

Tracing a Forgotten Monument of British Colonial Oppression and Salt Taxation in Roy Moxham's Novel, *The Great Hedge of India*

Dr. V. Sakthivel

Assistant Professor

Department of English

Government Arts College (Autonomous)

Salem, Tamil Nadu, India

omsakthipower@gmail.com

Abstract

The present study examines the history and remnants of the Hedge of India, a 2,504-mile customs line established by the British to enforce the salt tax in the 19th century. The author's research, using historical records and maps, confirms the hedge's existence and details its evolution into a massive, labour-intensive barrier maintained by over 12,000 men. The article explains that the hedge was built to prevent salt smuggling into the Bengal Presidency, where the salt tax was particularly high. This tax had severe public health consequences, causing widespread health issues due to insufficient salt consumption. Abandoned in 1879, the hedge's physical traces were located by the author in the Agra and Jhansi districts, using historical maps, GPS technology, and assistance from local villagers. The search not only uncovers the hedge's physical remnants but also provides a deeper understanding of this overlooked symbol of British control and the lasting legacy of the salt tax on colonized India.

Keywords: Hedge, smuggling, colonial, British, Technology, Presidency and etc

Introduction

Roy Moxham is a British writer and has been holding the post of conservator. He is known for his exploration of the British colonial era. His works are a blend of historical research, travelogue, and detective story, as he recounts his quests to uncover forgotten

stories and physical remnants of the colonial past. Moxham's most celebrated work is *The Great Hedge of India*, which chronicles his search for the remnants of the Great Hedge of India. His other notable works include *Tea: Addiction, Exploitation and Empire*.

He also wrote a novel, *The Freelanders*, which focuses on the real story of a European missionary who tried to set up a commune on Mount Kenya. In the 1990s, Roy Moxham had been a frequent visitor to India where he had developed good relationship with Indians and also developed interest in the colonial history of India and also interested in traveling in to the remote areas, led to the creation of the book, *The Great Hedge of India*.

Discussion

Since Roy Moxham is very much interested in India's culture and history. He wanted to read books on Indian history. One such book that aroused interest of Roy Moxham towards Indian History is W.H. Sleeman's book , “*Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official*” which describes the Indian history in the last decades of the East India Company's rule. This book had a detailed account of Kings, Queens, religious ceremonies, widow burning, holy men and witchcraft. The book also highlighted the tax levied on goods that entered ‘ British ‘ India from the princely states to the west. What impressed the writer is a footnote of Sir John Strachey and its mention of a 2300-mile hedge which extended from the Indus River to the Mahanadi in Madras to collect tax:

A custom line was established which stretched across the whole of India, which in 1869 extended from the Indus to the Mahanadi in Madras, a distance of 2300 miles; and it was guarded by nearly 12000 men. It would have stretched from London to ConstantinopleIt consisted principally to an immense impenetrable hedge of thorny trees and bushes. (*Great Hedge* 3)

Lucian W. Pye in his review of the book states that the book serves as a compelling historical case study for understanding border significance and maintenance: “ Globalization has made theorizing about the significance of borders fashionable. Here is an implausible example of border maintenance that readers should not overlook. In the nineteenth century, eccentric Englishmen in India thought of constructing a 2,500-mile-long impenetrable hedge, requiring up to 14,000 men to maintain, as a way to stop salt smuggling”(174-175)

The Great Hedge is a symbol of British Imperialism and Economic Control. The story of the Great Hedge of India offers a compelling discussion on the nature of British colonial rule. The British administration, initially through the East India Company, established a monumental physical and bureaucratic infrastructure to enforce a deeply unpopular Salt, Sugar and other goods tax. The 2,504-mile-long hedge was established by the British to enforce tax and was maintained by over 12,000 men. The hedge underscores the British commitment to maximizing revenue from India. The Salt Tax itself was levied on the Indian populace to generate more revenues. The Britishers used the salt tax as a tool of oppression that disproportionately burdened the poor, who relied on salt as a daily necessity. By controlling salt production and levying a high tax, the British administrators turned a natural resource into a product of immense profit, reaching the revenue of 43,500,000 rupees from salt and sugar duties in 1869-70.

This economic control paved the way for severe human consequences. The text highlights how the tax reduced salt consumption well below the minimum required for health, resulting in a host of debilitating symptoms and even death, which was often misdiagnosed. The government was aware of these serious consequences, yet prioritized an "easily collectable tax" over the health of the Indian population, ignoring the protests of British doctors. The hedge and the salt tax had been the powerful symbols of economic exploitation and human suffering during British rule.

Meenakshi Thiyagarajan, in his article entitled “ Great Endeavours,” comments that Moxham's research reveals the salt tax as a brutally severe tax, which makes Mahatma Gandhi's choice of the salt monopoly for his Satyagraha a singularly appropriate protest. The search for the hedge itself led Moxham to a thorough, economic historian-style analysis of the tax's impact on ordinary people:

The search for the hedge roused in Moxham an interest in the broader history, in salt as such, the role it played in the life of ordinary men, and in the role the tax on the commodity had in the government of the day. This is the third strand in the book; the author traces the history of salt taxation by the East India Company, studying the impact of the levy on the people in the context of their living conditions and the prevailing agricultural wage with the thoroughness of a trained economic historian. He finds it a monstrously harsh levy, which leads him to consider the taxation of salt in other countries. He finds that only in France was the levy of comparable severity but then in France the people revolted. In this context, he finds Mahatma Gandhi's choice of the salt monopoly as a launch pad for his satyagraha singularly appropriate, although by 1930, the salt tax was only nominal and although alternative forms of protest were strongly recommended.(4399)

The Customs Hedge is from 10 feet to 14 feet in height and six feet to 12 feet thick, composed of closely clipped thorny trees, shrubs, babool, the Indian plum, pear, and thorny creeper. The hedge had been abandoned and forgotten. The writer felt that some fragments and some memories must remain. Planning a trip to India, the writer decided to look for them. According to the writer, it would be fun to discover the traces of the "eccentric enterprise" of the colonial masters. The hedge, despite its immense size and cost, was a "quintessentially British folly" that was abandoned in 1879 and subsequently erased from mainstream historical narratives. This "forgetting" might be attributed to the British desire to

move on from a monument that had become a symbol of "unjust British taxes" and a physical embodiment of their oppressive policies.

Roy Moxham, the author, meticulously traces the forgotten monument of British colonial oppression and salt taxation. The historical narrative of the novel begins with the ancient precedents of salt taxation in India, dating back to Chandragupta, who ruled from 324 to 301 BC and imposed taxes on salt. The author then moves on to the Mughal era, where a five percent and two-and-a-half percent salt tax was levied in Bengal, highlighting the long-standing nature of this form of revenue collection. Moxham's historical account then converges with the British colonial period, focusing on a pivotal moment in 1765 when Governor Robert Clive established the "Exclusive Company" to collect the salt tax. This company, a symbol of early British economic exploitation, would go on to achieve a staggering profit of 6,731,170 rupees by 1768, a stark illustration of the oppressive and profitable nature of the salt tax for the East India Company. This historical context serves as the backdrop against which Moxham's novel explores the human cost and political significance of the Great Hedge.

Annual Reports of the Inland Customs Department and large-scale maps from the Royal Geographical Society. The author's use of a modern GPS in conjunction with a 19th-century map further exemplifies how new tools can unlock forgotten histories. The eventual discovery of the hedge's remnants, often with the help of local villagers who still remember the "Old Line" or "Parmat Lain," underscores that historical memory can persist in oral tradition and local knowledge long after official records and physical structures have faded. The hedge's legacy, therefore, lives on not just in the unearthed physical traces but also in the collaborative effort between a determined historian and the local communities who helped him find it.

The punitive nature of the salt tax was exacerbated under Lord Cornwallis. In 1788, he implemented a new system of auctioning salt to wholesalers, which further inflated the price. This policy drove the tax to an unprecedented 3.25 rupees per maund. This exceptionally high tax rate remained in effect for over nine decades, until 1879. The financial burden on Indian households was immense; in some regions, the cost of salt could consume half a year's wages, as documented in 1823. The Permanent Settlement of 1793, which capped land tax revenue in Bengal, made the salt tax an indispensable and highly lucrative source of income for the government, ensuring its maintenance at punitive levels for ninety years in the region. The exorbitant cost of British-controlled salt fuelled widespread illicit activities, including theft, clandestine production, and smuggling. The threat that this illicit trade posed to Company revenues prompted the construction of the "Customs Hedge," a physical barrier designed to combat smuggling and protect the Company's monopoly on salt.

The author's investigation into the Customs Hedge began with a series of frustrating dead ends. Initial consultations with librarians revealed a collective unawareness of the hedge's existence. A meticulous search through the India Office Library's map catalogue proved largely fruitless, as misleading descriptions and small scales rendered most maps unhelpful. Even the highly detailed sheets of *The Indian Atlas* from after the hedge's abandonment in 1879 showed no trace of it.

The breakthrough came with the discovery of an 1870 'Map of Jaloun District,' which was unusual for its inclusion of Urdu and Hindi scripts. This map appeared to depict the Customs Hedge, with the Hindi transliteration "parmat lain" revealed to mean "permit" or "customs post." While the *District Gazetteers of India* offered a rich source of administrative detail, their references to the Imperial Customs Line were often vague and unspecific. The author's search for personal papers of customs officers yielded no relevant findings, though it

did lead to the accidental discovery of a presumed relative, Private George Moxham, buried near Varanasi.

Crucial source of information was the Annual Reports of the Inland Customs Department. However, these reports were incomplete, with the last available volume dating to 1877-78. The author's subsequent search for the final report from 1878-79, which would have documented the hedge's abandonment in April 1879, was ultimately unsuccessful in both India and London.

The evolution of the Customs Line was a multi-stage process driven by territorial expansion and the need to control the flow of untaxed salt. Starting with a network of customs posts, the line was consolidated and transformed by figures like G. H. Smith and later Allan Octavian Hume into an "impenetrable and permanent barrier". By 1869, the line reached its peak, a continuous barrier of 2,504 miles that employed over 12,000 men and was protected by 1,727 guard-posts. The labor required to maintain this barrier was immense, with staff walking millions of miles annually and carrying thousands of tons of thorny brushwood for dry hedge sections.

The human cost of this policy extended far beyond the forced labor and bureaucratic harassment faced by locals. The tax's impact on public health was severe and deliberately overlooked by the administration. The government's own figures showed salt consumption was "way below the minimum considered necessary" for their soldiers and even prisoners in English jails. The resulting salt depletion led to symptoms such as lassitude, apathy, and muscular weakness, with death often misdiagnosed. The hedge and the tax it enforced therefore stand as powerful symbols of an economic policy that prioritized revenue over the basic well-being of the Indian population.

The hedge's obscurity in historical records is as significant as its existence. The author's struggle to find information on this massive project suggests a collective "forgetting"

of this oppressive infrastructure, perhaps because it symbolized "unjust British taxes". The rediscovery of the hedge through obscure maps, such as the Agra District Map of 1879 and various District Gazetteers, highlights the importance of persistent and unconventional historical inquiry. The author's use of a modern GPS in conjunction with these old maps, a process he meticulously practiced, was a crucial step in bridging the gap between historical documentation and the physical landscape.

The search itself became a collaborative effort with local communities. Villagers in places like Erich and Chakanagar, who still referred to the barrier as the "Old Line" or "Parmat Lain," provided invaluable insights into its location and history. This oral tradition, combined with the author's academic research, allowed for the discovery of physical remnants, including a raised earthen bank, stone walls, and thickets of thorny bushes that followed the hedge's historical path.

Roy Moxham highlights salt as a fundamental necessity of life and condemns the British salt tax as an "inhuman poll tax." He argues that its cruelty lies in its ability to extract revenue even from the most vulnerable and impoverished segments of society,

Next to air and water ,salt is perhaps the greatest necessity of life. It is the only condiment of the poor. Cattle cannot live without salt....There is no article like salt outside water by taxing which the state can reach even the starving millions, the sick, the maimed, and the utterly helpless. The tax constitutes therefore the most inhuman poll tax that ingenuity of man can devise .(*The Great Hedge* 181-182)

Conclusion

The author's journey to find the Great Hedge of India serves as a powerful conclusion to this historical inquiry, revealing how a forgotten colonial infrastructure can be unearthed through a combination of dedicated research, modern technology, and local knowledge. The hedge was more than just a physical barrier; it was a potent symbol of British economic

control and the oppressive nature of the salt tax, which transitioned from a moderate levy to a punitive burden on the Indian populace.

The existence and maintenance of the hedge for nearly a century at an immense financial and human cost—particularly the devastating health consequences for the Indian poor—underscores the moral bankruptcy of a colonial system that prioritized revenue over the basic welfare of its subjects. The British government's decision to abandon the hedge was not a change of heart, but a pragmatic move driven by the equalization of salt taxes and a desire to consolidate its monopoly over salt production across princely states.

The hedge's legacy concludes not with its abandonment in 1879, but with its rediscovery, a process that proved that while official history may forget, physical and oral traces can persist. The author's work serves as a reminder that the stories of oppression, like the Great Hedge of India, remain embedded in the landscape and the collective memory of the people who lived under its shadow, waiting to be rediscovered and understood.

Trevor Nobile views Roy Moxham's analysis in *The Great Hedge of India* as a masterful blend of genres. Nobile appreciates how Moxham's work revives the memory of this "monster hedge," presenting a forgotten historical object engagingly and astonishingly:

"A master storyteller, Moxham combines history, detective work, travel writing and social commentary in a truly astonishing revelation of an object unique to Queen Victoria's Empire - a monster hedge so little regarded in its own time that it has been almost completely forgotten. How fortunate that the memory of it has been revived in a book that makes engaging reading, especially for those who enjoy books with green associations."(8)

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author, on behalf of the second author, confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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