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## **Enduring Imprints of British Regime In Munnar**

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### **Abstract**

India attained its independence in 1947 from the rule of British. Before independence all the states of India were the victims of foreign supremacy. The Britishers were mostly interested to nurture their economic condition and Kerala, the Spice Garden of India attracted the Englishmen. They maintained a good relation with the Travancore family and received certain positions in the administrative system. Munnar, one of the most-sought after tourist destinations in Kerala, remains as a notable instance of British colonialism. Munnar, which was earlier inhabited by tribals, was found by John Daniel Munro. In each and every field the British interfered and established their own supremacy over the underdeveloped area. By the intervention of the British the earlier ecosystem got disturbed and the relation between the tribals and environment was destroyed. However the negative impacts do not overshadow the fact that they undertook many developmental works in the region. The British were responsible for starting transport and communication facilities. They started educational institutions for children. New technologies and strategies were implemented for increasing the production of tea and spices. The present study is in order to understand the enduring imprints of British in Munnar.

### **Keywords**

Western Ghats, Plantation, High Range, Monorail system, Ropeway

### **Introduction**

Munnar is one of the tourist destination of Kerala. Earlier, Munnar was inhabited by the tribals, who were known as Muthuvans. It had been noted that the tribal life in Munnar was started from A.D 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> century. They were inhabited in Western Ghats region of Munnar in Idukki district of Kerala. These people had migrated from Tamil Nadu during the period of calamities. On the way to Idukki they had carried their belongings on their back (*muthuku*), so they are called as *Muthuvans*. The tribals had their own tradition and culture



which was strictly followed by them. Before the advent of British they had lived an independent life. 245 *kudis* were existed in the highranges and also had many sub divided groups among them. They mostly engaged in cultivation of tapioca, cardamom etc. The cardamom was known as the ‘Queen of spices’ and it had became a part of the their life. Along with the cardamom cultivation, the Muthuvans collected the wild tubes and honey from forest. Their food timings varied depending on their work. Traditionally, the staple food of them was finger millet, which at present taken over by the rice. Commonly they drink black tea without sugar and use of jaggery was also prominent among them. Significance of these people was that they had resemblance with Tamil culture. For these tribes, Pongal is a harvesting festival in Thai month of Tamil. Most of their prayers and poojas were related to forest and it’s survival. The ceremonies like *Urumalketu* and *Thalemuttwere* famous among them. Muthuvans in the highranges were matrilineal communities. The route of the clan system is through mothers. In many of the Muthuvan families in Munnar, women were the breadwinners; they work hard in the fields and do all the household chores. The other feature among them was the strong faith in black magic. Many old women in the *kudy* practices exorcism and believed that each one’s disease is because of the evil spirit.

The modern administrative system of Idukki have been started by the proclamation made by GouriParvathiBhai(The Travancore Queen) on April 1822. Till 1864, most of the areas of Travancore was covered with forest. Later in 1865 they had imposed tax on trees and started the cardamom and coffee cultivation Though the Munnar region fell under the jurisdiction of the Travancore kingdom, it was the Jenmam(birth) land of the Poonjar Royal Family. Since it was a ‘Jenmam land’, the royal family enjoyed absolute powers over the land as the landlord. John DanialMunro who served as the Diwan of Travancore had a great interest in plantations. Of the several hills in the region, he founded theKannanDevan Hills with high potential for plantation crops. Munro visited the Poonjar Palace and met the then head of the royal family, RohiniThirunal Kerala VarmaValiya Raja, fondly called as KelaVarma Raja. The entrepreneur in Munro won the confidence of KelaVarma Raja and he agreed to lease out KannanDevan hills to Munro for a handsome payment. Thus in 1877, PoonjattilKoickalRohiniThirunal Kerala VarmaValiya Raja leased out the KannanDevan hills comprising about 1,36,600 acres of land to John Daniel Munro for an annual lease rent of Rs.3,000 and a security deposit of Rs.5,000.

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John Daniel Munro formed the North Travancore Land Planting and Agricultural Society in 1879. The Britishers started to plant crops which were essential for their motherland. Through it they had enhanced the profit of the foreign nation .They began the cultivation of crops including coffee, cardamom, cinchona and sisal in various parts of the region. Earlier the headquarters of the Cardamom department was situated in the Peerumedu but later by the arrival of tea plantations during 1890s the headquarters was changed to Devikulam. Munro had given more importance to the spices cultivation by considering the factor of profit in trade. This cultivation programme had brought the inhabitants of the highrangeie,the *Muthuvans* as the workers in these plantation regions. However, the crops introduced by them was later abandoned when tea was found to be the ideal crop for the region. A.W.Turnor suggested to start tea cultivation. Interestingly, it was not Munro or Turnor who started the tea cultivation in Munnar. The credit goes to A.H.Sharp, a European planter, in 1880. He planted tea in and around 50 acres of land at Parvathy, which is now part of the Seven Mallay estate. Along with the tribals the Britishers also invited the migrated Tamil people to the plantation works. These population arrived from the Tamilnadu due to the difficulties faced by them in the availability of food sources and distracted condition in their economic life. They lived in the areas near to the tea estate and started working in the plantations . In present day, Munnar,Peerumedu and Elappara have been populated with the Tamil people .Tribal community of the earlier times have been influenced by the newly migrated Tamil people. These influence made change in their language and cultural programmes. Both worked together in the plantations. Later these Tamil people got the land for their home by the Travancore order announced by the then DiwanKrishnaswamiravu.

In 1895, Finlay Muir and Company(James Finlay and Company Limited) entered the scene and bought 33 independent estates. The KannanDevan Hills Company was formed in 1897 to manage these estates. In 1924, the plantations of Munnar suffered a major setback in the form of a disastrous monsoon. This created a hard blow on the poor people. Heavy landslides and flooding literally redrew the landscape in several places. There was a heavy loss of property and life. Though it was hard for them, the inhabitants managed to bring back life to normal life in a few months. Large-scale replanting was carried out in several estates. The Britishers made the working groups to plant the destroyed crops. In 1964, the Tata Group entered into the area, implemented certain steps in the tea plantation which would



increase the production. They began collaboration with Finlay which resulted in the formation of the Tata-Finlay Group. Tata Tea Ltd. was formed in 1983. In 2005, the KannanDevan Hills Produce Company Pvt. Ltd. was formed and Tata Tea transferred the ownership of its plantations to the new company.

British had transformed the tribal area into a trade centre. Many facilities had been brought out by the foreign supremacy relating with the matter of trade. It resulted the construction of roads, bridges, ropeway, telephone etc in the highrange. All these progress in the Munnar was brought for the self need of alien power. The life of the Muthuvan tribal community was depended on the environmental resources of the region. Colonial interventions shattered their relation with the nature and forced them to be dependent upon foreign power. Tribals faced a drastic transformation in their life and society they lived. Unique life of the people had been exploited by the external power. There were several positive and negative concerns related to the colonial interventions in Munnar. Many notable progressive changes were brought by the British in the field of education, technology, transport and communication facilities. Here is a study on the impact of British rule and the imprints that had been left by the colonial power.

### **Objectives of the study**

- To understand the socio-economic changes that took place in Munnar after the advent of British.
- To evaluate the remarkable transformations of tribal community in Munnar
- To analyse the imprints of British rule in Munnar
- To understand the changes that took place in the hilly areas in transport, communication and technology

### **Methodology**

A study based on the literature available in the Government archives, Palace declarations and documents and many non governmental sources will throw light on the progressive steps taken by British in Munnar. The method adopted in this study is that of illustrative description based on qualitative investigation. The study proposes to make use of both primary and secondary sources. Primary sources comprise records from Forest and Wildlife Department



,Sanctuaries , Kerala Tourism Department etc. Secondary sources comprise books , journals , Newspapers , Souvenirs and other related articles and Website.

### **Analysis and Discussion**

The advent of British rule in Munnar had witnessed many socio economic transformations .Progress of the Munnar is not only for the people of that place but also for improving the profit of the colonial economy.The progress brought by the colonial force regarding the trade matters later became a part of the life of people. Roads, machines, quarters, churches, schools, club, brigdesetc remain as the effort done by foreign authority .Lets have a glimpse on the progress made by them .

British power had established their superiority along with the developmental programmes. Amongst ,the first step taken by them were the construction of quarters needed for them. As a part of plantation work they had to live in a place to supervise the working process. So the quarters had been built in the regions near to the tea estates. It made their stay comfortable and all the officials who approach to Munnar stayed here. The quarters had been constructed by the native people under the guidance of the British by using the big rocks . It not only remained as a shelter for them in the cold nights but also stood as a symbol of their exceeding power in the hilly areas . But later, when the Britishers moved from the tea estates after gaining independence by India, this quarters had became the residents of the officers who were appointed by the new plantation company. Still it stays in Munnar area as the imprint of their supremacy.

The British, when they took control of Munnar they established missionary works. This is to develop the religious concept of the tribal group and the Thamizhars. Christianity had been spread across the area near to the tea estates which had enhanced the conversion of the people from the traditions and customs followed by them till the arrival of the British. The people were mostly attracted to the new customs and beliefs. Even in the case of any medical needs they approach the missionaries to heal the disease that had affected them. So the tribal treatments with herbs and medicinal bushes had ended with the coming of the Christian thoughts and beliefs.AChurch had constructed after the death of the Eleanor Isabel May the



wife of Henry Mans Field Nite who was the then manager of British planting company. In 1894, Dec 23, she was died and in remembrance of her he had constructed a cemetery. A church was built near to it in 1910. Since that period the native people approached the church for the worship. For the people of Munnar it was for the first time that a church had been formed as a result of the transformation that takes place. In present day, it had became the CSI Church of Munnar. Many tourists were approaching to the church to witness the British architectural and skillful work. It remained as a remarkable change made by the British power for the progress of the state.

British had setup many educational institutions at Munnar. This is to encourage the people to be get educated and change their life through gaining knowledge. Another idea behind it was to create certain individuals who were good at administration works, as the employees of the British administration in Munnar. Through it they dreamed of moulding a generation that would support the British policies and help to make the natives subordinate to them. These institutions remained useful to the children of the British officials who stays in the quarters near to the tea plantations. For the tribal people it was the opportunity opened up for them to see the world beyond their imaginations. Later education had given them a conscious about their suppression under the supreme power. The people started to react against the British force that oppressed them. This insight gave the courage and knowledge which brought many changes and thus the educational institution played a very important role in forming an enlightened generation.

The next developmental step taken by the colonial power is the introduction of the technologies. It constitutes monorail, machines, communication system, bridges, roadways etc. All these created a technological innovation in the hilly area. Machinery and equipment developed from the application of scientific knowledge. Technologies are the sum of techniques, skills, methods and processes used in the production of goods or services or in the accomplishment of objectives. The technologies had changed their life and takes it to a new level. These new technologies improved the quality of tribal people's life. An architectural and technological marvel gave people much hope for the future and it opened up the hills in a way that had not seemed possible for a thousand years. It starts with the monorail .The Kundala Valley Railway, that facilitate movement of goods in the hill paradise of Munnar a century ago, was the first monorail system of it's kind in the sub-continent. Never rebuilt,

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today it is a reminder of the terrifying power of natural forces that no human can truly comprehend, foresee or prevent. The TataTea, with a number of it's tea producing factories in full swing, needed to export material to the UK in a faster way and the need for a faster mode of transportation became inevitable. Mr.W.Mime, the then general manager of the company, set up a monorail cart road connecting Munnar and Mattupetty with Top Station. This monorail was based on the Ewing System and had a small wheel placed on the track while a larger wheel rested on the road to balance the monorail. Five hundred bullocks were brought to the hill station and a veterinary surgeon and two assistants from England were assigned with the task of attending to the animals. From here it would travel to TuticornPort(Tamil Nadu) and eventually to the United Kingdom. The goods carriage initially consisted of a simple platform running on a small wheel over the rail and a larger one pulled by bullocks. In 1908, the monorail gave way to a light railway that began at Munnar station, with two stops at Mattupetty and Palaar, before ending the journey at Top Station.

The floods of 1924, caused due to the incessant rainfall, completely destroyed the system. It caused the entire railway track to vanish along with the most of it's other structures as well. Most of it was completely washed away and people were forced to abandon any plans of reconstruction because of the great scale of damage. Tata Tea was forced to choose ropeways for the transportation between Munnar and Top Station. Today, people can follow this trail and see the wreckage of the Kundala Railway line. TheMunnar Railway Station building still stands neae the regional office of Tata Tea. The railway tracks have been replaced by a road in front of this building. Aluminium Bridge near Munnar was once a railway bridge on the line, but it has since been converted to road traffic. Several remains of wheels, tracks, sleepers, stations, signboards etc. existed at several part of Munnar and Kundala Valley, notably at Top Station in Theni district Tamil Nadu. Machineswas the other progress that had made by the colonial power. Earlier, in tea factory the traditional methods were used by them which leads to low production. By analysing the deceasing rate of production they introduced certain types of machines to enhance the production level. All they need is the increase in profit level in the case of trade. The new machines in the tea factories had led to the high and fast means of production. Machines were seemed as the gigantic material by the native people. For them all these were a variety of form which are unseen by the local people.



In Kolukkumala Tea Factory, the different types of the British established machines can be seen today. Marshall's double action metallic tea roller, its manufacturers were Marshall Sons and Co.Ltd, Gainsborough, England was used in the tea factories. Tea processing machines were used for tea wither, fixation, rolling, kneading, deblocking, fermentation, molding, drying and sorting machines. Certain type of machines were used such as Myddleton Stalk Extractor Michie Shifter and Chottamoore which resulted fastest production with the limited time. This orthodox process of manufacture was different from the CTC or crush-tear-curl method used in modern tea production. The desire to produce the tea for a global market brought them to the implementation of the new methods in the tea estates. In one way it enhanced the tea production but in other way it limited the scope of the workers. The machines had replaced the labours and it reduced the job opportunities of large mass . This developmental progress led to improve the economic condition of the British.

Bridges and ropeways were used by the British to transfer the goods to the near places. Top Station is the place where the British pulled a long iron rope from the Kurangani Hill, the gateway to Old Munnar. This is the place where they built the ropeway after traversing forests, hills and blankets of mists. After receiving the land in lease ,British power had brought the ropeways to make their trading process much easier. Earlier, the workers used to carry the tea products on their back or transferred with help of the bullocks. But by the arrival of ropeway the most benefited group regarding working process was labourers. Ropeways was a stage of progress in the tribal community. Easy transfer of commodities is possible through these mechanism. But it hadn't last for long period. The flood that occur in Munnar washed away the ropeways. Iron ropes tied to the Kurangani Hill were thrown away by nature itself. The big pillars that anchored the ropeway are still there. Only the remains of the golden days are evident today in Top Station.

The footbridge was located at Old Munnar near High Range Club across the Muthirapuzhariver. Bridge had been built by the British when the colonial masters were setting up tea estates in the hilly region. It was initially a hanging bridge meant to connect Chokkanad estate and Old Munnar. So this had helped them in easy transfer of goods and also as a means of transportation. Later, concrete slabs were laid over the steel girders to stay it for a long period. This bridge was in a risky condition for long after the beams rusted. On November 7, 1987, 14 school kids were killed when the same bridge collapsed. This tragedy

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occurs when several students of Old Munnar Government High School gathered on the bridge to witness a helicopter landing on the ground of the High Range Club. Bridge gave away as the children moved to one side of the bridge to get a good view of it's landing and several students drowned in the river. Still that incident was a fearful one for the inhabitants of Munnar. After the tragedy the bridge had been rebuilt in 1989. Later the bridge was swept as rain intensified across Kerala, giving rise to unprecedented floods. Roadways is the other remarkable work done by the British officials. Earlier there was a path that connect Kuttampuzha-Pooyamkutty-Mangulam-Munnar to Tamil Nadu. It was recognized by the British and they had elaborated the way in 1895-1899. It is the route through which British had transferred the tea leaves to Aluva. But these path had been washed away by the 1924 flood that occurred in Munnar. So the officials had found out other path to Munnar. They constructed a road from Aluva to Munnar by connecting with Adimaly. By building the Neriamangalam Bridge in 1935, the transportation became much more easier than earlier. In 1935 March 2, the then king Sri.Ramavarma Chithira Thirunal had inaugurated the bridge. These facilitated the British to enhance their production works. Later, it was used by the people for their transport facilities. Still it remains as the remarkable work of British.

High Range Club is a recreational club which is located on the outskirts of the town of Munnar in the South Indian state of Kerala. It is situated in the mountain ranges of the Western Ghats amidst rolling hills with lush green tea plantations. Launched in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the club still has an aura of the bygone British era. Named as The Gymkhana Club, a Planter's Club was started in the year 1905, with a loan of Rs.2500/- from the erstwhile Kanan Devan Hills Produce Co. Ltd. for the gentlemen planters of the High Range in Kerala. Along with it another club had been built for the executives called "KDH Club". Former was located on the present Golf Course with a small pavilion built on the grounds. It was here the first coolie gymkhana for the workers of the Company was held. In the year 1909, the High Range Club was formally set up with furniture and fixtures, and was completed in 1910. Telephone were installed at the club in 1916. The Library was constructed near the present Nursery in 1916 but was demolished in 1924 after the floods that created havoc and changed the face of the hills and dales in the High Range. The present nursery and Ladies Room were made at the same site. The first club to be affiliated to the High Range Club was the Trivandrum Club in 1915. Lord Pentland, Governor of Madras visited the Club in 1916. Golf

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Course, grounds and Tennis Court were extensively damaged in the 1924 floods. But subsequently, they were rebuilt, Amateur Concert and Dramatic Society was formed in the year 1925, however it was closed in 1930. The first Indian to be made a member of the club was the Dewan of Travancore in 1934. Cottages were constructed in 1935 for the use of Moylam & Co. which constructed the Pullivasal Hydro-Electric Works. They were first used for visitors in 1941 and rented out at Rs.75/- per room per month. Billiards was thrown open to ladies for the first time in 1941. Diwali and Independence Day were celebrated at the club for the first time in 1972. After the withdrawal of British all the progressive methods implemented by them were utilized by the inhabitants of Munnar. The machines in the tea factories which were brought by the colonial force were a new phase for the workers. It increased the tea production to a peak level in a limited time. Along with it, the roads, monorail, bridges too had constructed for the easy transfer of the tea leaves to their motherland. But the monorail had been destroyed by the flood of 1924. Later, they completely depended on the roadways. The new technologies and transport facilities had not only utilized by the Britishers but also by the local people. When the supreme force had been driven away from India, all the progress that had brought by the British for their upheaval had been turned to be the part of natives life.

By their intervention of British many changes had been brought in the tribal community. The lifestyle of the poor inhabitants were changed. Till then they were mostly related with the environment and they had not seen a life beyond the forest area. Tribals and migrated Tamizhars had worked for British in the estates. In the early phase they were treated in a better way but slowly the condition began to change which had taken the poor people into poverty and misery. The inhabitants became the bonded labours and even considered them as slaves under the Englishmen. Their freedom had been restricted within the area and according to colonial power the people was just a machine to do all works regarding the tea plantations. Poor ones were tortured mentally and physically in the estates. Their life were under the pressure of colonial officials. Laws were imposed on the people in their working hours, lifestyles, economic and cultural matters. They had to work till the officials says to end it with today. There was no perfect timing for them to end the daily work but had a strict timing to start the job at early morning. All the schedules regarding the work would be decided by them. The Britishers treated both the male and female equally without any kindness towards



them. The women had to work in the estates even by carrying their children on their hip. Low wages were provided to them and that was not according to their daily work. With this less amount of money they can't satisfy the daily necessary needs of their family. So they suffered a lot to meet their demands. The wages was not in the form of money but as a receipt. It can be used to buy the commodities which they needed from the shops. So there was no liquid money in the hands of the people. It made the people to be poorer than earlier. This method was adopted by the British officials to keep the people dependent on the superior power. By this, the Britishers enjoyed the exploitation of people and the resources and surroundings related to them. By the intervention of British the earliest ecosystem got disturbed and the relation between the tribals and environment destructed.

### **Conclusion**

Munnar, the historical as well as the tourist area remain a memorable location which confronted colonialism. Earlier the area had been left as an undeveloped tribal society but later it was transformed into a plantation area by the intervention of the British. The Travancore family had given them the authority and ownership in the land which made them as the ultimate power in the respective area. British officials utilized this opportunity to enhance their economic status. After analysing the climatic condition of the place they started the tea plantation. In the earlier stages the plantation works had gone well and the workers too hadn't faced much difficulties. Albeit, gradually the attitude of the officials started to transform into an authoritative rule which separated the community into superior and inferior groups.

Many strict rules were imposed on the poor labours which constrained their rights and freedom. The tribal areas were turned into tea estates and became a hub of trade. For the British officials, quarters were build near to the plantation, so that they can observe and speed up the work in a limited time. New technologies were introduced in the hilly areas for the increasing production of tea, transport and communication. People thought that these were progressive methods that had been implemented by the British for their development. Nonetheless, all of these were the master brain of the colonials to deepen their power and to increase the economic status of their motherland. The colonial power always tried to establish their extreme authority over the colonies, for it they first convince the people as they came to



lead the natives to the path of development. The White Mens Burden theory of Rudyard Kepling got prominence here. The truth behind it was that Englishmen wanted complete authority over areas under their control. Therefore, they lay the foundation of good relation with the native rulers and slowly took over the locality on their sight. Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony is tied to this approach. He advocates that under modern capitalism the bourgeoisie can maintain its economic control by allowing certain demands from the civil society.

During this period migration occurred from Tamil Nadu and they became the workers of estates along with the tribals. Slavery under the British officials continued and they became aware about the right of liberty. Their only aim was to make their nation prosperous by utilizing the resources from the colonies. Prime importance was given to the trade and commerce, for that they introduced many methods in the respective area under their control. The gaining of independence by India from the British rule made them to leave the nation. The tribal society had witnessed the cruelty that accompanied colonialism as well as the transformation in the socio-economic condition of the people. The advent of institutions for providing education to the children of officials gradually unlocked the world of knowledge for the poor children of the natives. Likewise, clubs for the entertainment of the officials, machines for the fast tea production, telephone for the communication, roadways, bridges for the transportation led the people to a state of progress from a forest dependent life. The later withdrawal of the British from the tea estates resulted in the coming of the Tata group to the high ranges, under whom plantation operations are being successfully managed till date.

The present condition of the people in Munnaris at pace with the rest of the world. Numerous improvements have taken place from the remains that had left by the British power. These have served as a launchpad for the socio-economic development of the region. Munnar, is not just a land of hills and it's not the land of undeveloped tribes, these hills have rich culture, tradition and a great history. The imprints left behind by British tell us not just a story but an eventful chapter in history that unfolded at the serene location of Munnar.

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