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# Locating Local Elites in Negotiating Access to Forests: Havik Brahmins and the Colonial State 1860–1920

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*This paper is an exploration of how colonial forest policy in Uttara Kannara district of present day Karnataka was critically shaped by the interests of the Havik Brahmin community. Despite the protests of the forest department, the Havik community was provided a remarkably generous forest settlement to enable their production of areca nut, a high revenue earner for the revenue department. We explore the contours of the debates of the time and the strategies deployed by these areca nut cultivators. Ultimately, as is illustrated here, the forest department was able to enforce a restrictive conservation regime vis-à-vis only certain sections of the population. By highlighting the capability of certain elites in negotiating with the state, we attempt to bolster the argument that colonial forest policy was neither excessively oppressive nor completely pliant in the face of local resistance.*

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## Introduction

Three distinct positions can be noted within writing on Indian environmental history. The statist view is that for reasons that were largely commercial, the colonial state centralized control over most natural resources and successfully enforced a variety of restrictive policies that curtailed the access of farmers,

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pastoralists and tribal people to these resources.<sup>1</sup> A second view is that while a variety of restrictive policies were indeed put in place by the colonial state, this attempt at controlling local use of these resources stemmed primarily from an environmental concern. The consequences of deforestation in island colonies and Europe gave rise to widespread fears over environmental degradation and resulted in restrictions on local access to natural resources. Forests were indeed worked for commercial profit, but so long as this was done under technical supervision, the expectation was that it would not harm the environment.<sup>2</sup> Techniques and ideas developed in Europe were transferred essentially unchanged to the colonies and used to scientifically manage forest tracts. Both these positions see restrictive conservation policies of the colonial state as being broadly successful in curtailing local access to resources, and thereby depriving dependant groups of key livelihood options.

A third view that has gained currency over the past few years, is more nuanced. It holds that control over natural resources was clearly driven by commercial interests, but experiences with deforestation, particularly in the island colonies, also led to greater environmental concern and thus to the desire to adopt more stringent measures to protect these forests. More importantly, it has questioned the idea that colonial foresters were essentially transferring ideas from the centre to the colony, and has suggested that foresters were forced to adapt their training to the specifics of the local conditions they were working in. This new work has also questioned straightforward accounts of local populations being at the receiving end of harshly restrictive conservation policies. The picture that emerges is one of give-and-take, with administrators reacting to conditions on the ground, both with regard to developing conservation practices and techniques and enforcement of unpopular policies.<sup>3</sup>

This image of flux, however, needs to be more carefully examined.<sup>4</sup> Not all communities had the same ability to negotiate with the state, as can be seen from the highly varied experiences across the country. This paper will argue that certain communities were better equipped to negotiate with the colonial state, and that while dealing with them, the state was often unable to enforce unpopular policies restricting access to forest resources. Indeed, as we will demonstrate, under certain conditions, the state provided access to forest resources on remarkably generous terms. Conversely, communities that were unable to negotiate from a favourable

<sup>1</sup> R. Guha, *The Unquiet Woods: Ecological Change and Peasant Resistance in the Indian Himalaya*, Delhi, 1989; M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land, An Ecological History of India*, Delhi, 1992.

<sup>2</sup> R. Grove, *Green Imperialism: Colonial Expansion, Tropical Island Edens and the Origins of Environmentalism 1600–1800*, Delhi, 1995; Ravi Rajan, *Imperial Environmentalism: The Agendas and Ideologies of Natural Resource Management in British Colonial Forestry 1800–1950*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Oxford, 1994.

<sup>3</sup> V.K. Saberwal, *Pastoral Politics: Shepherds, Bureaucrats and Conservation in the Western Himalaya*, Delhi, 1999; K. Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests: Statemaking and Environmental Change in Colonial Eastern India*, Delhi, 1999; A. Chhatre, 'The Mirage of Permanent Boundaries: Politics of forest reservation in the Western Himalayas, 1875–97', *Conservation and Society*, Vol. 1(1), 2003, 137–59.

<sup>4</sup> I thank Ashwini Chhatre for suggesting we adopt this line of reasoning.

position bore the brunt of restrictions, even in localities where access was provided to others.

In this paper, we will explore the processes by which betel nut cultivators in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries negotiated privileged access to forests in the Uttara Kannara district of Karnataka state. In particular, we will focus on a long drawn out battle between these cultivators and the British administration between the 1860s and the 1920s. Two other works document these interactions in some detail.<sup>5</sup> For the most part these studies have provided overarching accounts of conflicts between the peasantry and the colonial government. My attempt here is to take a closer look at the nature of these interactions in an attempt to better understand the working of the colonial state, as well as to better nuance our understanding of the impact of forest conservation policies on local populations. We will argue that as a result of protracted negotiations, the Havik Brahmin community, which today controls most of the highly profitable areca nut cultivation, came to have exclusive usufruct over relatively large tracts of forest lands, also called *betta* lands, nominally under the control of the forest department. In sharp contrast, shifting cultivation by tribals was gradually phased out, leaving them with little control over private property or other productive assets. Their means of subsistence curtailed, tribals rarely figured in discussions over access to forests. In similar fashion there is little evidence to suggest that labour from outside the region or the landless residing in the region benefited from any of the negotiations that took place between the colonial state and the high caste, landed cultivators of the region.

Our point then, is that while the colonial state was forced to concede the demands of local populations to a greater extent than some accounts have suggested in the past, a local elite benefited disproportionately from these concessions. K. Sivaramakrishnan makes a similar case around zaminadari control over forest resources in Bengal.<sup>6</sup>

Revisiting the discussions and debates that took place between the 1860s and 1920s is useful from another perspective as well. The question of cultivators' tenures was central to discussions on forest management of the time. Many government officials argued that the provision of greater tenurial security would ensure a more sustainable use of forest resources. This debate took place at the level of the central government, as well as at the level of the district in each of the presidencies.<sup>7</sup> While current attempts to provide local communities with a greater tenurial stake in resource management<sup>8</sup> are sometimes seen as a departure from

<sup>5</sup> M. Buchy, *Teak and Arecanut: Colonial State, Forest and People in the Western Ghats (South India) 1800–1947*, Pondicherry, 1996; M.V. Nadkarni, S.A. Pasha and L.S. Prabhakar. *Political Economy of Forest Use and Management*, Delhi, 1989.

<sup>6</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*.

<sup>7</sup> R. Guha, 'An Early Environmental Debate: The Making of the 1878 Forest Act', *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. 27, 1990, 65–84; A. Chhatre, 'Forest Co-management as if History Mattered: The Case of Western Himalayan Forests in India'. Paper presented at the biennial conference of the IASCP, 31 May–4 June 1999, Bloomington, Indiana; Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*.

<sup>8</sup> Among others see M. Poffenberger and B. McGeen, *Village Voices, Forest Choices: Joint Forest Management in India*, Delhi, 1996; A. Kothari, N. Singh and S. Suri, *People and Protected Areas:*

more authoritarian forms of government functioning, historical records indicate that the demand for decentralization is not new, nor is the departmental resistance to a reduction in its own control over forest resources.

A brief account of the growing of areca nut and its dependence upon forest resources follows this introduction. Three subsequent sections provide a chronological account of the means by which Havik Brahmins have managed over the past century and a half to obtain access to the forests they require, and the tenurial arrangements that were ultimately put in place by the British. A concluding section uses the empirical material of the preceding sections to develop the thesis that while certain communities have managed to negotiate access to forest resources on favourable terms, they constitute a small, necessarily elite section of the population.

### Betel Nut Growing in Uttara Kannara

The growing of areca, or betel nut, has traditionally required large inputs of organic material from the forests adjoining the areca plantations, or gardens, as they are commonly referred to. Leaves hacked from trees are mixed with cattle excreta and allowed to decompose in a manure pit. Once a year, or once every two years where the resources are lacking, cultivators apply this manure to every tree in the garden. (Each garden has between 500 and 600 trees per acre of land.) To protect this manure from the hot sun in the summer and the incessant rainfall during the four-month monsoon, the cultivators either cover it with dead leaves, twigs and branches from the forest, or with the fallen fan-like fronds of the areca tree. As part of pre-sale processing, the nut is boiled, using fuel wood from the forest. It was estimated in the 1860s that a grower required access to eight to nine acres of forest land to support every acre of areca plantation.<sup>9</sup>

For a variety of reasons, the British adopted a policy that provided cultivators with exclusive usufruct rights to up to nine acres of forest or *betta* land. To all intents and purposes this was and continues to be private property, used by the cultivator pretty much as he pleases. It was a generous settlement, and one that flies in the face of standard accounts of exclusive, oppressive policies of the forest department. And yet, there was considerable opposition within the government both to a practice that was seen as wasteful (the collection of leaves and fuel wood from the forest) and to the provision of forest resources to cultivators on such generous terms. An examination of the process by which cultivators' access to resources was negotiated between society and state in the context of an abundant, though highly coveted resource, allows an exploration of a multiplicity of

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*Towards Participatory Conservation in India*, Delhi, 1996; R. Jeffery and N. Sundar, *A New Moral Economy for India's Forests? Discourses of Community and Participation*, Delhi, 1999.

<sup>9</sup> S. Lele, *Degradation, Sustainability or Transformation: A Case Study of Villagers' Use of Forest Lands in the Malnaad Region of Uttara Kannada District, India*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, Energy and Resources Group, University of California, Berkeley, 1993; Buchy, *Teak and Arecanut*.

dimensions to governance in general, and to the nature of negotiations that have ultimately shaped the tenurial geography of Uttara Kannara in particular.

### Transfer of Territory, 1862–69

Under the governorship of Thomas Munro (1820–27), much of the forest administration of the Madras presidency<sup>10</sup> was dismantled, resulting, presumably, in a reduction of state interference in cultivators' access to and use of forest resources. This preference for 'market regulation' of the harvesting of forest resources was, however, opposed by the more restrictive Baden-Powell and others, who advocated the need for greater state control and a clear-cut separation of agriculture from forests, that were to be more profitably managed for timber.<sup>11</sup> Uttara Kannara lay on the fringes of the Madras presidency, isolated, densely forested, difficult to access, and riven with malaria. In 1862, this district was transferred to the Bombay presidency, and as its forest administration came to have greater access to the government's ear, there was an immediate intensification of the attempt to better control the use of forest resources.

In the early 1860s, Assistant Collector Wedderburn calculated that each acre of areca garden land annually required 500 coolie-loads of leaves for manure, and that an acre of *betta* land produced an average of 50 loads of leaves. Consequently, 'not less than eight or ten acres of *Betta*' were required to cultivate an acre of garden.<sup>12</sup>

Given the fact that forests were not uniformly thick everywhere, it is difficult to see how Wedderburn arrived at this figure. Clearly, land with 100 trees per acre would provide more leaves than land with 50 trees per acre. Again, different species would provide different quantities of leaf, which would be of differing value as manure. What is important, however, is that this figure formed the basis for most future discussions on the allotment of *betta* lands to cultivators, the nature of the cultivators' and the forest department's rights on these lands, the nature of property rights that would ensure the optimal management of these lands, and so on.

In making his case for the allotment of *betta* lands, Wedderburn pointed out that forest regulations introduced over the past decade had made it increasingly difficult for cultivators to obtain their requirements. In particular, a notification issued on 31 December 1860, prohibiting the cutting of green wood without a permit, and enforced with 'considerable severity,' was cause for great concern—particularly to the Hygur Brahmins and Lingayats, 'a class, especially in the Seddapoor Mahal, of character and position, and keenly alive to the disgrace of being subject to criminal punishment.'<sup>13</sup>

<sup>10</sup> Buchy, *Teak and Arecanut*.

<sup>11</sup> M. Gadgil and R. Guha, *This Fissured Land: An Ecological History of India*, Delhi, 1992.

<sup>12</sup> Wedderburn, assistant collector, to Stewart, collector, Canara, 7 May 1864, RD 1862–64, Vol. 45, MSA.

<sup>13</sup> *Ibid.*

Wedderburn argued that in the absence of an adequate supply of manure, the gardens were likely to be abandoned, with consequent revenue losses to the government. Simultaneously, however, he asserted that destructive pollarding (cutting of branches for leaves) of government forests must be curtailed.<sup>14</sup> He proposed to resolve the issue by demarcating areas within which pollarding would be permitted, and assigning these lands to individual cultivators. None of these *betta* plots was to exceed eight acres, with 'perhaps less being enough.' Such areas would be assessed at between four and eight annas per acre. Cultivators would have full use of all unreserved trees to meet their leaf, firewood, and other requirements. He felt that there was little valuable timber on the *betta* lands, but if there was any, it could 'be reserved, or given at a valuation to the occupant, or cut down and sold by auction.'<sup>15</sup>

Wedderburn saw a number of advantages in the arrangements he was proposing. He anticipated an improvement in the condition of the *betta*, given the incentive to cultivators to better manage what would essentially be private property, as well as an improvement in the condition of the government forests, now relieved of the pressures of lopping. He felt there would be fewer disputes over the use of *betta* lands among villagers, a frequent occurrence he said, owing to the absence of recorded rights, which led to the 'lions share of the *bettas* [being] usurped by the rich and the influential, while the poorer cultivators have to make such a shift as they can to bring leaves from a distance.' He anticipated an increase of Rs 20,000 annually in government revenue from assessments on *betta* lands.

Despite the sanctioning of the measures proposed by Wedderburn in December 1864, there was little progress in the demarcation of *betta* lands. The settlement of these lands finally commenced in early 1867, and it took Assistant Collector Jardine a whole year to convince the people to accept it. Used to cutting leaf at will and for free, cultivators resisted a settlement that would limit their area and require a payment for the privilege.<sup>16</sup> In an attempt to reduce opposition, the assessment was kept to 4 annas per acre, a temporary reduction that went with the assertion that 'eventually at least two classes must be created, with different rates according to the quality of the bhet'.<sup>17</sup> According to Jardine, the settlement could eventually proceed only because cultivators perceived a benefit from 'an acknowledged proprietary right' in the *betta* lands.<sup>18</sup>

<sup>14</sup> Although the term pollarding refers specifically to the act of cutting the leading shoot of a tree, the term was often used interchangeably with the term lopping, which technically has a more limited meaning, referring to the removal of side branches, twigs and leaves, rather than the main stem itself. In subsequent discussions, there was considerable dispute over whether the original reports of the government had intended for cultivators to have the right to pollard or merely to lop trees within their *betta* assignments.

<sup>15</sup> Wedderburn to Stewart, 7 May 1864, RD 1862–64, Vol. 45, MSA.

<sup>16</sup> Acting collector, Canara, to revenue commissioner, S.D., No. 573, 6 April 1867, RD 1867, Vol. 33, MSA.

<sup>17</sup> GR 2211, Revenue Department, 8 June 1867, RD 1867, Vol. 33, MSA.

<sup>18</sup> Jardine, 2nd assistant collector, to Elphinstone, acting collector, Canara, No. 31, 21 February 1867, RD 1867, Vol. 33, MSA.

The issue of what was to be done with the timber on *betta* lands was discussed at length. The conservator, Peyton, suggested elaborate rules to regulate the removal of this timber, claiming the right of the forest department to all teak, *honi* and sandalwood. No pollarding of these trees would be allowed and all the large and valuable trees of *mutte*, *jumba*, *bitti*, *kunde* and jackwood, if hitherto unpollarded, would be considered the property of the forest department. In making over forest lands to the holders of *betta* lands, the greatest care would be taken to give only that land on which timber was least valuable.<sup>19</sup> The discussion went back and forth, and many views were put forward on the numbers of trees involved, the proportion that was valuable from the point of timber production, and the level of micro-management the government should enter into.<sup>20</sup>

Resentment against the assessment of *betta* lands, however, continued to simmer. In 1869, the acting collector of canara advocated its abolition. Forwarding a petition signed by 'the principal garden cultivators' of Sircy and Siddapur *taluka*, he stated that the cultivators were keen to revert to the earlier system, whereby they 'pollarded trees in the vicinity of their gardens without paying any assessment on the land whose trees they pollarded.' The cultivators appeared uninterested in possessing proprietary rights in the *betta* land. Accordingly, Elphinstone saw no reason for the government to hand over 'the right of property to both trees and land . . . against their wishes, merely for the sake of a small addition to [government] land revenue.'<sup>21</sup>

The collector was supportive of the idea that *betta* lands be 'held free of assessment,' so long as specific *betta* lands were attached to specific garden lands. Thus, if a garden should be resigned or transferred, the attached *betta* would go with it. Since the *bettas* were being given to the cultivators to aid in garden cultivation, the cultivators would not be allowed to treat the *bettas* as independent of their garden holdings. He suggested that the assessment of the *betta* lands be considered to be a part of the assessment of the garden lands, for 'a garden in Canara can no more exist without *betta* lands than without water.'<sup>22</sup>

The critical, and subsequently often discussed paragraph 3 of Resolution 664, passed by the government, reads as follows:

As regards the question of assessment His Excellency in Council is inclined to think it would be better to place some assessment, however small, on these lands, as by so doing a direct feeling of ownership would be established. He will not, however, object to the proposal to attach a certain quantity of this land to each garden and include the assessment of it in the garden rate, if, in the

<sup>19</sup> Peyton, deputy conservator of forests, to Jardine, No. 17, 11 February 1867, RD 1867, Vol. 33, MSA.

<sup>20</sup> See notes by Peyton and Elphinstone, in July and August 1867, RD 1869, Vol. 39, MSA.

<sup>21</sup> Elphinstone to Major Prescott, survey commissioner, S.D., No. 7, 6 January 1869, RD 1869, Vol. 39, MSA.

<sup>22</sup> No. 38, January 15, 1869, RD 1869, Vol. 39.

opinion of the local authorities, this arrangement is likely to be the more popular one.<sup>23</sup>

Two issues dominated the correspondence following these resolutions. One, whether assessment should be charged separately on *betta* lands or whether these lands should be considered a single unit along with the garden lands, and two, whether ryots should have the authority to cut down all unreserved trees on their *bettas*.

Finally, in June 1869 a resolution was issued by the government permitting the pollarding of all unreserved tree species, which, however, could be cut 'only on permission from the mamlutdar.' Such permission was to be given to the cultivator only 'for the improvement of his holdings or house, but not for sale or exportation.'<sup>24</sup> Over the course of half a decade, the government had come 180 degrees. Its initial attempts to provide the ryots with full control over all timber on *betta* lands and to provide proprietary rights over the *betta* lands were abandoned in favour of a far more restricted right to pollard a limited number of unreserved tree species, with the fate of the *betta* lands irrevocably tied to the fate of the gardens themselves.

The forest department did not directly play a prominent role in effecting this transformation. Rather, concerns voiced by it were readily taken up by officials in the revenue department. Following considerable debate, but one that was largely confined to the bureaucracy (unlike in later years when pressure from cultivators was a major factor that shaped policy) the government had arrived at a decision that appeared to meet its requirements—the provisioning of tenure security to cultivators, and the protection of the government interest in commercially valuable timber.

Up until this point, however, the forest department was a minor player, with limited area under its control and legislation that did not really address issues of cultivator access to forests beyond the *betta* lands. The carving out of 'government' forests within which the forest department attempted to establish better control over cultivator access came about in the last three decades of the nineteenth century. During this time, there was also a clear attempt to reduce cultivator rights within the *betta* lands—inevitably perceived by the forest department as being overly generous. The following sections explore how the forest department attempted to expand its control over *betta* and other forest lands, and how the response from within the government and the areca-cultivating population forced it to continually modify its position.

### The Emergence of the Forest Department

The passage in the late 1860s of legislation defining the precise terms and conditions under which individual ryots could use the *betta* lands assigned to them,

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> GR 2451, RD 1869, Vol. 39, MSA.

implied a belief in the simplicity of the task of regulation that would prove to be unfounded. Indeed, the very complexity and magnitude of local dependence on forest resources was such as to make a mockery of these early attempts at regulation. Since early regulations did not fully cover the variety of uses the forests were put to by cultivators, the forest department introduced more and more cumbersome regulations, each of which triggered prolonged discussions.

As the forest department sought greater control over forest resources, its claims were contested by the revenue department. Concerted resistance forced the forest department to back down gradually. The retreat was inevitably accompanied by repeated predictions of impending economic and ecological disaster.<sup>25</sup>

The passage of the Indian Forest Act of 1878 provided the forest department with the authority to more tightly control cultivator access to forest lands.<sup>26</sup> The act increased the number of species listed as reserved—species that could not be used by cultivators even when located within their *betta* lands. It also provided the legislation that would enable the forest department to establish forest reserves within which cultivator activity would be severely curtailed.

The rules resulted in a spurt in cultivator complaints to the government. Many argued that because of the forested, isolated nature of Uttara Kannara, ryots were poorer than in other districts, presumably a reflection of fewer economic opportunities. They listed the various products ryots had traditionally taken freely from the forest, but which following the introduction of the Kannara permit rules had to be obtained primarily from the *betta* lands assigned to them. As one petition put it, 'These assignments were barely sufficient, still by economical use and by resorting to other jungles for extra supply, [the ryots] passed so long with great difficulty. Now many kinds of trees even in these Bettas have been reserved and Government jungles are totally closed to us.'<sup>27</sup>

In 1886, two petitions were submitted by residents of Yellapur *taluka*, listing a number of complaints. They were unable to obtain adequate bamboo and other material to build crop protection hedges. There was a scarcity of firewood for the production of jaggery from sugarcane—an estimated thousand headloads of wood were required for every 300 maunds of jaggery produced by a cultivator. Firewood was also required to boil the areca nuts, an essential part of their processing, and wood—10 or 20 strong poles—was required to erect drying platforms on which the wet nut was dried. 'Half the crop' was destroyed by wild beasts, owing to the prohibition against creating a clearing of 'about 600 feet' around their fields.

<sup>25</sup> For accounts from other parts of the country, see M. Rangarajan, *Fencing the Forest: Conservation and Ecological Change in India's Central Provinces 1860–1914*, Delhi, 1996; Saberwal, *Pastoral Politics*; Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*; Chhatre, 'The Mirage of Permanent Boundaries'.

<sup>26</sup> For a general discussion see Gadgil and Guha, *This Fissured Land*. For details on Uttara Kannara see Buchy, *Teak and Arecanut*.

<sup>27</sup> Petition from ryots of Siddapur to His Excellency, Lt. Gen. G.H. Warre, Commander-in-Chief, Bombay Presidency, no date, RD 1881, Vol. 81, MSA; see other petitions in same volume.

They were forced to pay a grazing tax of 2 annas per head of cattle, although 'from ancient time' they had grazed their cattle for free in the jungles.<sup>28</sup>

The most serious complaints related to the size of the *betta* lands from which the cultivators were forced to obtain their leaf manure.

(Only) five or six acres are assigned to us for one acre of garden. But these are quite insufficient . . . The hills assigned to us are such that we cannot get four loads of leaves from them . . . The hills from which we used to bring leaves from ancient times are now reserved . . . At least five hundred loads of dungs (sic) are required for one acre of field. About five hundred loads of leaves are required to prepare the said dungs (sic). Formerly we had permission to bring leaves from jungles, freely. But this custom is now prohibited according to the Forest Act.<sup>29</sup>

The petition admitted, however, that although the ryots occasionally violated the law, 'yet we are not fined or become liable, or charged, under the gracious Colonel Peyton . . . who is very kind to the people.'<sup>30</sup>

Peyton, conservator of forests, claimed to know most of the petitioners, all but one of whom was a Havik, and referred to his good relations with them, as evidenced by the 'grateful way they refer to me.' He claimed that the cultivators routinely visited him with requests for wood, which they got freely and in greater quantities than was ever contemplated even in the liberal permit rules of the district. He also mentioned that at a recent meeting the petitioners had assured him that their reason for submitting the petition had been more to notify the government of their fears of the implications of the forest settlement, than any real objections to the current management of forests.<sup>31</sup>

There followed a second petition, signed by 94 cultivators, with an expanded list of complaints. In addition to complaints listed earlier, the petition alleged ryots were prohibited from bringing leaves from the forest for manuring *hakat* and *gaddi* land (the former used for chillies and vegetables and the latter for rice). Perhaps in an attempt to provide a broader social base to the petition—i.e., beyond just Havik Brahmins—it was said that Kunbis, formerly shifting cultivators, had now been forced to cultivate rice lands, the lack of familiarity with which was causing them considerable suffering. Earlier, the poor of the district would collect and sell myrobalans and *shigakai* pods from the forests. These products were now collected by the forest department, which forced the poor to work for it at very low rates. The petitioners also complained they were not allowed to carry

<sup>28</sup> Complaints from various residents of Yellapur, 30 October 1885, submitted to His Excellency, the Governor-in-Council, Bombay, RD 1886, Vol. 97, MSA.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>31</sup> No. 5046, January 8 1886, RD 1886, Vol. 97, MSA.

scythes and axes into the forest, and were prevented from taking timber from reserved forests.<sup>32</sup>

Once again, Peyton stated that he knew the petitioners, all but three of whom were Brahmins. He was of the opinion that the protests were basically orchestrated by the Kannara Van Dukha Nirvana Sangathan (KVDNS), an organization that had come into existence in Sirsi town in 1886. He believed that 'money and spite [were] at the bottom of the present agitation,' which was 'confined . . . to the Havig Brahmins.' For the most part, Peyton thought the cultivators were being manipulated into submitting petitions without any real reason.<sup>33</sup> Eventually, the government agreed with Peyton that the ryots had little ground for complaint.

The emergence of the KVDNS represented the start of what turned out to be a long drawn out discussion over local rights within forests, particularly in the context of the *betta* lands.<sup>34</sup> Following the establishment of a Forest Commission in Poona to enquire into forest grievances of Thana district, an attempt was made by the KVDNS to have a similar commission set up in Uttara Kannara. Although references to the KVDNS in the archives die out within a couple of years, references to a collective mobilization of cultivators against the policies of the forest department continue into the next century. The KVDNS appears to mark the beginning of collective action against the forest department.

The initiative to start the organization was taken by Anant Hadig, a lawyer in Sirsi town, who circulated a note in September 1885 'soliciting signatures against the forest department.' In December, Ramchandra Karkare, an official with the Poona Sarvajanic Sabha, and who on an earlier visit to Sirsi had lectured on the principles of local self-governance, addressed a gathering in Sirsi. Shortly thereafter, according to Peyton, the association began to take form. A number of meetings were held, various people were appointed to administrative positions, and ryots of Sirsi and surrounding areas were invited to join the association at a rate of 6 pies per rupee of government assessment. *Patels* or village headmen were instructed to collect money from any ryot willing to join the sabha.<sup>35</sup>

Peyton attempted to discredit the movement in a variety of ways, suggesting that the leadership was primarily interested in the subscription money that could be mobilized on the pretext of meeting expenses incurred in running the organization. To that extent he represented the leaders of the movement as manipulative individuals coercing members of the community to pay membership dues, and argued that in reality, the organization had very little support among the cultivators

<sup>32</sup> Petition by Venuka Bhet Bin Suha Bhet Maggod and 93 others, inhabitants of *taluka* Yellapur, to His Excellency, the Right Honourable The Governor-in-Council, 21 October 1885; RD 1886, Vol. 97, MSA.

<sup>33</sup> Peyton, CF, No. 5295, 27 January 1885; RD 1886, Vol. 97, MSA.

<sup>34</sup> Our account of the mobilization around the KVDNS and of Conservator Peyton's responses has also been documented by Buchy, *Teak and Arecanut*.

<sup>35</sup> Peyton, CF, to the Governor of Bombay, 17 January 1887, with comments on the memorial of the Kannada Vanadukha Nirvana Sabha, RD 1888, Vol. 109, MSA.

of the region.<sup>36,37</sup> In effect, a gullible peasantry, with few complaints of its own, was being misled by professional agitators, many of whom had little to do with the region.

Peyton went further and suspended a number of *patels* whom he accused of misusing their position to force cultivators to pay membership dues to the KVDNS. These men were, however, reinstated by the commissioner on the grounds that they were both government servants and agriculturalists, and that they could not be punished for attempting to look after their interests in agriculture.<sup>38</sup> Peyton remained hostile to the movement. With money flowing in, he claimed, the officials of the KVDNS were forced to provide some action—and this took the form of a lengthy and detailed questionnaire administered to wide sections of Kannara. Presumably based on questionnaire responses, a detailed memorandum was submitted to the government, signed by 3,690 ryots.<sup>39</sup> In response, the commissioner, collector, and district conservator of forests visited Sirsi to enquire into the complaints of the villagers. Most of the complaints were regarding individual access to government forest lands, and the terms on which such access was permitted. While admitting that a few concessions should probably be made for the cultivators, the commissioner for the most part felt that the petitioners had ‘utterly failed in making out even a shadow of a case for a commission.’<sup>40</sup>

Commenting on the petition, the collector pointed out that customary *betta* lands had not been interfered with unless, ‘it was quite out of proportion to the requirements of the garden land . . . From four to eight acres of betta for one acre of garden land is sufficient if the bettas be worked fairly, that is if the leaves and small branches are used solely for manure. It is not intended that the Haviks should cut firewood for their own use or for sale.’<sup>41</sup>

The district conservator of forests, Woodrow, argued that within *betta* lands, there were six reserved species that could not be pollarded—teak, blackwood, sandalwood, *home*, *hirda* and *size*. He stated, ‘there are very few of these kinds of trees on bhatt lands and the leaves of all of them are unfit for manure. Those of the *homme* and *hirda* trees are shed before the ryots begin to pollard them, generally in February and March; the leaves of the sandalwood and blackwood and *size* are exceedingly small and of no use, while those of the teak are too strong to be used for manure’. These six kinds of trees were besides of great value and it would be a serious loss to government with no proportionate gain to the ryots if they were destroyed.

<sup>36</sup> Peyton, CF, No. 5295, 27 January 1885; RD 1886, Vol. 97, MSA.

<sup>37</sup> Forest Administration Report of the Southern Circle of Bombay Presidency, 1885–86, RD 1887, Vol. 38, MSA.

<sup>38</sup> Memo from commissioner, S.D., No. SR/520, 15 March 1886, RD 1886, Vol. 106, MSA.

<sup>39</sup> Ramachandra Karare, secretary, KVDNS, Sirsi to D. Mackenzie, acting chief secretary, revenue department, Bombay, 17 January 1887, RD 1888, Vol. 109, MSA.

<sup>40</sup> W.H. Propert, commissioner, S.D. to John Nugent, chief secretary to government, RD 1238, 30 April 1888; RD 1888, Vol. 109, MSA.

<sup>41</sup> No. 841, 25 February 1887, RD 1888, Vol. 109, MSA.

Woodrow also claimed that the cultivators 'can and do make use of the betta lands freely.' The problem, according to him was that although they were supposed to take only twigs and small branches—the only parts of the trees of use as manure—in reality, the ryots 'cut thick branches and the thinner limbs of trees . . . . It is this pernicious practice that causes the greatest damage to the forests and leads to the supply of leaf manure becoming scantier every year.' As far as Woodrow was concerned, 'the giving of free betta was a mistake from the first. Had the people had to pay for it . . . greater care would have been taken of the property.'

In light of the petitioning, officials were willing to admit that greater concessions could be in order. Yet, there were the continual attempts by the forest department to toughen existing legislation—including extending the list of reserved trees that could not be lopped (which reached 41 species at one point), and transferring control over *betta* lands from the revenue to the forest department. Given the strong opposition to the forest department during the mid-1880s, it is remarkable that by the beginning of the next decade the government attempted to push through tougher legislation, as documented below.

### The Turbulent Nineties

In October 1890 the forest department published a new set of draft rules to regulate ryot access to protected forests, within which the *betta* lands had now been included. Over the course of the decade, there were progressive attempts by the forest department to more effectively control ryot use of the forests, defining in explicit terms the size of branches or parts of a tree that could be cut. The attempt to ban cutting instruments and lighted torches in the forest was aimed at preventing unsupervised cutting and frequent burning of trees. Importantly however, the department was in fact unable to enforce many of these regulations.

By examining the debates that took place within the government, particularly in response to the petitions that were filed by the cultivators, an attempt can be made to trace the long-term processes by which specific rights of use have come into play today, and argue that these are a consequence of the interplay of many factors, both within and outside the government.

#### *Rights versus Privileges*

Commenting on the draft rules that were published in 1890, the conservator of forests, J.L. MacGregor, primarily recommended that the term 'rights in beta assignments' be replaced with 'privileges in beta assignments,' because 'if admitted as rights, it will not be possible for government to modify, or cancel, any of these concessions should they wish to do so hereafter.'<sup>42</sup> The recommendation was

<sup>42</sup> J. MacGregor, conservator of forests, to the chief secretary to government, revenue department, No. 3228, 28 October 1890, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

supported by Wingate, forest settlement officer for Kannara,<sup>43</sup> as well as by Divisional Forest Officer W.R. Woodrow, who thus explained the point:

At the time of making beta allotments the rule followed by the Survey Department was to mark off all 'weiwat,' that is, all forest that the people had been in the habit of pollarding for leaf manure. The garden owners have thus selected their own forests without the forest department having had a word to say in the matter. At forest settlement, or during the operations of the Working Plans Branch, it may be found expedient to include some betas in reserved forests, in order to complete a block or for some other reason. If a right existed it would be difficult to make the alteration, whereas if only a privilege, the garden holder could be given beta somewhere else.<sup>44</sup>

However, there was opposition to the motion from a variety of other officials (primarily in the revenue department), largely on the legal point that *beta* lands had always been considered a part of the occupants' holdings, initially treated as a separate survey number that would be assessed independently, but eventually treated as an integral portion of the garden-holding. Keyser, the commissioner, felt that given that the rights seem to have received formal recognition, they could not now 'be ignored and termed privileges for the protection of government interests.'<sup>45</sup> The chief secretary was categorical in arguing for retaining the usufruct as a right, quoting from GR No. 2211, 5 June 1867, wherein the government had recognised 'inviolable rights' in the *beta*.<sup>46</sup> Rembrancer of Legal Affairs J.R. Naylor was also clearly sympathetic to the argument that ryots had rights and not just privileges within *beta* lands.<sup>47</sup>

### *Manufacturing Dissent*

Let us turn now to the petitions that deluged the government following the publication of the draft rules. They were strikingly similar: they addressed the same issues, not surprising given the similarity of petitioner concerns, but more interestingly, they were very similar in style and formulation, putting the issues in similar serial order, often using identical terms and phrases. This suggests an institutional orchestration of petitions rather than spontaneous protests against increased curbs over forest access. This should not, however, be taken to mean an absence of individual desire to obtain greater access to forest resources, or an

<sup>43</sup> R.T. Wingate, forest settlement officer, Kannara, to Alfred Keyser, acting commissioner, S.D., No. 258, 26 November 1890, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>44</sup> W.R. Woodrow, divisional forest officer, to MacGregor, No. 333, 20 December 1890, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>45</sup> Keyser to Nugent, No. 4650, 5 December 1890, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>46</sup> Note by the chief secretary, T.D. Mackenzie, 11 June 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>47</sup> Report by J.R. Naylor, rembrancer of legal affairs, No. 1040, 22 June 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

absence of individual agency with regard to opposing the government. A more interesting reading is that the institutionalized organization of protests was highly effective in forcing the government to concede key demands made by the cultivators.<sup>48</sup>

To demonstrate the organized nature of these petitions, some features may be pointed out. All of them started out by referring to the oppressive nature of existing forest regulations. They then talked of how the draft rules, if enforced, would lead to further losses for the cultivators, with negative consequences for future generations. This was generally followed by a reference to the rules being published in English, making them incomprehensible to most ryots in the district. Most petitions ended by pleading for the rules to be published in Kannada, and for more time to ryots to comment on them. Many petitions used identical expressions: 'incommodius, hardpressing and troublesome' when referring to the oppressive nature of existing regulations; the likelihood of the ryots 'being brought to the brink of ruin' were such oppression to continue; the comment that 'they desire greatly and with expectation to get rid of such various acts of annoyance [regulations in force at the time], to be free from them so that they may accrue benefit thereby'; the comment that they were 'quite at sea to surrender their objections or suggestions as the case may be within the prescribed time', a reference to the ryots' inability to read English, and hence to submit recommendations within the prescribed time period. All the petitions were sent in at approximately the same time, over a span of the month that preceded the 3 January deadline by which ryot comments and suggestions were to have been submitted to government. Each petition was signed by a very large number of ryots.<sup>49</sup>

On 22 January 1891, a government notification was issued naming 19 tree species as reserved, the list being appended to rule 22 of the draft rules already

<sup>48</sup> The betel nut cultivators of Uttara Kannara, largely Havik Brahmins, have continued to demonstrate such capacity for collective action in recent years—both in regard to the APIKO movement and in the running of a sales cooperative that has provided members with a wide variety of resources, including storage space for betel nuts, the institutional strength to sell commodities based on silent auctions, thereby forcing an ever-growing rise in betel nut prices, and easy credit, thereby enabling a continual expansion to the area under this highly lucrative crop (Saberwal, unpublished data).

<sup>49</sup> See RD 1895, Vol. 116, MSA—192 signatories to a memorial from Sonda village, Sirsi *taluka*, 5 December 1890; 146 signatures to a petition from another village in Sirsi (village not named), 13 December; 8–10 memorialists from Navilgaon, Honnavar, no date, December 1890; 30–40 signatories from Valgalli village, 17 December 1890; 70 signatories of Islur village, Sirsi *taluka*, 18 December 1890; 25 signatories from Kadtoka village, Honnavar, 19 December 1890; 75-odd signatories from Shautpurhagni and Shivallihagni, Sirsi *taluka*, 20 December 1890; 29 signatories from Sarur village, Sirsi *taluka*, 16 December 1890; approximately 200 signatories of Herura Hostet, Siddapur, 24 December 1890; approx. 75 signatories from Hulakul village, Sirsi, 25 December 1890; 61 petitioners from Ankola district, 30 December 1890. On 12 January 1891 the oriental translator's department forwarded 12 petitions to the chief secretary—79 signatories from Honnavar *taluka*; 640 from Sirsi *taluka*; 21 from Ankola *taluka*; 62 from Siddapur, 50 from Kumta, 167 from Siddapur; another 1,750 from Siddapur; 26 from Yellapur; 22 from Kumta; 81 from Honnavar; 34 from Kumta; another 25 from Kumta.

published and under discussion. The increase from 6 to 19 species was like a red rag to a bull, and set off a fresh round of petitions. They were fewer in number this time, but contained detailed critiques of the proposed rules.

Predictably, among the most common complaints in these petitions, variants of which were to be voiced over the next four decades, was the insufficiency of *bettas*. But there were many other issues as well. The petitions complained that with 19 species now in the reserved list, 'we feel sure that no betta assignments would be of any use to us.' They were no longer allowed to take earth from *bettas* or from forest lands in order to sustain the fertility of gardens. Nor were they allowed to take leaves from government forests that adjoined the *betta* lands or to clear land up to 100 fathoms around garden land in order to protect the gardens from 'floods, wild animals or fire'. They were prohibited from digging ditches around their *bettas* in order to prevent the entry of cattle. There were new restrictions on the removal of timber and fuel wood. A new grazing fee of 2 anna, per head of cattle was to be levied. Cutting instruments could no longer be taken into the forest, as a result of which they could not protect their cattle from wild animals and were unable to free their animals 'when their legs get entangled into rushes or roots of trees.' The ban on carrying lighted torches into the forest reduced the ryots' ability to protect their lands and crops from wild animals.<sup>50</sup>

On 14 August 1891, a detailed, printed memorial was submitted to the government, referring once again to the 'increasing severity and rigour of the forest regulations.'<sup>51</sup> The petition pointed out that the density of trees in a *betta* varied as a function of soil type, and accordingly, a garden could require from eight to sixteen acres of *betta* per acre of garden land. It was claimed that ryots had traditionally had such acreage of land as *betta*, but at the time of the revenue and forest settlements, the 'extent of the *bettas* in their possession . . . [had been] greatly curtailed,' with *bettas* assigned 'at the rate of 2, 3, 4, or in some rare and fortunate cases, at the rate of 6 acres' per acre of garden cultivation. As a consequence, there was now a shortage of leaf manure, and, therefore, a drop in garden productivity. The proposed increase in the number of reserved species to 19 would further inconvenience the ryots. The petition suggested that 11 rather than 19 tree species be reserved.

The petition also brought up the issue of the new ban on bringing green leaves and branches for manurial purposes from protected forests other than the ryots' own *betta* assignments. Apparently, prior to the introduction of the draft rules the forest department had permitted cultivators to remove, or at least not stopped them from removing, leaves and branches from protected forests during the rains. This was to be now stopped, and the removal of branches and leaves was to be limited to the *betta* lands. Interestingly, archival material up to this point, including petitions filed with the government, make no mention of cultivator use of

<sup>50</sup> Petition from Umamaheshwar Ganapaya Hegde and 100 other ryots of Sirsi to the collector, Kannara, 30 January 1891, and from Gaddamane Subraya Bhat and 37 others of Sirsi, to the collector of Kannara, 7 February 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 116, MSA.

<sup>51</sup> See RD 1895, Vol. 116, MSA.

government forests in this fashion. One has a sense that following the assignment of *betta* lands, cultivators had basically been limited to these areas to meet their biomass requirements.

The draft rules also contained a variety of clauses to regulate the cutting of *soppu* (leaf) and branches within *betta* lands themselves: branches longer than nine inches were not to be cut, no lopping was to take place within ten feet of the summit of the tree, a limit of five feet from the summit was proposed for 'jungle and low coppice.' The ryots stated that such regulations were likely to greatly reduce the amount of *soppu* they got from their *betta* lands. They stressed their awareness of the need for care in the working of these lands. The methods they used in harvesting *soppu* were geared towards the objective of maximizing leaf off-take while ensuring the long-term sustainability of the process. They pointed to the long-standing nature of the *bettas* as evidence of their success.

The petition called on the government to form a committee of three officers 'to investigate into the peculiarities of betelnut garden cultivation of Kannara for a period of two years.' Better still, the cultivators suggested, that an experiment be set up whereby half the garden be managed using techniques used by the ryots, and half according to the notions of the forest officials. The petitioners would willingly abide by the norms laid down by the forest department if the latter could demonstrate equal levels of productivity.

A variety of other issues had been raised in the draft rules, which the petition discussed in considerable detail. The forest department had always been unhappy about the large quantities of wood taken from the forests, and in the new regulations it attempted to limit the quantity and quality of wood that could be removed free of charge. According to the new rules, no green wood with a circumference greater than 32 inches could be taken out of the forest; no dead wood with a circumference greater than 32 inches or length greater than four feet was to be removed. Only head-loads of wood were to be allowed out of the forest, no cart-loads. No wood was to be taken out for use in the construction of new structures (only repair of old structures was permitted), and no wood was to be removed for any activity related to the production of articles of trade. The petition complained about all of these, saying that branches were often of an uneven circumference, and that they required wood for the processing of areca nuts and cardamom, as well as for the production of jaggery, the majority of which was sold in the market (thus making them articles of trade). Given that their garden lands were heavily taxed on the expectation that they would be selling their goods in the market, the cultivators could not see how they could be denied the wood they needed to produce these goods in the first place. Forcing the cultivators to buy the wood was simply an additional tax over an already heavy burden.

### *The Betta Question and the Expansion of Garden Cultivation*

In 1891, even as the ryot responses to the draft rules were under consideration, MacGregor expressed the apprehension that the spice gardens were being extended,

and that sooner or later, pressure would be brought to bear on the government to allot fresh *betta* lands from the 'remnants' of the forests not already given up.<sup>52</sup> A sceptical government note called for more information on the subject, stating that given that 'upwards of 90% of . . . Kanara district was now included in forests, there ought to be little difficulty in providing, should it become necessary, for a considerably larger demand for *rab* (green manure) than now exists in connection with these gardens.'<sup>53</sup>

The collector of Kannara provided figures to show that there had been an insignificant increase in garden cultivation. He believed there could even have been a decrease owing to the difficulties of obtaining sufficient *rab*. He also anticipated that within a relatively short time, the present allotment of *betta* would simply be exhausted, with the trees dying from frequent usage. He anticipated that under the current management of *betta* lands, the entire protected forest would suffer from denudation if additional lands were to be given to meet the demands of the ryots. He, therefore, proposed that the government take over the *betta* lands and provide leaves to the ryots on payment of a fee. He did not doubt the capacity of the forest to provide adequate leaf for manure, so long as the removal of leaves was carefully regulated and monitored.<sup>54</sup>

MacGregor doubted that any garden had been abandoned owing to an inadequate supply of *rab*, stating that villagers had had 'pretty nearly carte blanche in regard to the taking of *rab* until quite recently, and illegally raved forests wholesale outside their bet lands.' Any abandonment of gardens, he felt, must have been a result of the devastation of forests within reach of the gardens or due to the drying up of the land following the opening up of the forests surrounding the gardens. He was against the throwing open of the forests for the collection of *rab*, and suggested instead that the extraction of leaves be limited to clearly defined *betta* lands, appendant to specific garden lands. The proprietor of the garden would be free to work the *betta* lands as he chose, with the knowledge that the allotments were final and that no additional leaves would be provided from the forests.<sup>55</sup>

Davidson, acting collector of Bijapur, agreed with MacGregor that the current system of collecting *rab* was unsatisfactory, and had caused a serious deterioration in the quality of the *bettas*. Davidson anticipated a considerable improvement in the condition of the *betta* lands as a result of the proposed supervision by the forest department. Where *bettas* had been seriously injured, he felt the cultivators should make up their deficiencies by buying *rab* from the forest department.<sup>56</sup>

<sup>52</sup> Forest Administration Report for the Bombay presidency, including Sind, for the year 1889–90.

<sup>53</sup> Extract paragraph 23 of government resolution No. 1899, 13 March 1891 on the forest administration reports for the Bombay presidency including Sind for the year 1889–90. RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>54</sup> H. Woodward, collector, Kannara, to J. Nugent, commissioner S.D., No. 2566, 17 June 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>55</sup> J. MacGregor to Nugent, S.D., No. 1368, 25 June 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>56</sup> J. Davidson, acting collector, Bijapur, to Nugent, S.D., No. 2976, 6 July 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

Where spare forest lands were available, Davidson advocated the provisioning of additional *bettas* to the cultivators. These could be charged at Rs 1–3 per acre in cases where mismanagement had destroyed the *bettas*. Where rice lands were being converted to garden lands, he would provide *betta* and charge garden rates for the land.<sup>57</sup> Justifying his position, he argued (i) that garden and well-maintained *betta* lands were equally effective as forest cover with regard to climatic services, (ii) that the proportion of valuable timber in the Sirsi and Siddapur forests was small, and (iii) that land under garden cultivation was more profitable than that under forests.<sup>58</sup> Similar arguments were to be made over many decades by those who supported the extension of the gardens.

In reporting to the government, the commissioner, Nugent, argued against taking over the *betta* lands and providing *rab* against payment, especially because the *betta* lands formed part and parcel of the garden settlement, and their assessment was included in it. He also felt that there was scope for help in the rules for the assignment of *bettas* to ryots with insufficient assignments, and that in any case, the draft rules made ‘ample provision in the case of cultivators who have no *betta* assignments for the supply of leaf-manure from forests.’ This last was to be on a pay per load basis. Nugent also argued against following too liberal a policy of encouraging the conversion of forest to garden cultivation, stating that *rab* had to be collected from a limited radius around each garden. The fact that the district had 90 per cent forest cover did not mean that all of it was accessible to a given villager. Once the forest had been cleared from around a given area, the adjoining garden must suffer, since importing *rab* from distant, more heavily forested areas was not an option. He predicted that ‘within a measurable period of time spice gardens will in parts of Kanara have ceased to exist,’ unless the garden cultivators became more careful in their use of forest resources. In the process, the government would have lost not only the revenue from these lands but also the forest cover.<sup>59</sup>

As in other parts of the country, the tussle between cultivation and forestry was couched in diametrically opposite terms by the revenue and forest departments. The former suggested that the area under areca was diminishing as a direct result of the restrictive policies of the forest department. The latter argued that any decrease in garden cultivation was a consequence of the mismanagement of the *bettas*, with a reduced capacity of the land to support cultivation. An identical stand-off took place in Himachal Pradesh, where the revenue department argued that herders were leaving the area because of stringent restrictions on access to forests, and the forest department claimed that it was really lowered productivity caused by over-grazing that was forcing the herders to move out.<sup>60</sup>

<sup>57</sup> Garden lands were taxed at much higher rates than rice lands. Where the maximum tax for rice lands was just over Rs 4 per acre, for garden lands it was over Rs 14 per acre—a reflection of the higher profits associated with the growing of areca and the associated spices grown in areca gardens.

<sup>58</sup> Davidson to Nugent, S.D., No. 2976, 6 July 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>59</sup> Nugent (probably to the chief secretary ??) No. 2806, 21 July 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>60</sup> Saberwal, *Pastoral Politics*.

## A Lenient Government and the Lamb Report

In 1892, the government issued orders for the 'lenient treatment of the people in forest matters' in the Kannara district,<sup>61</sup> with the commissioner being asked to provide suggestions for revision of forest rules in response to the petitions.<sup>62</sup> The cause for this leniency is not altogether clear. A committee comprising of District Collector Lamb, the forest settlement officer and the divisional forest officer submitted its report in 1893. Responding to the government's orders for leniency, the report made a dramatic departure from earlier treatments of the subject. On the *betta* issue, the committee dropped a bombshell. It stated that while there appeared to be widespread agreement among government officers regarding the inability of the *bettas* to provide an adequate supply of leaf manure, all previous proposals appeared to have proceeded on the assumption that four to eight acres of *betta* would suffice per acre of garden. However, 'this committee is emphatically of the opinion that is not, and cannot be [sufficient]. For the settlement of the beta question garden cultivators must be given what their gardens really require.' The requirement, stated the committee, was nine to ten acres of forest per acre of garden.<sup>63</sup>

The Lamb report proposed two new rules: 5(a) allowed

any cultivator, between 1 June and 31 October to cut and remove without payment or license for use as manure or cattle bedding, such green leaves and twigs of all trees (except teak, hirda, shigekai, honni, matti, sandalwood, blackwood, abnus, surhoni and kari-mutal) as he may require from those portions of protected forest outside his beta assignment, provided that this privilege shall not be exercised by any individual possessing 9 acres and upwards of beta land per acre of garden.

Rule 5(b) permitted cultivators to enclose specified portions of protected forest for a period of four months a year—1 September to 31 December—to enable the harvesting of grass, also a critical commodity in the region. The report claimed that many people had been assigned *bena* land (grassland) during the settlement, but some had not been assigned these lands owing to their location within government forest. The report recommended that such lands be allowed to be enclosed, particularly appropriate given that there was considerable overlap in the parts of the forest from which *soppu* was harvested and that where the grasslands were present. The prescribed dates related to the committee's perception that grass did not begin to grow in the region until the end of August and was not harvested until the end of December. The conservator was incredulous, noting in the margins: 'As there is not land enough to give away as beta *and* ben, the Committee

<sup>61</sup> GR 7018, 6 September 1892 and GR 7232, 12 September 1892, RD 1895, Vol. 116, MSA.

<sup>62</sup> C.G. Dodson, acting under secretary to government, to commissioner, S.D., No. 7405, 18 September 1892, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>63</sup> R.A. Lamb, collector of Kannara to commissioner, S.D., No. 287, 14 January 1893, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

advance (sic) this makeshift proposal and support (sic) it by the astounding statement that “grass does not begin to grow till September”.’

Rule 6 provided the occupants of garden lands exclusive rights to lop or pollard all unreserved trees within *betta* lands. Rule 7 permitted the lopping of all reserved trees as well, barring teak, sandalwood, blackwood, *shigekai*, *honi* and *hirda*. This was a considerable modification of the draft rules, which had reserved no less than 19 different kinds of trees, even within the *betta* lands.

The report held that the extension of garden cultivation was desirable, particularly given the relative equality of the climatic value of forest on the one hand and *betta* and garden land on the other, as well as the relatively greater value of the forest for the production of *soppu* rather than timber. Accordingly, the report made it ‘imperative on the collector to allow the conversion of rice or other land into garden when there is sufficient protected forest from which its [manure] requirements can be met.’

The Lamb report was discussed by a number of officials over the next two years. Two conservators of forests, Wroughton and MacGregor, were openly hostile to the suggestion that additional *betta* lands be sanctioned, or that lands formerly under other cultivation be allowed to be brought under areca cultivation. Both were also firmly of the opinion that the terrible condition of the *betta* lands was entirely due to their being misused by the cultivators. J. Davidson, collector of Kannara, on the other hand, was generally supportive of many of the recommendations made by the Lamb Committee.<sup>64</sup>

In his proposals to the government, Nugent reiterated that most shortages in *soppu* were a direct consequence of the misuse of *betta* lands by the gardeners themselves. In such situations, the commissioner suggested, the forest department should make up the shortages by allowing cultivators to remove *soppu* from protected forests, but on payment per head-load. The commissioner argued that additional *betta* assignments should be granted only where it was proven beyond doubt that the original assignments were insufficient. Once granted, following a final, thorough survey, the garden-holder would be told, ‘Thus far shalt thou go and no further,’ and ‘informed that in no circumstances hereafter will he be given an additional yard of beta land. On this point there should be no misunderstanding. Otherwise the forests will vanish and with them will disappear the gardens themselves.’

He thought such a re-survey could usefully be undertaken in Yellapur, since the earlier survey had been somewhat faulty. In the Sirsi and Siddapur *talukas*, however, he did not see the need for a revision, ‘as in them beta lands were allotted with far greater care and on more scientific principles. In some instances the acreage of beta given may, as stated by the committee, have been comparatively small—5, 4½, or even only 4 acres per acre of garden—but the quality of the land

<sup>64</sup> See comments by R.C. Wroughton, conservator of forests, to commissioner, S.D., No. 568, 27 April 1893, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA; J. Davidson, collector of Kannara, to commissioner, S.D., No. 72, 2 January 1894, RD, 1895, Vol. 117, MSA; J. MacGregor, conservator of forests, southern circle, to commissioner, S.D., No. 6237, 10 February 1894, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

must be borne in mind as well as the quantity, and I see little ground to doubt that originally the quantity was adequate, and that if it is now insufficient, this is the result of the reckless improvidence and wasteful habits of the garden-holders.'

### *En Bloc or Individual Assignments?*

In mid 1894, a fresh issue came up vis-à-vis the *betta* question. In the process of conducting the forest settlement survey in the Siddapur *taluka*, the settlement officer, Sheppard, came across the *betta* assignments made by Wingate while conducting the revenue survey settlement some years earlier. Wingate had allocated *betta* lands en bloc to sets of villagers, to hamlets, or to entire village communities, rather than to individual cultivators. Sheppard anticipated that the current assignments would lead to wealthier individuals using their status to obtain disproportionate shares of manure from the communal *bettas*, that a communal system would lead to quarrels among the various users of the *betta*, and, ultimately, to a destruction of the commons, with each person maximizing his own harvesting of leaves and twigs, owing to the uncertainty regarding the actions of the others using the same *betta*. Accordingly, Sheppard recommended that the *betta* lands be re-allotted individually, ensuring greater equality in the allocations.<sup>65</sup>

Wingate, however, was firmly of the opinion that little purpose would be served by individual allocations. Given the costs involved in a re-survey, he felt that the exercise would be pointless.<sup>66</sup> He also argued that owing to his having adopted the principle that 'all land covered with trees that are pollarded, whether every year or in rotation, is to be regarded as *beta*, and measured accordingly,' an adequate amount of land had been given as *betta*. Complaints now voiced regarding the inadequacy of the *betta* assignments were solely due to the hacking of *bettas* for 'fuel and every other requirement.'<sup>67</sup>

Nugent too argued against a re-survey of *betta* lands in Siddapur. He conceded that his earlier impression that the assignments in Sirsi and Siddapur had been made on scientific principles was wrong, and that it now appeared that the Siddapur *betta* allotments had been done en bloc, without adhering to the minimum of four acres proposed by Colonel Anderson. Even so, and despite the communal assignment of *bettas*, Nugent felt that the cutting had not been 'indiscriminate.' It had been strictly regulated by '*wahiwat*' or custom, which had the sanction of the entire body of garden-holders and was religiously observed by them. Each garden-holder was aware of exactly which portion of the *betta* land belonged to him:

So minute is the custom that not only does the garden-holder know what bit of *betta* land is his . . . but also what individual trees are regarded by himself and

<sup>65</sup> See W.D. Sheppard, forest settlement officer, S.D., to Davidson, No. 172, 19 March 1894, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>66</sup> R. Wingate, forest settlement officer, northern division, Kannara, to Davidson, No. 12, 13 April 1894, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>67</sup> Extract from letter of Wingate to commissioner, S.D., No. 191, 20 October 1891, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

his brother-cultivators as those which he alone has the privilege of lopping. Obedience to custom is universal, a garden-holder transgressing it . . . would very soon be brought to his senses and made to know that he must conform to the unwritten law of the village community in the matter.<sup>68</sup>

Nugent claimed an absence of discontent within the Siddapur community with regard to the allocations of *betta* land. He saw no reason for interfering with the current arrangements, feeling that any attempt to do so would

lead to serious discontent and an immense amount of friction. The Havik Brahmin garden cultivators are not, or at least have not the reputation of being angels in human form. They are not generally credited with being a supernaturally unselfish community of guileless Socialists. It cannot be genuinely supposed, save by believers in the immediate advent of the Millennium, that a large number of these astute and well-to-do Brahmin gardeners would voluntarily and with pleasure assent to giving up a large slice of the land of which they have had the acknowledged usufruct for many years in order to place their less favoured brethren and competitors on precisely equal terms with themselves in respect of proportionate acreage of *beta* land.<sup>69</sup>

The comments above are interesting for a variety of reasons. First, Nugent's claim that the *rab* was not being cut indiscriminately in the Siddapur region. If this was the case, it was the only part of the region in which this was so, since the whole case of the forest department was based on the argument that indiscriminate cutting was taking place in Uttara Kannara. Second, and related to the first, it would appear that the single biggest factor resulting in such successful management was the difference in allotment of *betta* lands, with communal allotments being made in Siddapur and individual allotments in Sirsi. The latter was clearly a failure, according to the forest department, in direct contravention of the government's normally held position on the value of private property. Third was the suggestion that the community would be unwilling to go along with a more equitable distribution of *betta* lands. Implicit in the comment is the acceptance that the government would be unable to force the residents to accept a more equitable arrangement, whereas greater equity had earlier been seen as an important by-product of the settlement process.

Nugent proposed a single modification to the existing situation, which was that where a cultivator's *betta* (under the communal framework) was 'obviously and palpably inadequate . . . he might if any land is available (which often is not the case in Siddapur villages) be granted from forest a small additional assignment of land for his own exclusive use. Mr. Sheppard, however, informs me that such

<sup>68</sup> Nugent, commissioner, S.D. to the chief secretary to government, RD, No. 2679, 25 June 1894, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

instances are exceedingly rare. The present area of beta land is unquestionably in the aggregate sufficient.’

In May 1895, the Government resolved that:

1. The grant of additional beta land . . . was to be limited to supari (betel nut) and rice gardens which had no land at all, or for which the existing assignments were glaringly below the average of the village or group of gardens in area or natural productiveness. It was understood that the effect of this modification would be to limit new assignments to Yellapur and some of the earlier measured Sirsi villages. Denudation resulting from reckless cutting without attempt at reproduction would not be admitted as a reason for granting additional land, nor would any attempt be made to bring all assignments up to the existing average of the village or group, as that would practically entail a complete revision, as well as the conversion of the existing average into a minimum that was not intended.
2. There should be no interference with or addition to those *betta* assignments in Siddapur, which were held by the village or group of gardens in common.
3. No attempt should be made to assign lands for loppings and for *soppu* separately.<sup>70</sup>

Cultivators were to be clearly informed that while they could take all material free from within their own *betta* lands, they would have to purchase any additional requirements from the forest department. It was hoped that the arrangement would provide the cultivators with an incentive to better manage their lands.

The government also saw no reason to prevent anyone from converting rice or *betta* land to garden land, as long as it was understood that no rights to cut branches or leaves would go with it, and that any leaf manure taken from government forest would have to be paid for. Thus the government came down on the side of the forest department, and against the recommendations of officials of the revenue department who had argued for encouraging the expansion of garden cultivation.

As regards the method of supply of leaf on payment, the forest department was asked, wherever a sufficient demand was anticipated, to establish depots at which head-loads of leaves could be collected at reasonable prices. The resolution also urged that the cultivators be encouraged to use dry instead of green leaves as manure. Given the ‘unlimited supply’ of the former, this could potentially solve the *soppu* problem with ‘minimum damage to the forest.’

Over the next six months, the divisional forest officer reported that the cultivators were unwilling to purchase *soppu*, seeing this merely as an additional tax on garden cultivation.<sup>71</sup> Subsequently, the conservator proposed a cheaper variant to the depots, suggesting that *nakas* (checkpoints) be established ‘at which permits

<sup>70</sup> GR 4028, 29 May 1895, RD 1895, Vol. 117, MSA.

<sup>71</sup> W.A. Talbot, divisional forest officer, to the conservator of forests, southern circle, No. 693, 3 December 1895, RD 1896, Vol. 110, MSA.

to cut and remove headloads of *soppu* from specified areas' may be provided to the cultivators for a fee of six pies. He thought the system would be more acceptable to the people, even if less effective in protecting the forests. He also suggested that the taking of dry instead of green leaves be allowed from these 'permit areas' for free.<sup>72</sup>

The collector saw no hope of the depot system working simply because the cost associated with transporting the leaf from depot to garden would be too great for the cultivator to bear. He thought it possible that a *naka* system would work, although even this opinion he offered 'with great diffidence'. In his opinion, the only way to prevent the cutting of *soppu* from the forests was to increase the size of the *betta* assignments. Still arguing the case for greater support to garden cultivation, he pointed out that the net forest revenue from the whole southern forest division of Kannara (which included Sirsi, Siddapur, Kumta, Honawar and Bhatkal) was under Rs 22,000, compared with the land assessment of Sirsi and Siddapur, paid almost entirely by the gardens, of Rs 283,219. Accordingly, the collector felt the forests 'should be mainly administered for the increase of the gardens and the welfare of the existing ones.'<sup>73</sup>

The passage of the order requiring cultivators to meet all *soppu* requirements that could not be met from their *bettas* by paying for it by the head-load, resulted in the predictable petition. Three hundred and six pages of signatures accompanied the petition. At approximately 25 signatures a page, this came to 7,650 signatures! In the main, the petition complained that the charging of a fee of one anna per head-load would effectively translate, for many cultivators, to an average cost of Rs 50 per acre of garden cultivation, and would necessarily result in their having to forsake garden cultivation.<sup>74</sup>

The petitioners demonstrated a remarkable familiarity with the historical record, quoting copiously from various government documents, including selections from government records, annual administrative reports of the forest department and correspondence within the government. At one point the petition reproduced authenticated unpublished proposals of Mr Wingate (then settlement commissioner) regarding the settlement of villages in the Sirsi and Yellapur *talukas* (see Table 1).

These instances, and exactly similar decisions given in other village-forest settlement cases, will show that Mr. Wingate regarded existing beta lands as quite insufficient to meet the demands of garden cultivators and as Forest Settlement officer made a distinct recommendation that the garden-proprietors should

<sup>72</sup> The conservator of forests, southern circle, to the commissioner, S.D., No. 6972, 13 February 1896, RD 1896, Vol. 110, MSA.

<sup>73</sup> The collector of Kannara to the commissioner, S.D., No. 710, 14 February 1896, RD 1896, Vol. 110, MSA.

<sup>74</sup> Petition from landowners and garden-proprietors in the Sirsi and Yellapur *talukas* to His Excellency Lord Sandhurst, Governor-in-Council, 19 September 1896.

be allowed to exercise their usual rights and privileges over a major portion of the Protected forest area outside the Beta lands.<sup>75</sup>

**Table 1**  
*Details of Settlement Officer Wingate's Remarks on Beta Lands,  
in the Context of Area Devoted to Betel Nut Gardens, Beta Lands and Protected Forests*

<i>Name of Village</i>	<i>Garden Land (acres)</i>	<i>Betta Land (acres)</i>	<i>Protected Forest Exclusive of Bettas (acres)</i>	<i>Wingate's Decision</i>
Sadashivalli	76	486	3,219	<i>Betta</i> lands to be included in protected forests. Grazing and other rights and privileges to be permitted within these areas, not more than half of which should be closed by government without granting an equivalent elsewhere.
Kusguli	34	223	358	<i>Bettas</i> included in protected forests with usual rights and privileges to the ryots. No closing allowed.
Hasangi	46	263	1,502	<i>Bettas</i> included in the protected forests. Grazing and usual privileges to be exercised in the protected areas, not more than half of which should be closed by government without granting an equivalent elsewhere.
Chikoli	14	97	2,196	<i>Betta</i> lands and 691 acres of forest to be declared as protected area. Grazing and other rights and privileges to be allowed within it, none of which is to be closed without granting an equivalent elsewhere.

**Source:** Petition from landowners and garden-proprietors in the Sirsi and Yellapur *talukas* to His Excellency Lord Sandhurst, Governor-in-Council, 19 September 1896.

The petition pointed out that the average *betta* assignments of five to seven acres per acre of garden land were insufficient for manuring purposes, given that 16 to 20 acres of forest, per acre of garden, were required to meet *soppu* requirements. It said: 'Mr. Wingate was thoroughly cognisant of this fact, and he, therefore, recommended that the garden proprietors should be allowed the right of cutting and collecting *sopu* even from outside the beta lands and over the major part of the Protected Forest.'<sup>76</sup>

The petition used the disagreements between the forest and revenue departments to good effect, demonstrating the existence of considerable official support for the claims put forth by the cultivators. Through quotes from the forest administration reports, the petition even managed to demonstrate clear-cut admissions on part of the forest department regarding the insufficiency of the *betta* allotments.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>76</sup> *Ibid.*

Despite the fact that it had come to consider the *betta* issue as finally resolved, the government decided to enquire afresh into the matter. Predictably the collector and conservator disagreed on the validity of the complaints listed in the petition. The collector supported the claim that *betta* lands were insufficient. Further, that given the insignificant revenue from forest lands (gross revenue for Sirsi was Rs 26,322 for Siddapur, 13,245), maintaining the forest was unjustified. This appeared especially true when seen in the context of the low ratio of garden and *betta* land to overall forest in the Sirsi and Siddapur *talukas* (see Table 2).

**Table 2**  
*Magnitude of Revenue Assessment of Betel Nut Gardens, in the Context of Area Devoted to Gardens, Bettas and Forest Lands for the Sirsi and Siddapur Talukas*

Taluka	Area of Garden Land	Assessment of Garden Land	Betta Land	Area of Forest Including Betta
Sirsi	5,979	66,123	26,900	244,069
Siddapur	7,407	91,429	29,119	171,396

**Source:** Frost, collector of Kannara, to commissioner, S.D., No. 429, 13 February 1897, RD 1898, Vol. 101, MSA.

As a means of resolving the problem, the collector proposed that an additional four acres of *betta* land be allotted per acre of garden land, with a fee of four annas per additional acre. This would result in an additional 24,000 acres of *betta* land in Sirsi and 29,000 in Siddapur.<sup>77</sup> Once again, he expressed his support for the claim in the petition that the *betta* lands were well managed.

For his part, the conservator returned once again to the theme of the inevitability of the destruction of the *betta* land under current usage, with adverse consequences for the production of *soppu*, leading, eventually, to the drying up of springs that fed the gardens. He stressed that the ultimate consequence of continuing with the current system would be the abandonment of the gardens. What was really required was for the cultivators to adopt more conservative methods of making manure, i.e., through the collection of dry leaves and the regular production of leaf mould in pits, rather than the lopping of trees for green leaves.<sup>78</sup>

The long and short of the correspondence was that Mollison, deputy director of agriculture, was deputed to inquire into the system of garden cultivation and recommend changes he considered useful.<sup>79</sup> Mollison estimated that each cultivator required at least nine acres of *betta* land to adequately manure a single acre of garden land, and strongly recommended that the deficiencies in *betta* allotments be made good by the government. Faced with the detailed report on the matter,

<sup>77</sup> Frost, collector of Kannara, to commissioner, S.D., No. 429, 13 February 1897, RD 1898, Vol. 101, MSA.

<sup>78</sup> J.B. Fry, conservator of forests, to the acting commissioner, S.D., No. 177, 6 April 1897, RD 1898, Vol. 101, MSA.

<sup>79</sup> See GR 3463, 23 May 1898, RD 1898, Vol. 101, MSA.

the government finally agreed, leading to orders being issued for garden and *betta* lands to be re-surveyed with the full complement of nine acres of *betta* land being assigned per acre of garden land.

### Early Decades of the Twentieth Century

The first two decades of the twentieth century provide a good example of the gap that generally exists between government policy and practice. Despite the government decision to provide each cultivator with nine acres of *betta* land for every acre of *areca*, complaints continued to pour in, particularly from *talukas* along the coast. Things reached a head in the middle of the second decade, at a time when *areca* prices had fallen sharply. A combination of low prices and consistently high levels of taxation led to a number of cultivators abandoning their lands.

In 1918, G.R. Masur, secretary, Agricultural Association, Kumta, submitted a paper to the collector, listing various factors that had led to such a situation. He demonstrated a decrease in the acreage under cultivation from 240,399 acres to 210,826 acres, and a corresponding increase in fallows from 83,411 acres to 128,557 acres over the period 1890–1915. He went on to point out that since the 1890s, the extent of area under protected and reserved forests had changed dramatically, and this change had resulted in a huge increase in forest restrictions on the ryots. In 1890, he claimed, reserved forests covered 476 square miles, while protected forests were 3,048 square miles. By 1910, the figures had more than reversed, with only 138 square miles under the more leniently managed category of protected forests. By 1918, the entire forested area had been declared reserved—now constituted under two categories: organized and unorganized reserved forests. Privileges granted under the Kannara Forest Privilege Rules, 1911, could only be exercised in unorganized forests, which comprised no more than a ninth of the total forest cover in Kumta.<sup>80</sup>

Masur submitted that unorganized forests actually had very little forest or grass cover, and so were of little use to the cultivating classes. Where a cultivator was unable to obtain the produce he needed from these forests, he was required to apply for a permit to the forest officer, who had the authority to either refuse or direct him to purchase the materials from a given depot.<sup>81</sup> Masur spoke of the plans of the government to open more and more fuel depots close to villages, and of the fact that once these depots were established, the ryots would be forced to obtain their requirements from them rather than from the forests that they had earlier been able to access. Masur also made reference to the large number of forest offences that were recorded each year, and pointed out that most of these took place as a result of the ‘sheer desperation’ of ryots who had been unable to

<sup>80</sup> Rao Saheb G.R. Masur, to collector of Karwar. A representation to the collector, treating at length some of the grievances embodied in the preceding statement, 12 March 1918. In G.R. Masur, *Forest Grievances in North Kanara, Pamphlet No. 1*, 1927.

<sup>81</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 16–19.

meet their requirements from the forest lands they were legally allowed to use. He quoted from the collectors' remarks in the Forest Administration Reports for 1906–7, 1907–8 and 1911–12 to highlight the fact that collectors too had felt that forest officials were far too zealous in interpreting forest rules and that it was only the absence of alternatives that was forcing the cultivators to break the law.<sup>82</sup>

Masur's remarkably comprehensive document then went on to point out that land in Kannara was assessed at rates that were much higher than those in areas with no forest cover: Rs 3 per acre being the average for Kannara, compared to an average of eight annas per acre for neighbouring Ratnagiri. Therefore, he argued, 'the obvious inference is that the enjoyment of forest privileges was a count in the reckoning when the rates of assessment were fixed. The non-enjoyment, in practice, of these privileges should render the present rates unjust and hard.'<sup>83</sup> Masur suggested that unorganized reserved forests should be greatly increased to bring them on par with the area that was classified as protected forests in 1890, that the control over this area should be transferred from the forest department to the revenue department, and that these forests should be liberally assigned to each village to ensure that ryots could obtain the resources they required.<sup>84</sup>

The government appeared to recognize as legitimate some of the concerns voiced by Masur, and appointed G.F.S. Collins to recommend the best way to solve the problem. What followed is the settlement of 1922 and the issue of additional orders that placed *betta* lands and an expanded area of unorganized forests under the control of the revenue department.

## Conclusion

The controversy over cultivator rights and privileges within forests extended over a period of six decades, and continues to exist in some shape and form. Over this time, both the government and the local population as well as different departments of the government went back and forth as to the appropriateness of following a particular policy. Fissures within the government, as well as a strongly articulated resistance from the cultivators ultimately ensured a more lenient policy than desired by many officials.

The story provides compelling evidence of the necessity for governments to continually adjust policies in the light of altered circumstances. As Sivaramakrishnan points out, individuals within the government are continually responding to changing pressures.<sup>85</sup> The positions they take are critically influenced by the nature of the conditions they are operating in at that given time. During the 1860s revenue department officials attempted to provide settlement officers with a certain

<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 22–24.

<sup>83</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 25.

<sup>84</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 26.

<sup>85</sup> Sivaramakrishnan, *Modern Forests*.

leniency regarding the allocation of *betta* lands. During the 1870s and 1880s, the revenue department went along with demands from a relatively weak forest department to curtail cultivator access to forest lands. With the forest department gaining in authority following the enactment of the Forest Act of 1878, there was decreasing revenue department support for forest department policies of restriction—a function of the corresponding decrease in their own relative importance in the bureaucracy.

In some senses the ultimate agreement to concede up to nine acres of *betta* per acre of *areca* relates to the institutional pressure brought to bear by the cultivators on the government. The account of this organizational activism presented here, falls outside standard typologies of the interaction of the colonial state with its subjects. The assertion, for example, of the harsh impact of colonial and post-colonial policies on cultivator communities is hardly borne out by the example here of the colonial state being forced to concede a great variety of demands. Similarly, there have been repeated calls for a revisionist writing of history, one that gives greater space to peasant actions in resisting the British, so often concealed by the overwhelming organizational presence of the Indian National Congress. Here we see a negotiation between cultivator and colonial state that was controlled essentially by the community itself. There were leading lights responsible for putting together the petitions against the government, but these, nonetheless, were residents of Sirsi town and of the surrounding villages. The fight, as it were, must be seen as indigenous, and fought with a certain sophistication, as demonstrated by the use in the final petitions of the century, of British documents and statements.

But most critically, one needs to note that the ability to fight the state was limited in this case to the high-caste Brahmins of the region. It was this community that controlled the productive lands. This was also the most educated section of society, and hence had access to the means with which it could negotiate with the colonial state. The ability to quote from earlier administrative reports while petitioning the government would require the petitioners to go through the maze of paperwork that bureaucracies typically generated. Such sophistication could not be found amongst the tribal population of the region; the reason perhaps why tribal shifting cultivators did not fare as well, and were eventually forced to give up their practice of slash and burn cultivation. This was in line with the experience of tribal populations in other parts of the country, including the north-east and central India. Thus, in making the case for a more nuanced depiction of the colonial state, one that did not have everything always going its way, there is also the need to emphasize the fact that certain communities were able to negotiate with the state, while others lost crucial control over their means of production.

However, even while acknowledging that cultivators managed to extract a number of concessions from the government, figures suggest the forest department did ultimately manage to control a greater proportion of the overall landscape. Through the conversion of the bulk of its land holdings from protected to the far more restrictive reserved status, the forest department ensured that most activities were simply not permitted within the forest estate. The negotiations recorded

above were for a relatively small part of the landscape. This fact, however, bolsters our argument that the Haviks were relatively successful in negotiating on behalf of their own interests. That they were successful is at least in part due to the fact that their interests did not constitute a significant threat to the overall holdings of the forest department. Further, as exemplified by the Siddapur case of en bloc allotments, the department was willing to make concessions because of the social position of the Haviks, and these concessions can be seen as a strategic move aimed at keeping a social elite relatively satisfied.