



Teak: Boon or Bane

JANAL Team and Rajarajeswari Ashok

Summary- Teak forests of Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar were severely damaged by uncontrolled felling for colonial demand by the early 19th century. This led the British to establish teak plantations in Nilambur around 1840, an area which was for indigenous Adivasi communities, a home, herbal garden, food source, and a source of livelihood.

*JANAL Archive is the Kerala Museum's digital canvas for exhibitions on the history of Kerala.
Produced in Kochi, Kerala in partnership with the Geojit Foundation.*

Licensed under [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License \(CC BY-NC 4.0\)](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/)

Teak, 'King of Timbers' is a highly prized tropical hardwood known for its durability and resistance to decay, originates from South and Southeast Asia. Teak trees grow in the tropical forests along the western edge of the Western Ghats, particularly in Travancore, Cochin, and Malabar in southern India. This region suffered resource depletion during early 19th-century British colonial intervention in South India. The uncontrolled felling and exploitation of teak forests in the Western Ghats caused severe damage, prompting the British to establish artificial teak forests in Nilambur around 1840.¹ These teak plantations have been a fixture in Nilambur's landscape for over a century.

Recently, Nilambur teak received Geographical Indication (GI)² status from the GI registry in Chennai, marking it as the first forest product to obtain this recognition. This came after collaborative efforts by multiple stakeholders, including the Kerala Agricultural University IPR Cell, College of Forestry, Kerala Forest Research Institute, Department of Forests, and several NGOs.³ The development invites

examination of the social and political impact teak has had on Nilambur. This article explores two perspectives regarding teak plantations: the colonial view, emphasising the forest as an economic resource, and the Adivasi perspective, highlighting the forest's significance as both a livelihood source and home.

Characteristics of Nilambur Teak

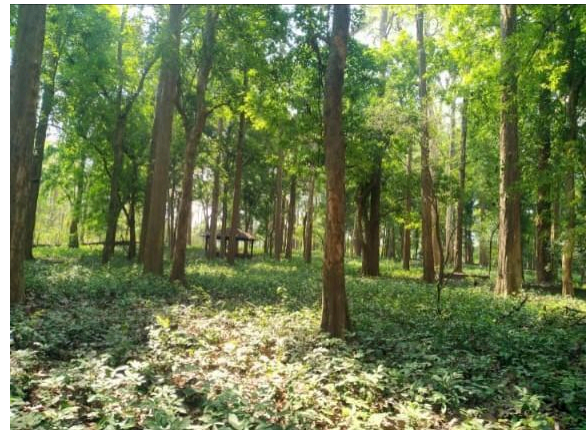


Figure 1. Teak trees in Conolly's Plot. Image: JANAL Archives 2023

Nilambur teak stands out among other varieties due to its exceptional quality. Influenced by the tropical climate and fertile soil, the trees reach impressive sizes of up to 50 metres in height and 2.5 metres in diameter. This substantial growth results in teak logs of significant size, highly coveted in the market.

What sets Nilambur teak apart is not just its size but also its remarkable colour. The heartwood of these trees possesses a rich, golden-brown hue that deepens over time, a sought-after characteristic in the market that signifies superior quality. Additionally, Nilambur teak demonstrates high resistance to fungal decay, insect attacks,

[or-forest-produce-gi-tag-for-nilambur-teak/articleshow/62320961.cms](https://www.janal.org/forest-produce-gi-tag-for-nilambur-teak/articleshow/62320961.cms)

¹ Bennett, Brett M. 'The Origins of Timber Plantations in India.' *British Agricultural History Society* 62, no. 1 (2014): 98–118.

² 'Geographical Indication' (GI) refers to a distinctive label attached to products originating from a specific geographic area, possessing distinct qualities or reputation associated with that region. For a product to be recognized as a GI, the label must truthfully indicate its origin from a particular place. Moreover, the product's specific characteristics, qualities, or reputation must primarily stem from the geographic region where it is produced. The direct correlation between the product and its original place of production significantly influences the product's unique traits and reputation, forming an essential aspect of its identification as a GI.

³ Ramavarman T. 'First for Forest Produce, GI Tag for Nilambur Teak'. *The Times Of India*, Kochi, 01 January 2018. Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/first-f>

and rot, common issues faced by other teak varieties. Furthermore, its high oil content renders it naturally hydrophobic, making it exceptionally resistant to water damage. Moreover, the natural antioxidants present in Nilambur teak enhance its resistance to sunlight and air damage, contributing significantly to its longevity.

The price of teak is determined by various factors, including the supply of timber during auctions and the wood's quality. The popularity of Nilambur teak has transformed it into a recognised international brand that commands a premium price compared to other teak types. Shareef P., the Range Forest Officer in Government Timber Depot, Nedumkayam, noted that in a recent auction (March–April, 2023), Nilambur teak reached a record price of 5.55 lakh per cubic metre, showcasing the high demand and exceptional value placed on this timber.⁴

Colonial Expansion: Need for Plantations

During British rule following the defeat of Tipu Sultan in the Third Anglo-Mysore war in 1792, South India came under British control. The Western Ghats, abundant in valuable timber like Teak, Anjili, and Rosewood, drew particular interest from the British. Specifically, regions like Malabar and Anamallai were renowned for high-quality teak, which fetched higher prices (over Rupee 1 per cubic foot) than Burma teak in the Bombay market. To ensure a steady teak supply, efforts were made by military officers, botanists, and colonial officials to cultivate teak in Bengal, Orissa, and Bihar. However, complexities in

⁴ Interview with Shareef P., 18 April 2023, Range Forest Officer at Government Timber Depot, Nedumkayam, Nilambur Forest Range.

growing teak led to many unsuccessful attempts.

The latter half of the 19th century saw global transformations involving British trading networks, and the military importance of Malabar teak. Malabar teak, especially prized for its durability in humid tropical climates and saltwater exposure, was used by the British for export articles and shipbuilding in local port towns. By the 1840s the British faced a severe shortage of teak in ship building, leading to an emphasis on preserving native forests while fostering plantation agriculture growth in southern India.⁵



Figure 2. HMS Amphitrite & Trincomalee, San Francisco, 23 Sep 1854 Image: Wikimedia Commons.

The British preferred focusing on teak plantations in the Western Ghats due to its superior growth rate and higher quality compared to teak from other British colonies. Teak thrives in areas with specific conditions: an annual rainfall of 1250 to 3750 mm, hilly and well-drained soil, a temperature range of 13–17 degrees Celsius minimum and 39–43 degrees Celsius maximum, making the Western Ghats ideal for both natural teak forests and plantations. “The climate in these regions was optimal for teak growth and the

⁵ Mathew, Joshy. ‘Colonial Interventions and Forests in Malabar, 1792–1947’. *Proceedings of South Indian History Congress*, February 2014, 460–62.

Nilambur plantation was established due to this.”⁶

In 1843, H.V. Conolly and Chatt

u Menon successfully established India's first viable teak plantations in Malabar. Menon's method involved boiling teak seeds, germinating them in water, and then sowing them widely under leaves in a nursery, resulting in successful saplings. The British set up timber depots in Kerala's ports like Thalassery and Kollam for exporting teak wood to Britain. They imposed strict regulations governing the harvesting and transport of teak wood, along with heavy taxes on teak wood exports. Additionally, the introduction of a tramway from Chalakkudi to Parambikulam in the early 20th century aided timber transportation. These activities significantly impacted the global timber industry and left a profound mark on Kerala's history.

Adivasis of Nilambur

The Nedumkayam forest encompasses roughly 500 hectares of teak plantations, housing several distinct communities like the Cholanaikkar, Kattunaykar, and Paniya. Among these groups, the Cholanaikkar community inhabits the deepest parts of the forest, while the Kattunaykar reside in less remote areas. In contrast, the Paniya community lives closest to the town, right within the forest boundaries. Notably, the Cholanaikkar people heavily rely on the forest for their livelihood, maintaining the least contact with the outside world, a practice that persists even up to current times.

Sunil, a member of the Paniya Community in Nedumkayam, shared that his maternal

⁶ Interview Shareef P. 18 April 2023, *ibid*.

family hailed from Wayanad and were brought to Nilambur by the Kovilakam from Nilambur. Conversely, Sunil's paternal family has roots that span several generations in Nilambur. People from diverse communities residing in Nilgiris were relocated to Wayanad and then brought to various locations based on the type of work required.⁷ As a result, the Nilgiris region serves as the ancestral origin for all communities residing in the Nedumkayam forest area. The language spoken by the Kattunaykar community reflects influences from Kannada, while the language used by the Paniya community shows influences from Tamil.

The various communities maintain strong relationships and often participate in each other's religious ceremonies or celebrations. Aneesh explained during the researcher's interaction that festivals like Onam and Vishu are relatively recent additions. Instead, each gothram (community) observes its *varshika akhosham* (yearly festival), mainly occurring between March and May, and typically linked to the collection of produce from the forest. Before venturing out for collection, prayers are offered, acknowledging an inherent sense of a divine presence, perceived as nature itself. Paniyar, Muthuvan, Kaattunayakar—each community has its distinct way of conducting prayers.

During these festivals, there's a customary exchange where the head of the Nayakkanmar community is invited to Paniya festivals and vice versa, signifying mutual respect—a tradition upheld over time. One crucial ritual, the *Vilaveduppu ulsavagangal*, involves prayers before

⁷ Interview with Sunil Kumar, Aneesh, and Lakshmi Babu on 17 April 2023, residents of Nedumkayam forest villages.

collecting honey or other forest produce. Lakshmi highlighted the significance of praying before honey collection, referred to as *malakku kodukkuka*. This ritual involves offering *vettilla and adakka* (betel leaf and areca nut) to the gods before consuming any harvested produce. Notably, honey collection takes place at night, considered a risky task, hence the necessity to offer prayers before initiating it. According to tradition, failing to offer prayers might lead to potential accidents or dangerous situations during the collection process.

Plantation and Forest

The rampant cutting of trees to clear land for the plantation, without concern for the ecosystem led to the destruction of a forest previously characterised by a diverse range of trees, both large and small. A teak plantation, with numerous giant trees closely planted, with just enough space between them for light to reach the ground, dominates a large stretch of the forest floor. Teak roots spread horizontally in the topsoil layer, and the tree consumes most of the soil nutrients and moisture to ensure its survival, and so does not allow other plant species to grow around and under it.⁸

While walking through the forest outside the plantation, Madhavan and Sunil Kumar highlighted another troubling consequence of teak plantations. The expansion of teak significantly disrupted the growth of tuber crops, jeopardising their viability. To begin with, the slow decomposition of teak leaves intensifies this by raising soil temperatures as these leaves accumulate on the ground for extended periods. Consequently, the proliferation of once-abundant medicinal plants in the

area has been severely reduced. Next, the presence of teak leaves obstructs seed germination and, combined with the sap they release, completely inhibits the growth of seeds, resulting in a noticeable decline in the region's previously flourishing plant species.

Other trees, creepers, and shrubs disappear gradually in a teak plantation, making it useless for local people and wildlife. Community members believe that the impact of this destruction still lingers today, and are reminded of this by the logs of teak at the present-day Nedumkayam forest depot, a continuing reminder of the exploitation and deforestation of the area.

Plantation and People

Before the British arrived, the Kattunayaka and Paniya communities were already settled in the area. The Paniya primarily worked the land, while the Kattunaykar and Cholanaikkar communities were responsible for supplying hunted animals, honey, and other forest products to the Kovilakam. These communities primarily inhabited the forest's interior regions. Among them, the Muthuvan community had a notably strong relationship with the Kovilakam, according to Madhavan, a member of the Cholanaikkar community.

However, these lands historically belonged to the Kovilakam, which the British wanted to exploit for timber resources. So after the British arrival in the Nedumkayam forest area in the 1930s, the indigenous people faced servitude and forced labour. The British exploited their power over the Kattunayaka and Paniya communities, compelling them to perform assigned tasks. Before British occupation, the Adivasi people had some control over the forest. However, the arrival of the British led to

⁸ Interview with Madhavan, 18 April 2023, resident of Nedumkayam forest village.

forced labour against their will and the subsequent degradation of the forest.



Figure 3. Statues of Sri Karimpuzha Mathan, eldest of the Cholanaikkas and his wife Karikka at Nilambur. Image: JANAL Archives 2023.

The British recruited individuals from various Adivasi communities residing in the forest to work in the newly created Nedumkayam forest plantation, enticing them with food incentives. Their primary task was to capture and train elephants, a crucial part of the plantation's operations. Other forest residents were tasked with maintaining the teak plantations. This employment significantly altered their lifestyles, dietary habits, and daily routines. The forest department cleared natural forest areas to establish teak plantations under the pretext of agricultural benefits for the community. Initially allowed to engage in agricultural activities within a designated plot for three years, forest communities were required to move to another plot for the next three-year cycle due to teak trees' rapid growth by the fourth year. This practice, known as shifting cultivation, left community members feeling exploited, perceiving that the government was benefiting from land that rightfully belonged to everyone.⁹

⁹ Interview with Sunil Kumar, 19 April 2023, resident of Nedumkayam forest village.

The enforcement of Forest Act and other laws in the 1970s had profound consequences, eroding relationships within and between different communities. While Adivasi communities residing within the forests maintained their connection to the land, those living outside the forest boundaries faced restrictions on visiting their peers inside. These new rules hindered free movement, leading to deteriorating relationships among community members. Despite having shared close bonds in the past, these forest laws prevented reunions between elders and strained connections. The members of the community likened their situation to individuals of African origin severed from their homeland relatives due to the forced displacement of their ancestors, feeling similarly disconnected from their own community members due to these imposed restrictions.

Life in the Forest Today

Regrettably, the passage of time has witnessed a shift towards a preference for brick and cement in contemporary house construction, ultimately leading to the waning of proficiency in traditional construction methods. "It is not that people have forgotten skills like using bamboo in house construction. Most have forgotten how to generate income from the forest itself," said Sunil.¹⁰ Consequently, a palpable consequence of this evolving trend has been the gradual neglect of knowledge and skills related to forest-based income generation, thus ushering in a concerning era of waning familiarity with such invaluable practices.

¹⁰ Sunil Kumar, 19 April 2023. *ibid*

Over the last two decades, there has been a discernible decline in the availability of forest produce, prompting a significant shift in occupational patterns among the populace. The people of Nedungayam, Mundakkadavu, and Pulimunda *ooru* have predominantly gravitated towards engagements in loading and unloading operations. Notably, many of these individuals are affiliated with labour unions and rely heavily on the proceeds generated from Teak plantation activities. Their daily responsibilities entail loading trees, clearing shrubs, and managing fire line duties within the forest's confines. As per the Forest Act of the 1970s, people residing inside the forest were allocated land (*pattayam*) ranging from 2 to 5 cents, which is insufficient for housing.

"We rely on work like *koolippani* (daily wage labour) outside the forest since solely depending on the forest for our livelihood isn't enough. Hence, we need to seek work outside. Moreover, younger generations lack familiarity with forest ways."¹¹

Conclusion

Will the global attention with the GI tagging of Teak let the Nilambur forests remain so, or will it turn the forest into a plantation, like Rubber plantations elsewhere in Kerala?

Nevertheless, can GI tagging help to draw attention to people's histories and local ecologies in this corner of the world, describing how trees and peoples thrive because their lives and futures are interconnected and coexist?

Acknowledgment

¹¹ Interview with Lakshmi Babu, 19 April 2023. Resident of Nedumkayam forest village.

We extend our heartfelt gratitude to the individuals whose invaluable assistance and support greatly contributed to the completion of this article. Special thanks to Madhavan from the Cholanaikkan community, Sunil Kumar, Aneesh from the Paniya Community, and Lakshmi Babu from the Kattunayaka Community, whose participation in discussions and organising a walk through the forest to talk about the impact of Teak plantations on their communities provided crucial insights.

We express our sincere appreciation to Shyamjith and Faseela of Thoduve Foundation, whose introduction to the community members and organisation of our journey into the Nedumkayam depot made this project possible.

Our gratitude also goes to Mr. Shareef P, the Range Forest Officer at Government Timber Depot, Nedumkayam, and Mr. Ravi Varma of Nilambur Kovilakam, whose generous sharing of experiences and knowledge enriched our understanding of the subject matter.

References

<https://www.news18.com/news/india/road-less-travelled-how-a-24-yr-old-became-the-first-to-pursue-phd-from-keralas-cholanaikkan-tribe-3085871.html>

Munster, Ursula, and Suma Vishnudas. "In the Jungle of Law: Adivasi Rights and Implementation of Forest Rights Act in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* 47, no. 19 (2012): 38–45.

George, Jose, and S.S. Sreekumar. "Statutory Restoration of Tribal Lands in Kerala." *The Indian Journal of Political Science* 55, no. 2 (1994): 173–76.

Bhukya, Bhangya. "The Mapping of the Adivasi Social: Colonial Anthropology and Adivasis." *Economic and Political Weekly* 43, no. 39 (2008): 103–9. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40278007>.

R. Bijoy. "Adivasis Betrayed: Adivasi Land Rights in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* 34, no. 22 (1999): 1329–35. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4408014>.

Ravi Raman. "Breaking New Ground: Adivasi Land Struggle in Kerala." *Economic and Political Weekly* 37, no. 10 (2002): 916–19. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4411834>.

Mathew, Joshy. "Colonial Exploitation Of Forest Resources of The Western Ghats." *Indian History Congress* 80 (December 2019): 591–99.

Mathew, Joshy. *Colonial Forest Policy in South India with Special Reference to Malabar (1792-1947)* <https://www.academia.edu/34325976>

Pandey, and C. Brown. "Teak: A Global Overview ." *Unasylva* 51 (2000): 1–11

T Ramavarman. "First for Forest Produce, GI Tag for Nilambur Teak" *The Times Of India* Accessed May 6, 2023. <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/kochi/first-for-forest-produce-gi-tag-for-nilambur-teak/articleshow>.