 17th-century ideologue for English colonialism, differentiated it from Iberian modalities of colonial expansion seeking to convert ‘heathen lands’ by locating legitimization based on the ability to turn unused wastelands productive.³⁶ However, this ‘improvement’ principle, paradigmatic of Baconian sciences and modern governmentality, is intertwined with the belief in recovering the fruitfulness of the ‘fallen earth’ in the postlapsarian period for the advancement of mankind. The agrarian dimension of recovering earth’s fruitfulness-restoration of man’s ‘Adamic empire’ increasingly began to be tied up with the English colonial conception of improvement of land that by the end of the 17th century institutionalized in the ideas of Locke and the taxonomic pursuits of The Royal Society London.³⁷

The Lockean quest for the restoration of the Adamic empire is the cornerstone for English notions of possession and private property by which labour over land imparts property rights over it to the one who laboured. Thus, possession and improvement are equated, implying the legitimacy of colonial dominions that the English are to improve.³⁸ The direct implication of such a thesis was that if the owner allowed private property to waste away, he was effectively forgoing his rights over it. Since the colonized native was constructed to be too ignorant to improve the land in his possession, the improving colonizer had the right to take over.³⁹ Improvement was thus the foundational theory of the empire.⁴⁰

Similar to the Lockean justification for English colonial sovereignty over conquered Amerindian lands using his conception of civilizational improvement⁴¹, early colonial surveys and reports on Malabar attempted to propose an ‘objective’ notion of interventionist improvement seeking to rescue and better-colonized wastelands from ignorant and restless natives. Buchanan directly seeks possibilities of inviting the interventions of Moravian missionaries,

known for their association with colonial slave enterprises in the Caribbean⁴², to improve the civilizational-material conditions of the *Nayadi* community that for his ‘gaze’ was so wretched and non-industrious.⁴³

Unsurprisingly, Lockean justification for the possession of colonized lands ran in tandem with the resource-seeking expansionary spirit of the English capital. Malabar was envisaged as an experimental space since 1792 for English investment claiming native transformation.⁴⁴ The capitalist spirit that lay behind the colonial quest for improvement advocated increased crop production and productivity, better animal husbandry, better marketization, initiating managed plantations and timber forests and converting forested wastelands to sites of rampant hill produce.⁴⁵ These projections are reproduced faithfully in early colonial records on Malabar. While the foremost report, the JCR, adopted a collaborationist stance by hoping that allowing the natives to “freely use their talent and industry” would improve manufactures and commerce well connected with the rest of the empire⁴⁶, later assessments like Macleod’s are extremely anxious of not even being able to collect revenue in select items like timber, coconut, pepper, mint and tobacco by Mysorean era standards.⁴⁷ The latter hindrance, blamed upon the natives as elucidated already in the paper, is inherently associated with the capitalist improvement logic. Buchanan’s survey report too is replete with colonial projections of improvement.⁴⁸ The timber value of teak, to which natives pay scant attention, is repeatedly highlighted in Buchanan.⁴⁹ He reiterates the high marketability of coconut saleable outside Malabar⁵⁰ and the possibilities of extracting potential gold on an industrial scale from Nilambur, over which he is visibly frustrated as he could not visit the deposits in person due to the ongoing Pazhassi rebellion (in 1800-01)⁵¹. Macleod too talks excitedly of the gold prospects in the Wayanad-Nilambur region.⁵² Colonial plantation experiments aimed at improvement are time and again celebrated as in Buchanan endorsing Murdoch Brown’s experimentations with

pepper, sugarcane, Mauritius and Nanking cotton, coffee, cassia, Ceylon cinnamon and various rice varieties.⁵³ Brown's opinion that pepper vines grow better against teak is of crucial importance to Buchanan as it advances the prospects of two commodities that he specifically exoticizes.⁵⁴ Reports like that of Buchanan, Smee and Macleod repeatedly mimic Locke's own idea of restoring Earth's lost fruitfulness by sharing his vocabulary that includes colonial 'innovation', 'useful arts' and 'industry' posited against that of native 'idleness', 'waste' and 'ignorance.'⁵⁵

Making Visible the Colonized 'Riches'

Not only was the Lockean divinified conception of improvement connected with rising colonial capitalist interests, it also augmented and validated the scope and method of Baconian inductive sciences. Colonial investigative modalities that sought to gather, order and transform knowledge of the natives into useable forms like survey and revenue reports operated on the Baconian philosophy of knowing the divinely ordained world through induction of individual sense experiences.⁵⁶ The colonial process of property-making in to-be assessed lands, that had mobilized substantial amount of cultivatable land using the discourse of improvement,⁵⁷ require making the said unused land and its underutilized yet rich resources visible to the upper echelons of the Company administration and the Metropole. Continuation of the colonized land and its resources as *terra incognita* was considered a threat as the English colonial experience in the Scottish Highlands proved whereby the Jacobite uprising of 1745 was considered to be an outcome of the poor knowledge of Highland topography that was rectified with the Military Survey of Scotland from 1747 to 1754.⁵⁸ Early colonial reports on Malabar too share this anxiety over the 'invisibility' of the native land and resources to the colonial gaze as JCR laments "...our own want of adequate information and efficacy to administer a troublesome area as Malabar..."⁵⁹, anxiety confirmed in the Second Malabar

Commissioners Report made a decade later in 1801 as "...with the detail of which we are entirely unacquainted...", referring to the proper revenue estimates of Kadathanad.⁶⁰

The colonial gaze, replaceable here with 'Scientific gaze', made visible native land and resources according to their own perceptions and governmental requirements. While this 'disciplining gaze' that carried out the Foucauldian 'ceremony of objectification' reiterated the power relations inherent to the very act of observation that embodies the observer's power over the observed, the gaze localized itself to the immediate needs of its space-time.⁶¹ Thus, the initial process of making visible the *terra incognita* of Malabar involved comparing it with already defined spaces for similarities and differences.⁶² Buchanan, the most localized surveyor in the said period, differentially locates the state of cultivation and timber forests by comparing the lofty trees of countryside Palakkad to that of Bengal⁶³ and Chelakkara to that of Chittagong⁶⁴. This differential visualization however was anxious to make the whole of Malabar visible to the colonial gaze and this includes the likes of Buchanan and Smee frustrated at not being able to properly cover the whole of Northern Malabar as places like Wayanad were back then still rebel territories. The anxiety of the colonial gaze strove to grasp the whole of Malabar as in Buchanan and it was not, as opined by K N Ganesh⁶⁵, his intention to focus solely on traditional resource regions like central plains and coast and avoid Wayanad or western ghats proper. Further, the unexplored resource abundance of Malabar is accentuated in most early colonial reports. While Smee declares "...no country in the world, I am disposed to think, excels Malabar in fertility or in its valuable spontaneous product...",⁶⁶ Buchanan places it as where "...nature has bestowed uncommon advantages..."⁶⁷. Wellesley justified his expansionary policies against Mysore by claiming "to improve its cultivation, to extend its commerce, and to secure the welfare of its inhabitants."⁶⁸ The special commissioning of Buchanan's survey was itself to prove the material

advantages of the conquered territories to Wellesley's opponents in London.⁶⁹ Similar were the efforts of other early colonial reporting that cumulatively justified the Lockean conquest of foreign lands like Malabar.

Conclusion: 'Improvement' Allies with Mysore

The earliest colonial surveys, 'statistical' reports and revenue assessments in Malabar, made between 1792 and 1805, are paradigmatic of a colonial enterprise in-making that constantly tries to legitimize its possession of foreign lands via the Lockean colonial conceptions of private property based on 'improvement'. The philosophy of improvement was introduced into modern governmentality and coloniality as an attempt at restoring the true fruitfulness of Earth, the pre-lapsarian Adamic empire, by improving labour. The notion of Christian improvement augmented organically with the rise of modern Baconian science with which it shared the Christian spirit to know God's world at its fullest and the expansionary quest of English capital that was seeking the 'underutilised' resources of the orient. The rhetoric of colonial improvement, as implicated in early colonial reports on Malabar, was thus primarily instituted to supply British markets with commodities and create institutions for colonial civil, revenue and judicial administration⁷⁰. The anxiousness for self-legitimizing the improvement principle is evidently visible in most early colonial reports on Malabar that goes to the extent of even subtly defending Mysorean revenue assessments, a regime otherwise monsterized, so as to negate the natives complaining of the early company regime continuing the heavy revenue demands exacted by Mysore. Claims of Malabar Second Commissioners Report that Tipu's revenue assessments are not overcharged⁷¹ is elaborated theatrically in Buchanan's survey report where the natives are ridiculed as "sick children" falsely and peevishly complaining of oppressive taxation by Hyder which is observed as not true⁷². Revenue demands, thus justified as balanced, indicated the colonial quest for colonized resources sanctified by the philosophy of improvement.

End Notes and References

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² Terms popularized by Mary Louis Pratt in her work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*.

³ Refer to the propositions of Coloniality that perceives modernity and coloniality in a continuum in Walter Mignolo's article *Epistemic Disobedience, Independent Thought and Decolonial Freedom*, Anibal Quijano's Coloniality and Modernity/Rationality, in Globalization and the Decolonial Option, Walter D. Mignolo and *Zero-Point Hubris: Science, Race, and Enlightenment in New Granada (1750-1816)* by Santiago Castro-Gomez.

⁴ David Arnold, Agriculture and 'Improvement' in Early Colonial India: A Pre-History of Development, *Journal of Agrarian Change*, Vol. 12, No. 4, 2005, p. 509

⁵ *Ibid.*

⁶ Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007, p. 2.

⁷ M. P. Mujeebu Rehman, *Formation of Society and Economy in Malabar, 1750-1810*, Unpublished PhD Thesis, University of Calicut, 2009, pp. 105-146.

⁸ J. Smee, *Report on the Survey and Assessment of South Malabar*, R/351/A, Revenue Department Files, Kozhikode Regional Archives, p. 1.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 6.

¹⁰ Francis Buchanan-Hamilton, *A Journey from Madras through the Countries of Mysore, Canara and Malabar*, London: W. Bulmer & Co., 1807, p. 380.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 346.

¹² Native Malayalam term for hill cultivation as opposed to paddy cultivation.

¹³ J. Strachey, *Report on the Northern Division of Malabar*, Thiruvananthapuram: Director-Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, (Reprint), p. 23.

¹⁴ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 380.

¹⁵ K. N. Ganesh, European Perceptions of Kerala Landscape: From Barbosa to Buchanan, in *Advances in History*, Kesavan Veluthatt & P. P. Sudhakaran (eds.), Calicut: Professor M.P. Sridharan Memorial Trust, 2003, p. 202.

¹⁶ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 389.

¹⁷ Smee, p. 9.

¹⁸ Strachey, p. 33.

¹⁹ No. 3290.R/316, Revenue Department Files, Kozhikode Regional Archives, p.10.

²⁰ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 452.

²¹ *Ibid.*, pp. 468-9.

²² Smee, p. 6. Also, Buc, p. 371.

²³ Quoted in Vinay Krishin Gidwani, 'Waste' and the Permanent Settlement in Bengal, *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 27, No. 4, 2007, p. 43.

²⁴ Metcalf, p. 513.

²⁵ Macleod, p. 8. *Janmi* in Malabar was the feudal lord made the absolute owner of the land by early colonial records, equating them with the Roman *Dominus* and *Kanamkkar* were the mortgagees, mostly Nairs.

²⁶ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 470.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 494.

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 544.

²⁹ No. 31 A, Home Public Department Files, National Archives of India.

³⁰ The Joint Commissioners' Report, Thiruvananthapuram: Director-Kerala State Archives Department, 2010, (Reprint), pp. 187-188. *Karikkar* are broadly Zamorin's revenue officials

³¹ Macleod, p. 5. Officials mentioned are revenue account-keeping agents.

³² Deepak Kumar, *Science and the Raj: A Study of British India*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2006, p. 264.

³³ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 381.

³⁴ Metcalf, p. 2

³⁵ John Gascoigne, Science and the British Empire from its Beginnings to 1850, in Brett M. Bennett & Joseph M. Hodge (eds.), *Science and Empire: Knowledge and Networks of Science, across the British Empire, 1800–1970*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011, p. 48.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, pp. 48-9.

³⁷ Sarah Irving, *Natural Science and The Origins of The British Empire*, London: Pickering & Chatto, 2008, pp. 109-110.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 110.

³⁹ Gidwani, pp. 41-42.

⁴⁰ Irving, p. 114.



⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

⁴² Oliver W. Furley, Moravian Missionaries and Slaves in the West Indies, *Caribbean Studies*, Vol. 5, No. 2, 1965, pp. 3-16.

⁴³ Buchanan-Hamilton, pp. 413-415.

⁴⁴ Ganesh, p. 197.

⁴⁵ David Arnold, Science and the Colonial War-State: British India, 1790–1820, in Peter Boomgaard (ed.), *Empire and Science in the Making Dutch Colonial Scholarship in Comparative Global Perspective, 1760–1830*, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013, p. 50.

⁴⁶ JCR, pp. 344-345.

⁴⁷ Macleod, p. 1.

⁴⁸ Arnold, Science and the Colonial War-State, p. 42.

⁴⁹ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 385.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 399.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 441.

⁵² Macleod, p. 11.

⁵³ Buchanan-Hamilton, pp. 544-547.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 545.

⁵⁵ Irving, p. 117.

⁵⁶ Cohn-4-5, 12

⁵⁷ Bhavani Raman, Sovereignty, Property and Land Development: The East India Company in Madras, *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient*, Vol. 61, 2018, p. 981.

⁵⁸ Gascoigne, p. 51.

⁵⁹ JCR, p. 125.

⁶⁰ No. 3223 R/251C, Revenue Department Files, Kozhikode State Archives, pp. 151-152.

⁶¹ Matthew H. Edney, *Mapping an Empire: The Geographical Construction of British India 1765-1843*, Chicago: Chicago University Press, 1997, pp. 53-54.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 42.

⁶³ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 347.

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 389.

⁶⁵ Ganesh, p. 198.

⁶⁶ Smee, p. 6

⁶⁷ Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 556.



⁶⁸ Arnold, Science and the Colonial War-State, p. 42.

⁶⁹ Zaheer Baber, *The Science of Empire: Scientific Knowledge, Civilization, and Colonial Rule in India*, New York: State University of New York Press, 1996, p. 149. Also read Marika Vicziany, Imperialism, Botany and Statistics in Early Nineteenth-Century India: The Surveys of Francis Buchanan (1762-1829), *Modern Asian Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 4, 1986, pp. 625-660.

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⁷¹ No. 3223 R/251C, p. 35.

⁷² Buchanan-Hamilton, p. 444.