The gentle teak giants

Conolly’s Teak Plantation located in Nilambur (11°16’18"N, 76°12’36"E), Kerala is the world’s oldest teak estate. It has been a visual treat for over 169 years reflecting the first success story in teak domestication (Figure 1). It also represents the first man-made initiative to sustain a tropical timber species and perhaps the first in situ conservation attempt too.

During 1840, Conolly, then Collector of Malabar proposed an ambitious planting programme with an objective ‘to replace those forests which have vanished from private carelessness and rapacity’. The programme was carried out under the stewardship of a local forester Chathu Menon. The land for the planting programme was leased by the Maharaja of Nilambur, then owner of Malabar forests. The first technical problem that Team Conolly faced was in germinating teak seeds. During their first year, nursery results were disastrous. In 1841, not even a single plant emerged out of the 30,000 seeds sown in the nursery. Team Conolly consulted Perrotet, a French expert and the Superintendent of Pondicherry Tropical Botanical Garden. But his technical inputs did not yield the desired results. In 1843, Roxburgh, a renowned British forester suggested methods for successfully germinating teak seeds.

Team Conolly started with a modest target of 50 acres/year and continued for the next three decades until 1874. The earliest afforestation programme of the country enriched an area of about 2730 acres (91 acres/annum, ref. 2). The financial implication to the then Malabar district administration was Rs 229,000. It cost Rs 30/acre to develop the plantations wherein labourers were hired at the rate of 4 annas/day (equivalent of 25 paisa). The programme included fire protection, clearing parasitic mistletoes, watching and thinning. The finances were raised from the government treasury at a rate of 4% compound interest until harvest of the plantation. On full rotation (85 years), the plantation was estimated to have 60 trees/acre yielding 475.72 m³ (ref. 3). Teak was sold at a rate of Rs 70/m³ during the establishment period of these plantations.

Today, Conolly’s plantation is reduced to about 5.67 acres with 117 trees in it. The average volume of each tree is estimated at 8.9 m³, the standing volume is approximately 1060 m³ and the revenue is worth 5.3 crores (Rs 50,000 m³) (Figure 2). It stands as a treasure for dendrochronology, tracking climatic changes and for carbon sequestration studies. It is hard to imagine that a small input at the district level has inadvertently led to the world’s first in situ conservation and planting programme of teak. Interestingly, Chathu Menon who led this successful plantation programme was laid to rest in the very same plot as suggested by Conolly.


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