Chapter II

Historical Antecedents of the Normalised Forest Estate

In this chapter, I shall provide the historical context in which the measures to improve the forests was introduced in Travancore towards the last decades of the 19th century. Forests of Travancore were linked to the world system of trade for centuries. But, there was no idea of improvement of forest by the hands of industrious prior to second half of 19 century. To gain some idea about the link between the local forest and the maritime trade, and to highlight the discontinuity in approach to forests, a brief examination of the historical antecedents will be of use.

European and Arabian trade at the South-Western Coast of India from sixteenth to eighteenth centuries were predominantly in spices and condiments, most of which were procured from the forested inlands.\(^1\) The consistency and volume of trade in historical accounts suggest that there existed collection and supply networks and merchant guilds developed due to trade.\(^2\) By late 17th century, European traders began to exert considerable political influence on the local rulers with regards to the monopolistic trade rights on pepper and other merchandise. The goods thus collected served as capital for inland trade also. Towards the end of 17th century and early decades of the 18th century, the trade centres were began to be dominated by the foreign trading companies. However, their gaze had not fallen on the forestland from where most of the spices originated to flow to these centres.

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1. Major items of trade included: pepper, ginger, coir, cinnamon, sealing wax, clove, cardamom, myrobalan, indigo, tamarind, Myrrh, zerumbet, camphor, cubebs, nutmeg, sandal, zedoary etc.
Gradually, centralised political power was extended to the whole of the territory, especially following the entry of chartered trading companies of England and France, and it culminating in Colonial domination by the end of 18\textsuperscript{th} century.\textsuperscript{3}

It was substantiated that after 1792 an important shift took place in terms of sources of the capital that financed the Colonial activities in Travancore (as elsewhere in the south-western coast).\textsuperscript{4} This shift in policy had long-lasting impacts on shaping the Land Revenue Administration and consequent interventions in the forestlands of newly annexed regions. Land revenue became important source of financing the Colonial project in comparison to trade surplus. The shift occurred was coterminous with annexation of Malabar and incorporation of the Princely States of Cochin and Travancore to the territories of English East India Company.

The two consecutive treaties with the Company, the first in 1795 and the second in 1805, left Travancore with only a nominal autonomy in adopting the measures or reforms suggested by the paramount power. The provisions of the treaty of 1795 bound Travancore to closely adhere to the ‘advices as the English Government shall occasionally judge it necessary to offer’ on matters relating to state finances, collection of revenue, administration of justice, extension of commerce, encouragement of trade, agriculture and industry.\textsuperscript{5} Of course, British paramountcy had deemed itself fit to make advices in most matters. The second treaty of 1805 revised

\textsuperscript{3} Roughly in the mid-18 century, one of the Kingdom - Venad - consolidated and extended command over the smaller principalities with the aid of English East India Company to form Travancore.

\textsuperscript{4} Tharakan (1999: 360-401)

\textsuperscript{5} Aitchison (1983) quoted in Rammohan (1996: 13)
tributes, raising it almost ten times more than that of the previous.\textsuperscript{6} The period that followed the second treaty witnessed the revolt of 1808 in Travancore\textsuperscript{7} and subsequently Col. John Munroe assuming the offices of Dewan and Resident.\textsuperscript{8} This situation was especially conducive for British to wield power in all the matters of the State. The Resident virtually assumed the power of throne on grounds of the fragile political situation in the State. Therefore, the period of Col. Munroe as British Resident of the State witnessed a radical restructuring of the State’s general administration in line with that prevailed in British India.\textsuperscript{9} Among the successive reformation and reorganisation of the revenue administration in the Travancore the most crucial one was that of Munroe’s period (1811-15). The characteristic feature of this reform is a conscious effort for emulating the similar system prevalent in the Madras Presidency. The rhizomatous sprouting of the administrative appendages was consequent to the need for the demand for subtler application of power, while still maintaining a strong centralised control.

The revenue administration, therefore, became the most influential and authoritative apparatus of the state. The tributes and the land revenue

\textsuperscript{6} Enhanced from Rs. 78,000 to more than Rs. 8,00,000 (Varghese 1970, quoted in Chundamannil 1993: 13)
\textsuperscript{7} Revolt of 1808 was lead by Dewan Velu Thambi Dalawa.
\textsuperscript{8} Resident was the diplomatic representative of the British Paramaountcy in Princely States. Col. John Munroe was the Resident of the Travancore from 1810 to 1819. His assuming of the office of the Dewan and Resident simultaneously, was responsible for enabling revenue reform.
\textsuperscript{9} These reforms had further implications of weakening of the existing upper-caste dominated power structure in State. For a detailed treatment of the impact of the revolt of 1808, leading to a near total annexation of State by British, and subsequent reforms in the line of British-India, see Rammohan (1996: 11-17). The structure of the upper caste dominated state administration, including revenue and justice up to the lower rung at village level, was affected by the reforms.
became the most important source of income in Travancore as elsewhere.\textsuperscript{10} This dependence on the land revenue meant drawing the State policies towards the land revenue settlements as a measure of intensification of agriculture based production.\textsuperscript{11} Following the transfer of territories to the British Crown in late 1850s extension of the land put to ‘productive’ purposes received a new impetus.

It is well known that the affairs of forests were keenly observed and controlled by the British paramountcy as the fine timbers for various purposes, especially teak for the Royal Navy’s seafaring vessels, had assumed strategic importance in the domination of maritime trade. The interest of the Travancore government on the forests was mainly to maximize the revenue for which it was hard-pressed due to the payment of tributes to paramountcy. In early decades of the 19\textsuperscript{th} century, the growing scarcity of fine timber in the forests, due to indiscriminate felling by private agencies, had already become a concern.\textsuperscript{12} As a result, more attention fell on the affairs of forests, especially on timber. The office of Conservator was among the first three British offices that were created in the State which in a way indicates the importance given to forests by the colonial power.\textsuperscript{13}

\textsuperscript{10} The new modes of land revenue system also had decisive influence on various social and production relations, especially, effecting a shift towards increasingly monetised economy, among almost all strata of society. (Ludden 1999: 170-72) For instance, during 1867-68, the revenue from the paddy land in Travancore was Rs. 11,13,006, while the same from garden land Rs. 4,02,804, out of the total revenue Rs. 16,69,316 from land. This means that, the revenue due to paddy amounted to roughly 67 percent of total land revenue. The gross revenue from all sources were about 52 lacs (RAT 1867-68 : 32).

\textsuperscript{11} Ludden (1999:159-70)

\textsuperscript{12} Mann (2001)

\textsuperscript{13} The other two were, offices of political resident and the commercial agent (Rammohan 1996: 95).
During the second decade of 19th century, almost half of the total land area (approximately 8754 sq. km. out of the 16458 sq. km.) of the State was forested, while the area of forests in the metropolitan countries such as Britain was insignificantly small.14 Early Colonial interests on the forests were on spices and timber. Among the forest spices, cardamom was a state monopoly for nearly a century until late 19th century. There were inquiries on the availability of teak timber from the forests of the Malabar Coast right from the late 18th century.15 As early as in the late 18th century a timber depot was opened at Aleppey during the period of Dewan Raja Kesava Das.16 A post of Conservator was created in early 1800s to organise extraction and supply of the timber to the depots in Aleppey to be sold to the British-Indian dockyards for shipbuilding.17

Towards 1820s, it was reported that teak at the most accessible parts of the river basins that were leased out to the private contractors for extraction of teak were exhausted of timber. Subsequently extraction of teak by private contractors was replaced by the direct operation by government agency under the supervision of a British officer.18 Initially the offices of the Conservator and Commercial Agent were held by a single officer. The original purpose of Commercial Agency was sale of Sirkar pepper alone. Later monopoly commodities such as cardamom, teak timber and other forest produces were also sold by the Commercial Agent. It also

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14 According to Bourdillon, the average acreage of forest per 100 persons in Travancore and United Kingdom was respectively 90 and 6 (Bourdillon 1993: 122).
15 Mann (2001: 9-26). By the end of the 18th century the British ineffect replaced the Arabs as buyers of teak timber for their construction of the sea going vessels (Chundamannil 1993 : 12).
16 Chundamannil (1993: .12)
17 Chundamannil (1993:13)
18 Ward and Conner (1863 : 41)
functioned ‘…as a trustworthy medium of supplying all valuable foreign articles of merchandize required for the use of Palace and State…’\textsuperscript{19} The duties of the Conservator and Commercial Agent were separated in early 1820s. The first fulltime Conservator was a British, Urban Verres Munro, son of Col.Munro, the British Resident at Travancore. The conservancy did not mean conservation in its presently used sense. Concern of the office of the conservator was confined to overseeing the supply and sale of the timber in the timber yard at the Aleppey.

Manpower was limited and the Department was manned by personnel who usually had no prior experience or expertise in forestry. Major activities of the Department were procuring of timber and hill produce to government Commercial Agent, levying of river duty on the timber transported, and issuance of regulations and proclamations for controlling hill cultivation and forest offences. A few proclamations for restricting the extraction of state monopoly produces were issued during the period. The Conservator’s territories within the State were loosely defined either in terms of occurrences of the royal timber or in terms of the watch stations it maintained to check unauthorised transportation of timber through rivers.

Apart from the intensification of agriculture based production, there were also attempts of extending area under plantation crops. For instance, Travancore responded to the demand for land by European planters favourably by fixing concessional rent and moderate taxes.\textsuperscript{20} State also

\textsuperscript{19} RAT (1874-75: 56)

\textsuperscript{20} Concessional land rent announced in this regard continued to be the same for both food and cash crops. Declining state income from conventional trade and restrictions on imports of rice were also been reasons for adopting measures for promoting paddy cultivation (Rammohan 2006 : 15-22).
incurred expenses of developing communication networks much necessary for increasing accessibility to hitherto unopened territories / plantation zones in the hills. These policies favoured the intentions of European planters who were interested in growing subtropical cash crops in the higher altitudes; gradually resulting in the large-scale plantations in the High Ranges. 21 In the wake of establishment of coffee plantations in the High Ranges by J.D. Munro, the then Dewan of Travancore observed that:

The Sircar feels satisfied that the country would largely benefit by the introduction of the capital, skill and, enterprise of European gentlemen in utilising tracts of valuable land, which for the most part would other wise be untouched for generations. It has accordingly been the anxious desire of the Sircar to afford facilities for planters… (RAT 1862-63: 13).

Extension of plantations meant alteration of forested lands. During the European / Arabian trade, the companies never involved in production. Rather they confined to the costal area. Only after the British began to concentrate on the production, the forestlands came under their surveillance. This consequented alteration of forests.

**Domesticating Nature- Usefulness of Knowledge**

As mentioned elsewhere, in the early 19th century, the locus of control on forests was on the produce. This was operationalised through monopolisation or controlling of the transportation and trade of these forests produces. Gradually the attention and locus of control had shifted to forestland and its productivity. Timber such as rosewood and anjily were declared as monopolies along with teak by 1844. Sandalwood and ebony

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21 Augmenting of the revenue flow continued to be the motive behind most of the policies and proclamations announced in Travancore pertaining to the utilisation of land, especially those intended to facilitate expansion of food and cash crop cultivation in the forested lands, even in late 19th and early 20th centuries.
were made so in 1865. Similarly, a score of other forest produces such as wax, ivory and cardamom were also made state monopolies. There were stringent regulations on capturing and killing of wild elephants. Further, by 1873 itself two Assistant Conservators of the Department were posted at Malayattoor and Collacadavoo, as these locations were ‘the principal stations to which the timber felled in the forests…[were] brought and sent out to various parts.’ Though these aspects of control on timber and hill produces and their procurement and sale were often taken for the forest conservancy, the organized drive for ‘improvement’ of the forestlands on the basis of Forestry was to begin only in the post-1860s. This change was coterminous with similar development of the tropical forestry and commercial plantation agriculture in other parts of the British-India. In 1864, following statement appeared in the Report on the Administration of Travancore:

…it is the belief of the Sirkar that the management of the forests is yet susceptible of much improvement. There are parts of forests where there is magnificent timber which ought to be, but which cannot be, brought down; first because there are no roads, and secondly, because Elephant-power, considered indispensable, is limited. The renovation of the forests which are being worked, is left entirely to natural processes….It is the intention of the Sirkar to arrange for the Conservator visiting some of the best worked forests of British India, with a view to see if any particular instruction is to be gained. (RAT 1864-65: 52)

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22 Chundamannil (1993 :12-13)
23 RAT (1872-74: 82)
24 See Rammohan (1996: 95-106), According to him, there was a demand explosion for timber in the post 1860s which would have prompted State to make initiatives for improvement of forests.
25 The British Indian forest establishment had a formal beginning in 1864 with Dietrich Brandis as Inspector General of Forests (Chundamannil 1993: 20). The first version of Indian Forest Act was brought out in 1865, soon after the institution of the Forest Department. It was replaced by a more ‘sophisticated’ Act in 1878.
Need for renovating the forests, making the forest work more efficiently and improved timber productivity are well reflected in the above statement. Travancore attempted to replicate British Indian system of forest administration. Timber extraction at the direct supervision of the government necessitated establishment of a network of labours, contractors and traders. Activities such as capture of elephants and their training proved to be an indispensable part of the scheme.

Forests of Mahendragiri which was managed by the Revenue Department were brought under the Conservator in 1882. This act was a response to the indiscriminate felling and consequent directive passed by Madras Presidency. In the pre-reservation period (i.e. prior to 1890s), such incidents of inclusion of forest tracts to the Forest Department’s jurisdiction were frequent. Majority of the forest tracts in the State, excepting the land under the supervision of Superintendent of Cardamom and a small portion in the Southern Travancore, came under the jurisdiction of the Conservator by then.26

Another significant development in pre-reservation era was a change in the land revenue policy that occurred around 1883. New policy emphasised taxing the fertility (productive potential) of land whereas the old one taxed the actual crop produced.27

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26 The Cardamom Hills was under the control of Conservator until 1869. It was thereafter transferred to Cardamom Department which started functioning in 1823. The forests in South Travancore was under the direct control of the Revenue Department (RAT 1872-74: 82) also see Nair, Chundamannil and Muhammad (1984 : 53).

27 Reforms in the revenue administration that took place in the early 19th century under the zealous initiative of Col. Munroe as the British Resident involved annexation of the land and property owned by the temples. This brought to focus the land as a source of revenue. The assessment of tax was based on the actual produce from land. The new system of assessment all lands were classified based on the productivity classification and determining the possible maximum yield from cultivation of each of these categories of land.
adopting this criterion was the creation of newer productivity categories of land that belonged to definite tax-tariff. The land is taxed on these tariff rates even if it was not cultivated. In an address to the land owners of Travancore, Dewan explained the reason behind this reform as below:

It is true that only a portion of the land yields any return at present, and that the vacant portion even if planted at once, would take probably 7 or 8 years to come into bearing, but surely the unplanted portion can be and a matter of fact, turned to account in a hundred ways. The coconut plant does not interfere with the ground being cultivated, with anything the owner likes to grow. He can and does grow vegetables, plantains, arrowroot, yams and edible roots of all kinds. It can be no hardship to pay a trifle for land which can be put profitable account in so many ways. It is true that the owner pays little or nothing for such land now, but that is precisely why he does not care to work, why he is lazy and earns so little, and why his cultivation, such as it is, is so slovenly. The sooner the cultivators in Travancore are made to see that if they take up land they are bound to pay for it, the better for them and the country in general. They will become much more useful and active members of the community than they are. (RAT 1882-83: cxxiii)

This was a manifestation of the State’s aspirations for making its subjects more enterprising in the production of wealth by making improvements on land. The rationale behind the shift of attention from crops to fertility of land subsequently influenced the perception on forms of land use also. The changed treatment of forest as ‘land’, as opposed to the standing crop of timber, also justified the reservation of forests and charting out territories for ‘improvement’ of its ‘value’ with the aid of specific management inputs. This was a criterion already followed in the British-

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28 See the Address by the Dewan of Travancore to the Leading Landholders, on 24th March 1883 (RAT 1882-83: cvii-cxxv). Such policies had already been in practice in Madras Presidency. However, for us what is interesting is the change in the general logic in taxation and locus of control (RAT 1882-83: cxxiii).

29 It may be noted that, in Travancore, the policy of reservation of forests was followed on the basis of the report of the committee on improvement of forests -1884. However, both these policies were coterminous.
Indian revenue settlements. But in Travancore the shift was coterminous with the shift in forest policy. The Forest Act, which came into effect in 1888, classified forests in terms of its productive potential of timber. Similarly, choice of plantation sites was also made by considering their productivity and land value. Therefore, these logics of reforms significantly recast the idea of what forests ought to be. From this historical background let us return to the forestry discourse under Colonial Conditions.

The political-economic rational inherent in forestry discourses were often bundled along with other legitimising discourses of colonialism and Modernisation. In a deeper sense, this logic formed the leading thread of practice. However, there were crevices between the rationale and practices. This rationality was different from the rationality of other competing discourses on desiccation and shifting cultivation.\(^{30}\) This is to argue that, although colonialism is all about control of economy, the self-justification of it could be achieved only through the Orientalist discourse.\(^{31}\) Orientalism represented the Occident as progressed and Orient as yet to be progressed or primitive. Therefore, when the notions of progress and primitive are invoked, they imply certain notions of altered ways of production for which society should be reordered; only then the economic end is ensured. In a way, this provided new measures of civility, progress and improvement. To achieve this end, novel mechanisms and institutions of calculative procedure were introduced. Therefore, the forthcoming chapters would sketch the process of realignment of institutions to a more amenable

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\(^{30}\) See Grove (1994) for a scholarly treatment on colonial Desiccation Discourses. Also see Chapter VI of this thesis for the pattern of discussion on shifting cultivation under the colonial Conditions.

\(^{31}\) See Said (1978)
modular form for enabling ‘legibility’.\(^\text{32}\) This legibility was rendered by practice of Eurocentric/modern knowledges which in turn simultaneously constituted hybrid forms of knowledges. This knowledge constituted new objects; created diverse new regulatory strategies; mechanisms, technologies, institutions, policies, language regimes and calculations. This enabled strategies of control and action from distance and proximity.\(^\text{33}\)

Achieving such controls required an appraisal of existing forest governance and finding out its defects for better conservancy of forests. This requirement was necessitated by the increased demand for wood and timber which had to be met by intensification of extraction. The idea of sustained yield, that was already in circulation, demanded the quantification of available resources over space and time. It was found that what is equally important is phasing and planning of extraction; where, techniques of Continental Forestry came handy. However, existence of suitable administrative machinery, legal provisions and well-demarcated forest territory, which are the prerequisites for introducing Sustained Yield Principles, were lacking in the State. Moreover, by early 1880s, it was being strongly felt that the forest had much room for improvement, provided the Department is reconstituted to suit the changed times.\(^\text{34}\) Timber prices had escalated so much that the existent rates of seigniorage were redundant. Besides, valuable forests were being destroyed due to

\(^{32}\) See Scott (1998) for the specific meaning in which the word ‘legibility’ is used here.


\(^{34}\) RAT (1882-83 : 53). Also see Rammohan (1996: 96-97), where he demonstrated that there was a demand-explosion for timber around 1860s. It is also stated that “The quantity of teak exports from Tiruvitamkur doubled between 1882 and 1892. Between 1860 and 1900, the value of timber of all kinds exported expanded by more than seven-fold....”
‘kumari’ or hill cultivation and by fires which in the absence of legislation could not have checked’. 35

As a consequence, in 1884, a Joint Committee on Administration of Travancore Forests, consisting of senior officers of forest, revenue and other departments, was constituted to look into the matters of forest administration and report on its defects. In the joint Report, the Committee expressed their conviction that there existed an urgent need for a revision of the system of administration of forests in the State. Assistant Conservator, T.F. Bourdillon, was assigned the duty of preparing a detailed report on the modalities of effecting these changes. The Committee also made proposals for reserving forests and for making an enactment similar to that of Madras Forest Act. Subsequently, a draft regulation was prepared. Travancore promulgated the first Forest Regulation in 1888 for ‘want of a comprehensive legislative enactment for the proper protection’ of forests. 36 The Act emulated Madras Forest Act (1882) which was in turn a modified version of Indian Forest Act brought out in 1878. Indian Forest Act had provisions for forming two kinds of forests the ‘reserved forests’ and ‘protected forests’. In case of reserved forest, the right to use it was exclusively vested with the government, boundaries of which were clearly demarcated and others could use it only with government permission. Whereas the protected forests were those Government forests that were not yet been surveyed and temporarily been open to limited private use. Madras Government declined to implement the Indian Forest Act of 1878 as the rights of the villagers over the forests were such as to prevent the formation

35 RAT (1882-83: 53)
36 RAT (1890-91:113)
of exclusive State Reserves. Madras Forest Act also was framed in the same general lines as the Indian Forest Act. However, the procedures relating to the constitution of reserved forests were made more people-friendly and simple.\textsuperscript{37}

The regulation 1888 was revised and expanded in 1893 with provisions for asserting state rights over the monopoly forest produces. The regulation of 1888 concerned only about the reservation forests; this was retained in the 1893 regulation more or less fully.\textsuperscript{38} The Government was aware of the controversies such bills and regulations created in other British-Indian Provinces.\textsuperscript{39} Finally, the forest regulation was passed in Travancore and it prohibited most of activities that had been practiced laymen in the forests.\textsuperscript{40} The Travancore Forest Regulation was formulated in close compliance with the similar acts of Madras and British-India. The Forest Rules along with the forest regulation provided a detailed framework for translating the ideals of the Continental Forestry into practice. The legal framework formed the crucial invention and contrivance that empowered

\textsuperscript{37} The Indian Forest Act was passed in 1878; the Madras Forest Act was delayed by four years because of the strong disagreement prevailed among the cadres of foresters in the Presidency on annexing forests as intended in Indian Forest Act. Majority of the foresters in the Madras Presidency were sympathetic to the needs of villagers. Resultantly the Madras Act was more liberal than the Indian Forest Act, for more details see Guha (1990: 65-84). I have not ventured a comparison of the provisions of the Acts of Madras and Travancore, but it is glaringly evident that the provisions such as village forest is lacking in the Travancore Act.

\textsuperscript{38} TFM (1917: 1-2)

\textsuperscript{39} As introduction to bill, T.Rajaram Rao provided a detailed introduction for the Act. In the very beginning of the introduction he stated that “While the working of Forest laws is causing much heart-burning and complaint in British India, the introduction of a Bill passing a law on the same subject in this country requires special explanation…..”. (TFM 1917: 1)

\textsuperscript{40} TFM (1917: 13-17)
the foresters to assert the rightness of their specialised knowledge over the “ignorant” by labelling their practices as criminal.

To suit the operationalisation of the new legal instruments, the Forest Department was completely reorganised by the turn of 20th century by dividing the territory under its jurisdiction into Divisions and Ranges on the lines of the British Forest Administration. As in the case of other Acts and policies, in this instance also Travancore replicated British-Indian administrative courses, of course with a time lag in comparison to Bengal and Madras. The objective of passing forest regulation was to consolidate all activities to a forest territory that was exclusively owned by the state. This was made possible by extinguishment of the private rights once and for all; this process was called ‘forest settlement’; where, the word ‘settlement’ stands for settlement of private rights. State owned Forest Estate was a requirement for practicing the Continental Forestry that was originally constituted as one of the cameral sciences in the 18 and 19 century Germany and France.41

The condition that made such reforms necessary is reflected in a retrospective statement made in the year 1930s by the official historian.

No rules were issued for the guidance of the department; no forest demarcation was done; no survey was carried out; no fire-protection was attempted; no roads and bridle-paths were opened in the forests; and no rest-houses or camping sheds were constructed to facilitate inspection. The unsystematic felling and removal of timber was another grave menace to forest growth. No process of extraction under any working plan was contemplated, while smuggling was rampant, and the insufficiency and inefficiency of the small illiterate, irresponsible preventive staff employed to combat the evil was all but notorious. Nor was the complicated,

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41 Rajan (1998), please also see Appendix-I.
unreliable and unmethodical manner of keeping accounts in the departments calculated to enhance its prestige. (Iyer 1998: 321)

The need of the time was a departure from this chaos. What is aimed at was institutionalisation and modernisation of forest governance. In the next Chapter we shall examine some key process in the creation of a normalised forest in Travancore.